

THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT. *This review article examines differences in the development of two major regional security organizations in Central Asia: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Although both organizations emerged in their initial phase as the guarantor of the security of Central Asian states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, currently they have evolved in a different manner, and they are growing with different priorities. By synthesizing the literature on the SCO and the CSTO, along with the preferences of their main patron states - using the comparative research method of most similar systems design (MSSD) - this review contributes to a broader understanding of why regional organizations evolve differently while operating in the same geopolitical space and sharing a similar background once they emerged.*

This review highlights that China's focus on economic growth through a peaceful rise and its aim to preserve regional stability have contributed to how the SCO has evolved and adapted into a diplomatic multilateral arena, surpassing the status of a regional organization. In contrast, Russia's security strategy, aiming to use the CSTO to protect its sphere of influence and pursue economic integration through frameworks like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), has limited the CSTO's development. The organization's limitations are evident in its varied response to regional crises.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, China, Collective Security Treaty Organization, regional organization, regionalism, Russia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization.*

INTRODUCTION

Classical regional studies emphasized the integration of European states that shared similar identities and political systems. The European Union was the champion of that model, in which like-minded liberal states integrated to enhance liberal trade after two devastating world wars. However, new regionalism studies propose a more flexible approach to regional cooperation, encompassing not only trade but also security and regime survival dimensions among different states. This model was developed after the Cold War, in the era of globalization (Chung, 2004, pp. 992-993).

In this sense, it could be suggested that new regional organizations established after the Cold War were merely designed in response to the changing structural dynamic. As

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Söderbaum and Sbragia (2010, p. 568) outlined, exogenous factors driving regionalism in post-90s are mainly related to the globalization waves that impelled actors of a particular region to form a united stance in approaching the new phenomenon of world order. However, there is a view that each region that is affected by globalization and the new world order has formed a pertinent kind of regional organization tailored to meet the uniqueness of its geopolitical setting (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p.13).

Central Asia re-emerged as a distinct region following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. With independence, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan began forging their national and regional identities in a rapidly changing world (Weitz, 2018, p.1). Today, Central Asia is home to numerous regional and multilateral organizations (Cooley, 2012, p.150). However, this paper focuses mainly on two regional organizations that operate in the region: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The problem this study tries to address is that, while Central Asia is one region and both the SCO and the CSTO have emerged in the same context, they pursue different agendas.

Although the SCO and the CSTO have followed distinct institutional trajectories, their interaction has not been entirely absent (Weitz, 2018). Both organizations share overlapping agendas in countering terrorism and drug trafficking. Coordination has been formalized through memoranda of understanding between their secretariats, aimed at exchanging information and cooperation on security-related matters. Moreover, both organizations have conducted counter-terrorism exercises with similar design and objectives, particularly through the SCO's "Peace Mission" exercises and the CSTO's "Rubezh" and "Kanal" operations (Paramonov & Stolpovski, 2008, pp. 1-12).

Nevertheless, this cooperation has remained limited in depth and has not led to sustained institutional integration. The existence of parallel security mechanisms reflects functional overlap rather than genuine coordination. This limited interaction reflects the argument that, despite shared threat perceptions, the two organizations remain shaped by different strategic visions and pursue different agendas (Rauf & Saud, 2020, p. 43).

What is puzzling for this study is why, while situated in the exact region and both organizations in the first place made to enhance the security of Central Asian states, the SCO and the CSTO nowadays have evolved to pursue markedly different objectives and agendas. While the CSTO remained as a Russian tool to enhance its security agenda, the SCO is becoming an economic tool in the hands of the Chinese to promote their diplomacy in the broader region (Cooley, 2012, p.8; Kropatcheva, 2016, p. 1530).

This paper argues that different policies adopted by the two main patrons shaped the evolution of the CSTO and the SCO. It hypothesizes that the CSTO's persistence as a narrowly security-centered and relatively rigid organization reflects Russia's preference to confine collective security cooperation to enhance its regional hegemony doctrine in Central Asia, while pursuing economic integration through alternative institutional frameworks. Conversely, the SCO's evolution into a multilateral and adaptable organization is attributed to China's domestic priorities and its broader strategy of

“peaceful rise,” which encouraged the expansion of the organization’s agenda beyond security to include economic and diplomatic reflections.

In the first part of this study, the argument is grounded in the existing literature, which states that the main patrons of the two Central Asian organizations have driven the evolution of the SCO and the CSTO. After the methodology section, this paper, using a comparative design, examines how China’s domestic needs have driven the SCO’s development, thereby transforming it into a multilateral arena and enabling its expansion beyond Central Asia. In the third part, it discusses how Russian foreign policy has shaped the CSTO, making it a rigid organization with a narrow focus on security issues. Finally, it concludes that regional organizations mainly driven by a patron’s security and foreign policy tend to become institutionally rigid and militarily centered, whereas organizations that are shaped by the patron state’s domestic needs prove to be more flexible and expand beyond their demarcated scope.

METHODOLOGY

This article reviews and critically assesses why the CSTO and the SCO pursue different policies and agendas. To this end, I use the comparative research method of most similar systems design (MSSD), drawing on Mill’s method of difference. This is due to the similarity of the context and focus of the SCO and CSTO, once they established to preserve the regional security of Central Asian states.

While the SCO and the CSTO emerged in a broadly similar geopolitical and historical context, they diverged along a critical dimension: the preference and policy orientation of their main patrons, namely Russia and China. The variation in the leading state’s priority is treated here as the key independent variable accounting for the organizations’ differing trajectories, functional scope, and their overall evolution.

For collecting data that can make the argument of this paper more plausible, I will mainly rely on secondary sources. This encompasses peer-reviewed academic literature and policy reports. Through this approach, I will be able to synthesize and critically assess the evaluation of existing scholarship in order to address the central analytical puzzle surrounding the differences in how the SCO-CSTO evolved. The review is guided by a thematic and comparative reading of the literature, with particular attention to institutional design, practical security cases, and the strategic roles of China and Russia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of Regionalism in Central Asia

To start answering the main research question, this paper reviews the literature about the factors that contributed to the evolution of regionalism in Central Asia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, regionalism efforts in Central Asia were security-driven. Once the Soviets lost control over the region, each of those newly born republics wanted to prevent clashes on their borders and protect their nations from the rising terrorism (Palma de Seixas et al., 2014; Amrosio, 2008, p. 1332).

Several authors in the literature have indicated that the driving force behind both SCO and CSTO was security concerns related to the regime's own safety (Aris, 2009, p. 462; Beeson, 2005, pp. 980-982; de Haas, 2017).

Nevertheless, over the years following their establishment, the focus, purpose, and functions of the two Central Asian organizations gradually diverged. It has been noticed that one of the key reasons behind the SCO's expansion from a military focus toward a broader economic agenda is China's ambition to expand engagement with its western neighbors for securing its energy needs (Becquelin, 2004, pp. 364-365; Blank, 2012, pp. 14-15). Therefore, this reinforces the argument that China's domestic concerns drove the SCO to evolve into a multilateral arena for economic integration and diplomatic engagement, to maximize China's economic objectives.

More specifically, existing studies have attempted to explain the differences between the two Central Asian organizations by focusing on their main patrons. Namely, Russia in the case of the CSTO and China in the case of the SCO. It has been argued that it is the CSTO that enhances the Russian military influence in the region, and that Russia dominates the organization (Rauf & Saud, 2020, p. 32; de Haas, 2017, pp. 12–13). Contrary to those views, Cooley (2012, p. 68) summarizes that Russia has been unable to compel member states to follow its lead.

However, Weitz (2018, p. 16) argues that without Russian military support, most of the Central Asian states, particularly Armenia and Belarus, would be unable to defend themselves against external threats (Allison, 2008, p.p. 188-195). Therefore, it remains clear that Russia is the main patron and leader of the CSTO, a position that enables it to shape the design and the function of the security organization.

On the same note, it has been outlined that China is becoming the primary provider for the SCO, therefore allowing it to influence the agenda of the regional organization (de Haas, 2017, p. 2). Also, de Haas and Putten (2007, p. 34) argue that the SCO is becoming an institutional vehicle for China to promote its economic influence in Central Asia. Danilovich (2013, pp. 73-86) expands on the argument that China is the primary influencer of the SCO, utilizing the structure of the organization to maximize its power across the broader region.

However, the literature has not sufficiently examined how the approach of these patrons affects the design and functioning of the organizations themselves. This paper argues that it is the approach of the patron states that shapes the structure and institutional characteristics of regional organizations in Central Asia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

China's Vision and the SCO's Expansion

China, which is the main patron and leader of the SCO, adopted a new approach to regionalism that promotes a multilateral view of the world (Clarke, 2010). This is to assert that China rejected universal liberal capitalism. Instead, Beijing proposed a new approach, the "Shanghai Spirit" to maximize its domestic interests and secure crucial routes of imports, which are mainly oil and natural gas, that are essential to sustain its economy (Cooley, 2012; Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2008, p. 9). Also, Xiang (2004) contends that through Eurasia, China can further advance its grand strategy of peaceful rise.

As a result, the new regionalism approach adopted by China is congruent with Karl Polanyi's (1945) thesis, which advocates for regional planning over universal capitalism.

Hereby, the SCO shaped by China's strategy of peaceful rise and its endeavors for integration toward Central and Eurasia is supported by Polanyi's idea of regional planning, thus making the SCO a viable tool to enhance China's broader objectives.

Nonetheless, the enlargement of the SCO to include India and Pakistan has further complicated its internal dynamics. While researchers address the liability of expanding the SCO due to the emergence of new conflicting interests (Muratbekova, 2019). I argue that this internal diversity partly explains why the SCO has evolved into a broad, multifunctional forum rather than a tightly integrated security alliance. The growing heterogeneity of membership has also limited the scope for structured cooperation with the CSTO, as the SCO increasingly functions as a flexible diplomatic platform rather than a coherent collective security bloc. I further argue that China's vision and its strategy of peaceful rise, combined with the "Shanghai Spirit," enabled the SCO to flourish and expand its scope beyond security to encompass economic and energy initiatives as well. Therefore, it becomes clear that China's domestic needs, which underpin its doctrine of peaceful rise, have shaped the SCO's evolution.

Russia's Vision and the CSTO's Stagnation

Contrary to the SCO's evolution, the CSTO failed to expand beyond its strict security scope, and this needs further explanation (Weitz, 2018). Russia has limited intention and economic rationality when dealing with the members of the CSTO. Therefore, it has constrained the scope of the organization to security and military dimensions (Rozaev & Turarbekova, 2013, p. 136). I argue that the lack of economic perspective by Moscow has left the CSTO in a state of stagnation. Also, the challenges that initially justified the CSTO's creation have diminished. Consequently, the CSTO's objectives appear outdated. The limitation of Russia's approach to the CSTO, for instance, confining the organization to advance its hegemony doctrine in Central Asia, and the lack of regional cooperative spirit in Central Asia have undermined the progress of the military organization (Mayer, 2021).

This article does not overlook the lack of cooperative spirit as one of the reasons for not having deep political integration among the Central Asian states. While this paper emphasized the role of China and Russia as primary patrons, Central Asian states are not passive recipients of external influence. Kazakhstan, for instance, has simultaneously deepened security cooperation with Russia through the CSTO while pursuing economic diversification through engagement with China within the SCO framework (de Haas, 2017). Smaller states such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have leveraged membership in both organizations to increase support for their regimes. This selective engagement by Central Asian states further constrains the depth of institutional integration and contributes to the differences outlined between the SCO and the CSTO.

Therefore, I treat the lack of cooperative spirit among the Central Asian regimes as the control variable. While their reluctance to deepen ties with Russia helps explain the CSTO's limitations, their selective engagement, driven by economic interests, partially contributes to the "Shanghai Spirit" of the SCO. Treating the lack of cooperative spirit among the Central Asian States strengthens the argument that the key factor behind the divergent paths of the SCO and the CSTO lies in the preferences of their principal patrons.

It is worth mentioning that this analysis does not seek to undervalue the transformations that the CSTO has undergone. For instance, the organization evolved from a traditional inter-state defense pact into a body that is mainly concerned with regime security between 2003 and 2005, specifically during the color revolutions (Ambrosio, 2008, p. 1330). However, these transformations have been mostly confined to the security and military dimension, with limitations to incorporate an economic agenda. Even outside the CSTO's framework, Russia was unable to align the regional organization with the goals of regional planning and economic cooperation (Collins, 2009, p. 259).

Russia has primarily pursued its economic and integration objectives through substitutive institutional frameworks, most notably the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Tsygankov, 2018, p. 403). As a result, the CSTO has remained a security and defense pact similar to America's NATO rather than evolving into a multifunctional regional organization. This reflects Moscow's strategic choice to constrain security cooperation within the CSTO while advancing economic integration through parallel frameworks.

I argue that Russia's investment in establishing substitute institutions as arenas for economic cooperation deepens doubts about the CSTO's viability, thereby further underscoring Moscow's reluctance to expand the organization beyond its security mandate (Weitz, 2014, pp. 2-4). Hence, the CSTO's stagnation and its inability to undergo a real transformation from a narrowly security- and military-oriented organization to one with an expanded economic vision can be attributed to Russia's foreign policy goals, which have constrained the scope and flexibility of the CSTO.

Two recent cases illustrate both the operational capacity and political limitations of the CSTO. First, during the January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan, the CSTO conducted its first-ever collective deployment at the request of the Kazakh government (Hedenskog & von Essen, 2022). The rapid deployment of the CSTO demonstrated that the organization is capable of coordinated action in support of regime stability.

By contrast, the CSTO's inaction during the 2023 escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, despite Armenia's formal membership in the organization, exposed the political constraints and selective application of collective defense commitments (Atasuntsev, 2023). The absence of meaningful CSTO intervention highlighted the organization's limited credibility as a collective defense alliance and reinforced critiques regarding its constrained adaptability and uneven application of security guarantees.

The main argument of this article, that the primary patron's approach toward the two regional organizations (the SCO and the CSTO) has shaped their evolutions, is also backed by Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002, p. 600). When examining the absence of a NATO-like organization in Asia, Hemmer and Katzenstein contend that the US's vision of a collective identity for Europe was essential to the creation of NATO on that continent, whereas the lack of a parallel vision prevented the emergence of a similar structure in Asia. Thus, I reaffirm the main argument that the varying policies and approaches adopted by the two patrons (Russia and China) have shaped the evolution of the CSTO and the SCO.

Overall, the results indicate that differences between the SCO and the CSTO are closely correlated with the priorities of their main patrons. Taken together, the China's "peaceful rise", as reflected in the "Shanghai Spirit" of the SCO, and Russia's efforts to firmly align the CSTO with its foreign policy objective of blocking other powers from entering its sphere of influence, leads to a major finding that the intentions and preferences of major patron states ultimately shape the evolution of such organizations. This finding indicates that while the preference and agency of Central Asian regimes matter, they do not account for the divergent evolution of the SCO and the CSTO. Instead, the strategic preferences and policy orientations of the principal patrons, China in the case of the SCO and Russia in the case of the CSTO, emerge as the primary independent variable shaping the scope, adaptability, and the lack or existence of dynamic evolution of the two organizations.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that, despite being situated in the same region and emerging out of similar security and military concerns, the SCO and the CSTO have gone through different levels of evolution. Grounding on the broader literature that identifies China as the main patron of the SCO and Russia as the main patron of the CSTO, this article argues that the differing approaches and objectives of these two central patrons have been decisive in influencing the development of the two organizations.

To trace the differences in how both organizations evolved, this paper adopted the comparative research method of MSSD. Through this method, I made the argument plausible about the similarity of the context in which both organizations emerged, while designating the influence of their main patrons as the independent variable shaping their contrasting developments.

The outcome of this study is that the evolution and adaptability of a regional organization are dependent on the approaches and objectives of its main patron. If a country like China comes with a vision of promoting its domestic needs through peaceful rise, this approach is more welcomed by other member states, and the progress will follow. Meanwhile, if a country like Russia capitalizes on its foreign policy objective and adopts a dominant security-centered approach, the regional organization will stall in its limited security approach and undergo a modest structural expansion, as illustrated in the case of CSTO.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest and has no affiliations with any organization or entity with financial interests related to the subject matter discussed in this article.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AHM: conceptualization, literature review, methodology, formal analysis, writing and original draft preparation, review and editing.

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