

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Europe

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has never claimed a European model and analogue, in the way that the Russia-led Cooperative Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) likes to profile itself as an equivalent to NATO. If the SCO has any substantial European antecedents they are most easily found in the CSCE/OSCE, where the ideas of mutual confidence building and border management – the cornerstone of Beijing’s and Moscow’s original “Shanghai process” – were elaborated from the 80’s onwards. Up to very recently, analytical writing about the SCO in the West has been somewhat U.S.-dominated and the authors have liked to stress how far away the Organization actually is from European traditions and norms in its way of dismissing human rights concerns and forbidding mutual “interference in internal affairs”. In purely institutional terms, the SCO stands near the opposite end of the scale from the EU in being extremely inter-governmental with only minimal central institutions and centrally managed resources. Its evolution has also followed the opposite route from that of the EU – and within the Asian sphere, ASEAN and APEC – in focusing on security first and the economy – or other functional cooperation – second: even if the SCO’s security agenda is itself a pretty wide and “post-modern” one.¹

Despite all this, the reasons for Europeans and their institutions to start taking the SCO seriously have been piling up lately. Perhaps the most basic is the sheer staying-power of the organization: it is, for example, clearly more substantial and dynamic than any of the previous structures tailor-made for Central Asia, and has come more clearly into the EU’s focus as the Union itself has prepared to adopt its own first ever

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¹ For more on this and other analytical questions see the opening chapter by A.J.K. Bailes and P. Dunay, in “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 17, May 2007, text at <<http://www.sipri.org>>.

Central Asian "strategy".² Russia and China, the organization's joint designers, are growing in importance all the time as objects for collective European diplomacy, even if Europeans at the moment look remarkably divided over Russia and somewhat slow in learning how to integrate strategic issues into their China policy. On a more philosophical plane, the EU's Security Strategy of 2003 defines "effective multilateralism" as a key security goal and also as something of a normative ideal for the EU and its members. If nothing else, the SCO is multilateral and it raises the intriguing question of whether there can be such a thing as "bad multilateralism". Should Europeans conclude that in the SCO, as in the former Warsaw Pact and perhaps also the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) today, a good method is being used for illegitimate goals and thereby merely making our opponents more efficient than we would like them to be? Or could we argue that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" and that even if using a somewhat outdated and hollow form of multilateralism, the SCO's members – and particularly their elites who come into contact on a more-than-bilateral basis as a result – are having their security cultures subtly transformed into something we shall be better able to coexist and work with in the end? And how much right do cultures subtly transformed into something we shall be better able to coexist and work with in the end? And how much right do Europeans have to pass judgment anyway so long as the EU and NATO themselves have no large resources or realistic alternative models to offer the regions concerned? It is no coincidence that several new papers about the SCO have been published by European institutions in the last year or so.³ This short comment will not try to duplicate their general analysis of the SCO's strengths, weaknesses and future prospects, but will aim, rather, to think through what are the more specific benefits or disadvantages of the organization's existence for Europe as such. A few words will be added at the end on European-SCO contacts.

² The text of "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership" (Council of the European Union document 10113/07 of 31 May) was finally approved at the European Council on June 21-22, see para. 47 of Presidency conclusions at <www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/94932.pdf> (August 20 2007).

³ Aside from the SIPRI study already mentioned, see e.g. Henry Plater-Zyberk, UK Defence Academy (JCDC, Shrivenham), "Who's afraid of the SCO" accessible at <<http://www.defac.ac.uk/colleges/csdc/document-listings/caucasus-publications>> and a paper by Oksana Antonenko for the London Centre for European Reform, April 2007, at <www.cer.org.uk> (Both available August 25 2007).

The “Up-side” for Europe

However low or high we place the possibility of a direct Russia-China conflict in post-Cold War conditions, the SCO is designed to avert it both by methods of restraint (the confidence building regime inherited from the Shanghai process) and by positive co-management of these two states’ overlapping influence in Central Asia. However intriguing a prospect it might look from the safe distance of the U.S., any serious new Russia-China rift would be bad news for Europe not least because of the impact on Moscow’s general mentality and the problem of avoiding taking sides. Somewhat paradoxically, the managed framework of the SCO also seems to have given the Central Asians, at least so far, a firmer base for calculating their traditional balancing act, both between Moscow and Beijing and between their Eastern and Western friends. (It would be a different story if the SCO was actually more effective at shutting out Western influence but there is no evidence yet that its policies – as distinct, perhaps, from bilateral Russian pressure – have yet stopped any Central Asian leader from doing what he wanted to do either for or against the West).⁴ The SCO has also made more headway, faster, than anything else so far - including NATO’s partnership framework - in getting the Central Asians to work together on real issues in a non-zero-sum fashion. If it can start to channel Chinese finance for coordinated infrastructure and other physical development plans in and across Central Asia this will potentially benefit everyone, and the risk of China flooding out all other competitors is limited because the Russians and Central Asians themselves are so much on their guard against this.

Secondly, the SCO addresses security problems that are common to its members and to European nations notably in the fields of anti-terrorism, anti-smuggling and anti-drugs work. To the extent that it succeeds without blocking any of its members’ access to Western aid and expertise in the same fields, it reduces the overall global threat and also the risk of such phenomena “leaking” Westward from SCO territories.

Thirdly, returning to the question of whether the SCO is “real” or “bad” multilateralism, it stands out from all Russia’s other main integrative experiences other than the G8⁵ by the fact that it includes an equally, and increasingly, strong partner country – China. Just as with

⁴ See Ruslan Maksutov’s paper “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Central Asian perspective”, SIPRI, August 2006, text under “Project Papers” at <<http://www.sipri.org/contents/worldsec/eurosec.html>> (August 27 2007); and the discussion in the SIPRI Policy paper (note 1 above) on the SCO’s Astana declaration of 2005.

⁵ The author, perhaps controversially, is not including the NATO-Russia Council or EU-Russia relationship as “integrative experiences” because the whole problem with them is that Russia is a single-nation outsider facing the “ganging-up” of a collective power. Far from developing real joint interests and political styles, Moscow seems to act in an extremely Realpolitik and often zero-sum style in the EU framework particularly.

Germany and France in the early European Communities or Argentina and Brazil in Latin America, the delicate balance of interests and more visceral mistrust between these powers requires real compromise between them and the exercise of real self-discipline by each side. Moreover, the SCO's extensive (on paper) menu of cooperation also appears to permit or even demand sub-state interactions among several kinds of actors, including e.g. businessmen and parliamentarians, which are another sign of relatively "advanced" forms of multilateralism. If these same features are also having any "educative" affect on the smaller Central Asian states, it could even be argued that the SCO is doing part of the West's job by "softening them up" for more transformative kinds of international partnership in future. Finally, to the extent that China sees the SCO as a successful experiment in multilateralism it ought to reinforce Beijing's tendency to apply multilateral, rather than coercive, bilateral or isolationist, tools to other issues of interest to Europe, such as the Six-Party process over the Korean peninsula or the handling of inherited disputes with ASEAN members.

The "Down-side"

Even if it has become a cliché of analysis, the main point here is still that the SCO explicitly rejects both European ("Western") and global norms of human rights, political liberties, good governance in general, and the right and duty both of states and international institutions to intervene in other states' internal abuses. It thereby helps to shore up authoritarian Central Asian regimes, and panders to the more negative aspects of Russian political culture. (It is less likely that it has anything to do with either speeding or slowing political reform in China.) The SCO is also notably non-transparent in its workings and effects, both for the citizens and representative institutions of its own member states, and the outside world.

It is clear from all recent investigations that the SCO is not and never could be a full Russia-China strategic "alliance", and its military and directly security-related activities are still on a very modest scale.⁶ Even so - and probably above all at Russia's and Uzbekistan's urging - its rhetoric and actions have included elements of deliberate "counter-

⁶ The latest SCO Summit communiqué, issued at Bishkek on August 16 2007, see <http://www.sectSCO.org/news_detail.asp?id=1651&LanguageID=2> (August 27 2007), announces the signing of a new treaty among the members on "good-neighbourly relations, friendship and cooperation": but while the text is so far unavailable, this does not sound like any close approach to a military alliance. From other announcements at Bishkek there are hints that the SCO members' joint military activities will increasingly be set in the context of SCO-CSTO partnership (the CSTO standing for the indisputably "hard" side of Russia/Central Asia security cooperation). Other new initiatives reported at Bishkek were in relatively "soft" areas including disarmament and non-proliferation.

balancing” and ”blocking” of Western nations and organizations that also have legitimate interests and partnership goals in the regions concerned. The supposed ”counter-terrorism” exercises have included forces and activities more relevant to high-intensity warfare against another alliance. The SCO agenda of fighting the ”three evils” - terrorism, extremism and separatism - has too often acted as a cover for suppression of what Europeans would see as legitimate oppositional groups and the cutting off of trans-regional ties between them. The SCO also acts as

a legitimating and coordinating framework for Russian arms transfers to other participating states, which may be excessive and/or block out European suppliers. If we had proof that the SCO really had brought under control the genuine non-state threats to its own and its neighbors’ territory, this unpalatable price might be easier for a realist European policy to live with. But in fact there is no evidence that the related elements of disorder in various Eurasian regions have been substantially reduced as a result, and in the medium term unbridled authoritarianism is only likely to aggravate them.

To cite here the risk of an SCO energy cartel, which would both close doors to Western firms and make it harder for European importers to diversify supplies, would be premature at a time when the organization seems to have produced little but words on this topic - and indeed, on infrastructure development generally. Nevertheless it needs watching. Finally, the fact of Iran being an SCO observer does not seem to have offended European observers as it clearly does Americans, possibly because Europeans desperate to find some way of ”acculturating” the Iranian elites may have a faint hope they will catch the multilateral bug from one of their rare chances to take part in an operationally meaningful grouping.⁷

To Liaise or not to Liaise

The SCO has no institution-to-institution links with Europe-based organizations and indeed has not done much to seek them, while it has proudly advertised its mutual observership arrangements with the UN (and a dialogue link with the ASEAN Regional Forum). For the EU, Javier Solana met the then SCO Secretary-General Zhang Deguang during a visit to China, and NATO officials have discussed SCO developments through a bilateral channel with China. Recent European studies have naturally raised the question of whether Europeans should promote closer and more formal contacts, primarily in the EU context (since U.S. objections within the NATO family look hard to dislodge).

⁷ The presence of the new leader of Turkmenistan as a personally invited observer at the Bishkek summit hints that the SCO could also have some role to play in easing that country out of its former autocratic isolation.

What seems clear from the above is that the practical impact of the SCO, as distinct from its normative characteristics, has some useful sides and could even be seen as positive for Europeans on balance. But the SCO does what it does as a result of the interplay of its members' interests and is likely to go on doing it regardless of what signals it receives from Europe. Moreover, its most significant impacts probably come from what its member states do with each other in its name and under its cover, rather than from transactions (or the use of resources) channeled through the small central secretariat and Regional Anti-terrorism Structure (RATS). Soberly viewed, therefore, more formal staff-to-staff cooperation or even a Western observer presence at meetings would be more significant (at least at this stage) as moves in a titillating diplomatic game than as real vehicles for operational synergy. That may not be an argument against them, especially at a time when Europeans badly need some "good news" in relations at least with Russia, but it is not a strong argument for them. In the near time, much more could probably be learned – and more effective messages and influences conveyed – by the EU and its individual states talking directly to the SCO's member and observer states about what the organization means for them, and what it could and should mean for the larger security interests of Eurasia.