



# The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the role and place of the SCO in the development of interstate interaction in the Eurasian space, as well as the condition of and prospects for the main areas of multifaceted cooperation within the Organisation. The author further analyses the characteristics of the SCO partnership system as a model of interstate interaction that can provide an institutional platform for broad regional economic cooperation within the context of the new realities of Eurasian development, the implementation of member states' national development strategies, the linking of efforts to align integration processes within the EAEU, and the implementation of China's One Belt, One Road initiative with the potential to form an overarching partnership between countries of Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific region.

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The modern system of international relations remains in a state of imbalance as it passes through a stage of profound transformation and painful evolutionary development.

Globalisation has emerged in recent decades as the main trend in international relations and continues to deepen the intertwining of relations between countries and regions of the world. The rapid development of modern technologies in areas of transport, communications, and information delivery and transmission is contributing to the creation of a cohesive global community of states united by, among other things, common development challenges.

Along with the obvious benefits these processes bring, their negative features are also becoming more pronounced. Hotbeds of tension are no longer only local in nature, but carry influence far beyond their particular region. The deepening of trade and economic ties and the interdependence of capital markets exert reciprocal influence on the dynamics of economic processes in various regions of the world.

Given the systemic nature of interdependence, shifts in development modalities in one part of the world inevitably cause repercussions in the others.

Regionalisation, the steady process of building qualitatively new forms of interaction between the states comprising the world's macro-regions, has emerged as another fundamental trend in the development of global order. Ever more countries are striving to form a system of stable ties with their neighbours, thereby enhancing their own potential while also facilitating the solution of pressing regional problems. Such regionalisation has taken increasingly diverse forms, including classic examples of regional integration that include the establishment of supranational regulatory systems, more flexible models of cooperation in a range of areas that proceed at different speeds and at different levels, and new mixed type models of partnership. The goals and objectives of such partnerships are determined primarily by the need to address pressing regional problems and by participants' common desire for dialogue and a search for approaches to achieving mutually beneficial, sustainable development of the entire region (Leonova, 2013; Lukin, 2016).

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In the Greater Eurasian macro-region, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is one of the most outstanding examples of this new hybrid or mixed model of interstate regional partnership. Established in 2001 to meet the objective of ensuring regional security and stability, the SCO has since continued along its own evolutionary path, gradually developing multifaceted multilateral cooperation. The dynamics of the SCO's development are driven primarily by vital necessity, and by multilateral agreements and the shared national interests of SCO member states. The SCO does not aspire to attain some specific target level of interaction, but rather moves systematically along a path of finding a common denominator in solving pressing regional problems. One thing is obvious – the SCO holds enormous potential in each of a number of unique parameters, and the ongoing search for new opportunities determines the direction of its further development. Still, the SCO is relatively young and, as the history of other international associations suggests, it exhibits the characteristic signs and problems of any young and growing organisation.

The expert community often expresses scepticism regarding the level of cooperation among SCO member states, most frequently claiming that the Organisation is nothing but a type of club for its various heads of state or a conference hosting their annual meetings that does not pursue any specific objectives (Aris, 2018). Experts also deprecate the SCO's model of decision-making through consensus, claiming that it is sluggish and ineffectual. Some sceptics believe that the countries comprising the SCO are too different, that their political systems, economies, belief systems, and civilisational approaches are too diverse (Imanaliev, 2017). This, they argue, greatly complicates dialogue, the search for common ground, and the ability to achieve mutually beneficial solutions to problems based on a shared vision – and that the level of internal disagreement is only increasing and leading to an accumulation of unresolved issues.

Nevertheless, while continuing to address shared political and security objectives, searching for optimal mechanisms for expanding economic ties, and deepening cultural and humanitarian contacts, the SCO continues to develop gradually – primarily as a partner-type organisation based on member states' similar approaches to the development of such a partnership. Overall, the experience of the SCO is arguably the first in history of building an equal partnership among states of different sizes and with varying degrees of influence, different economic and political potentials, and diverse cultural and civilisational features.

### 1. Existential bases of the SCO model of cooperation

According to the classic ideas of political realists in the theory of international relations, international politics are a struggle for power between states based on compelling national interests (Snyder, 2004, p. 55). This theory often proves true in political practice, particularly as the most powerful countries have increasingly come to dominate transnational regional entities and groups. Although decisions engineered by the dominant state often run counter to the national interests of other member states, they are

positioned before the public as collective decisions. More powerful states therefore employ mechanisms for compensating the weaker states as a way to maintain the internal balance and, essentially, the long-term stability of the organisation.

In this context, and despite criticisms from the ranks of the expert community, it is difficult not to agree that the SCO model of cooperation is an extremely important achievement in the practice of international relations. A fundamentally important feature of the SCO is that it is one of the few multipurpose international organisations built from the outset as a multilateral partnership. This universal partnership model is enshrined in the SCO Charter as one of the international association's fundamental features.

It is important to emphasize that partnership within the SCO differs from a traditional alliance. Military-political alliances involve a very high degree of political interdependence as well as some separateness because such alliances usually imply a readiness to mobilise in opposition to someone else.

The SCO is not a classic example of economic integration in which maximum unification is achieved by delegating a significant part of sovereign prerogatives to supranational bureaucratic institutions (Alimov, 2017).

Transparency and the lack of an identified opponent are inseparable features of the SCO partnership model. The SCO's consensus model of decision-making emphasises the absolute equality of all participants regardless of their potential or opportunities. Only when the views, opinions, and approaches of the member states crystallise and become unified does the SCO reach a decision. Thus, it is fair to consider the SCO an example of a consensus-based partnership organisation.

Thanks to these features of interactions within the SCO, the Organisation provides an example not only of how states of different sizes, levels of influence, organisational paradigms, and cultural and national traditions can coexist, but also of how they create favourable conditions for combining considerations of both objectives and values, of the productive establishment and development of a dialogue between civilizations, and of establishing a culture of communication aimed at reaching a joint and mutually beneficial result (Alimov, 2017).

Given the multilateral nature of equal participation in decision-making, the search for mutually beneficial solutions will always be difficult and will require time and effort at the negotiating table. The resilience of the SCO model depends on the ability of member states to identify points or zones of converging interests. Of course, this takes time, and often, the inability to reach a decision acceptable to all is an indication that conditions are not yet ripe.

Despite this, there can be no doubt that Eurasia now has a system for regional interaction based on the principles and approaches formulated and enshrined in the joint documents of the SCO.

One of the most important results of the SCO summit in Astana in June 2017 was the accession of India and Pakistan as full-fledged SCO members. Both countries became unconditional signatories to all SCO documents and committed to making a constructive contribution to strengthening and developing cooperation within the

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