

SHANGHAI COOPERATION AS A MECHANISM FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT. *This study examines the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a tool of regional integration in Central Asia based on an analysis of its official language from 2015 to 2025. The study addresses a key gap in the literature by examining how regional integration is articulated and prioritized in official SCO discourse and how the relative salience of different areas of regional cooperation has changed over time. The study used a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative frequency analysis of 41 official SCO documents, including declarations, statements, and joint communiqués. The coding scheme included six analytical categories: integration, economic cooperation, political coordination, energy and transport, humanitarian cooperation, and security. The results show that the SCO functions more as a hybrid institutional platform than as a traditional model of deep regional integration. Economic cooperation accounts for 26.8%, and security for 20.3% of the organization's discourse, constituting the core of its activities. Longer-term analysis shows a significant shift from security-focused priorities in 2015-2019 to a more economically oriented and diverse agenda in 2020-2025. However, integration remains largely a matter of debate, reflected in ideas such as multipolarity and the "Shanghai spirit," rather than established mechanisms. This study complements existing literature by providing a systematic long-term analysis of SCO documents and linking discourse to measurable models of collaboration. The findings highlight the importance of flexible, consensus-based regionalism in a multipolar world and suggest that the SCO offers an alternative model for regional engagement through selective cooperation and adaptability.*

KEYWORDS: *Shanghai Cooperation Organization, regional integration, Central Asia, content analysis, economic cooperation, security, discourse.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As world politics and power have shifted, regional organizations have become important players in creating new ways for countries to interact. Central Asia, located at the intersection of major geopolitical interests, is a pivotal region where various

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integration efforts converge and influence one another. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become one of the leading platforms in Eurasia, bringing together major regional and global powers such as China, Russia, and the Central Asian states. Since its inception in 2001, the SCO has grown in both size and functionality and now addresses issues such as security cooperation, economic growth, infrastructure development, and humanitarian activities. The growing importance of the SCO is evident as global governance changes, cooperation with non-Western countries grows, and demand for various models of regional integration increases. Therefore, understanding how the SCO works and how effective it is as an instrument of integration in Central Asia is a relevant and important research task (Wang, 2019; Proń, 2023). The research focuses mainly on its role in security cooperation, especially in combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism (Akmadi, 2021; Uzakbayev & Movkebayeva, 2022). Other studies look at the SCO in a broader geopolitical context, often highlighting the strategic interests of major powers. In the present study, regional integration in relation to the SCO is not understood as a classic model of deep institutional integration involving the transfer of some national powers to supranational bodies, the formation of a common market, or the unification of national policies. In the context of the SCO, regional integration is seen as a more flexible and selective process of rapprochement of states, realized through regular political coordination, security cooperation, development of economic links, transport and energy interconnectedness, as well as humanitarian interaction, while preserving state sovereignty and the consensual nature of decision-making. For the Central Asian states, such a model is particularly important because the SCO provides an institutional framework through which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan participate in shaping regional priorities, agree on security positions, and expand economic and infrastructure engagement with the larger regional powers. Thus, in this article, integration is not evaluated by the degree of transfer of sovereignty or the creation of supranational institutions, but by how different directions of regional convergence are formulated, prioritized, and institutionalized in the official discourse of the SCO. However, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding detailed analysis of the SCO as an instrument of regional integration, including its official statements and underlying dynamics. Few existing studies combine qualitative analysis of official documents with quantitative assessment of key topics over time. Little attention has been paid to how formal commitments to regional cooperation are articulated, prioritized, and institutionalized in official SCO discourse, particularly in relation to Central Asia. This creates a need for a systematic longitudinal analysis capable of tracing changes in the relative prominence of different areas of regional cooperation over time. In this study, regionalism refers to the institutional and political framework through which states organize regional cooperation, regionalization denotes the broader process through which regional interactions become more intensive. In contrast, regional integration is used analytically to describe the increasing coordination and institutionalization of cooperation across specific functional areas without implying the transfer of sovereignty to supranational institutions.

The study aims to determine how regional integration in Central Asia is conceptualized and reflected in the official discourse of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as well as to identify changes in the relative importance of its main economic cooperation areas, security, political coordination, energy and transport, humanitarian cooperation, and integration rhetoric between 2015 and 2025.

The study is based on the following main research question: *How is regional integration in Central Asia constructed and prioritized in the official discourse of the SCO, and how has the relative importance of its main directions changed between 2015 and 2025?*

Additional research question: *How do integration priorities differ between the SCO Council of Heads of State and the SCO Council of Heads of Government?*

The research contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it provides a systematic, long-term analysis of SCO documents over 10 years, from 2015 to 2025, and identifies shifting priorities and trends. This period was selected because it captures a decade of substantial institutional and geopolitical transformation within the SCO, including its membership expansion and the diversification of its cooperation agenda. It also provides a sufficiently long and continuous timeframe to trace changes in thematic priorities beyond individual summits or short-term political events. Second, it uses a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative content analysis with quantitative assessment, thereby enhancing methodological rigor. Third, the study provides insight into the relationship between political discourse and integration processes, and promotes a broader discussion of regionalism and international institutions in non-Western contexts.

Theoretical basis of research. The SCO represents a particular model of regionalism, distinct from classical integration paradigms and often referred to as "soft regionalization" or "informal institutionalism", characterized by low levels of supranational power; flexible mechanisms of cooperation and emphasis on political dialogue rather than deep economic integration (Acharya, 2016; Allison, 2008). The model is closely linked to the normative principles of the so-called "Shanghai spirit," which places mutual trust, equality, respect for sovereignty, and non-interference in domestic affairs at its core (Karrar, 2017; Xue, 2021). The principles assume that the SCO functions not as a traditional integration project but as a hybrid institutional platform that combines elements of security cooperation, economic coordination, and diplomatic engagement. In the context of Central Asia, this model of regionalism is particularly important. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are not only geographical spaces for implementing SCO initiatives but also member states involved in shaping the organization's regional agenda (Dadabaev, 2014; Bourdais, 2026). For them, cooperation within the SCO is developing in conditions of the need to simultaneously preserve national sovereignty, ensure regional security, expand economic links and transport interconnectedness, as well as build relations with the larger powers - primarily China and Russia. Therefore, the regionalization of Central Asia within the SCO does not imply the formation of a single supranational space along the lines of the European Union (Karami & Mozaffari, 2026). It is manifested primarily through the alignment of interests, policy coordination, and development of cooperation in individual functional areas. In this sense, the Central Asian states should be seen not only as objects of influence by major powers, but also as autonomous participants in regional interaction, able to use the SCO's institutional mechanisms to advance their own security priorities. Economic development and regional interconnectedness. To fully understand the nature of the SCO, one must consider constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of ideas, norms, and discourse in shaping international relations (Karrar, 2017). From a constructivist perspective, international institutions are not only formal structures but also socially constructed arenas where shared meanings and identities are created and reproduced.

Official documents, including declarations and pronouncements, play a crucial role in this process by formulating priorities, legitimizing collective action, and defining the organization's role in the international system. In this context, discourse becomes a key analytical dimension for understanding how the SCO functions. By exploring how concepts like "security", "cooperation", and "integration" are formulated and prioritized in official texts, it can be assessed to what extent the organization promotes a coherent integration program or serves primarily as a platform for policy coordination.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have identified several interrelated areas of analysis. The first examines the SCO through the lens of regionalism and institutional development, highlighting its differences from classical integration models grounded in supranational governance. Under this approach, the SCO is characterized as a flexible institutional framework in which the preservation of state sovereignty, consensus-based decision-making, and functional cooperation are more important than the devolution of powers to supranational institutions. (Dadabaev, 2014; Rauf, 2020; Yuan, 2023). Current studies also show that the SCO's expansion of membership and institutional evolution have gradually transformed it from a predominantly security-oriented grouping into a broader regional governance framework encompassing economic, infrastructure, and policy issues. A key area of modern research is the SCO's role in managing regional security and its effective promotion of cooperation in combating terrorism, extremism, and cross-border threats, especially through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (Cooley, 2021; Pantucci, 2021). However, this focus on security has been criticized for ignoring other aspects of the SCO's work, including economic and infrastructure cooperation. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the SCO's economic potential, particularly in the context of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which serves as a political and institutional platform for promoting linkages, trade, and investment in Central Asia (Akmadi, 2021; Pradhan & Mohanty, 2021). However, evidence suggests that economic integration within the SCO is uneven and largely bilateral rather than multilateral. The second area of research focuses on the roles of China and Russia in the SCO's institutional development. The Organization is both a space for cooperation between two major powers and a mechanism for reconciling their partly divergent interests in Central Asia. Russia has traditionally emphasized security issues and the preservation of its political influence in the post-Soviet space, while China's growing role is linked to economic engagement, infrastructure, trade, and the broader promotion of its vision for a regional and international order. The development of the SCO should therefore be viewed not solely as a result of Sino-Russian rivalry or, conversely, of their strategic partnership, but as an institutional process in which cooperation and competition coexist. This interaction between the two powers affects both the organization's thematic priorities and the limits of its institutionalization (Yuan, 2023; Seiwert, 2023). At the same time, explaining the SCO's institutional development solely through the interests of China and Russia risks portraying the Central Asian states as passive political objects of larger powers. On the contrary, more modern approaches to Eurasian regionalism emphasize the ability of smaller states to leverage regional organizations to pursue their own strategies, diversify foreign-policy linkages, and expand policy space. In this regard, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are not only members of the institutional framework formed by China and Russia but also actors capable of influencing the regional agenda through national security priorities: trade, transport connectivity, and economic development. The SCO provides these states with an additional multilateral platform to interact simultaneously with China, Russia, and other members of the organization without the need for deep supranational integration (Nasibov & Gawrich, 2025).

From a constructivist point of view, researchers emphasize the importance of common narratives such as "Shanghai Spirit" in legitimizing cooperation and forming a special regionalism model, and studies show that the SCO is not just an institutional instrument but also a platform where different views on the international order are expressed. Despite the expanding literature on the SCO, three related empirical gaps remain. First, relatively little research has systematically examined longitudinal changes in the thematic structure of official SCO discourse. Second, limited attention has been paid to changes in the relative salience of different dimensions of regional cooperation, including security, economic cooperation, political coordination, energy and transport, humanitarian cooperation, and explicit integration rhetoric. Third, existing studies rarely compare these priorities across different institutional levels of the SCO, particularly between the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Heads of Government. However, much less attention is devoted to a systematic longitudinal analysis of how the structure of the SCO's official discourse changes over time and how the relative importance of different areas of regional cooperation changes. It therefore remains unclear how the relative prominence of security, economic, political, transport and energy, humanitarian, and integration-related themes has evolved within official SCO discourse and whether these patterns differ across institutional levels. This study addresses these gaps through a systematic longitudinal content analysis of 41 official SCO documents published between 2015 and 2025. By tracing six thematic categories over time and comparing their relative salience between the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Heads of Government, the analysis identifies both temporal shifts and institutional differences in how the SCO constructs and prioritizes regional cooperation. It refers to explicit references to regional convergence, institutional development, membership and enlargement, shared regional frameworks, and broader normative visions of integration. References to economic, security, transport, political, or humanitarian cooperation are therefore not automatically coded as integration unless they contain an explicit regional or institutional dimension.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Design of the study. The study is based on a longitudinal mixed content analysis of the official discourse of the SCO for 2015-2025. The methodological design combined qualitative directed content analysis with subsequent quantitative frequency analysis and the relative representation of thematic categories. The choice of such a design was due, on the one hand, to the need to define meaningful ways of constructing regional integration in the official discourse of the SCO, and, on the other hand, to establish changes in the relative importance of individual areas of cooperation over time and at various institutional levels of the organization. The quality stage involved interpreting the meaning of official documents and systematically assigning relevant textual fragments to pre-defined analytical categories. In the quantitative stage, coded

fragments were aggregated at the level of individual documents, time periods, and SCO institutional bodies. Thus, the frequency of code entries was regarded as an indicator of the discursive salience of the relevant subject rather than a direct indicator of the degree of actual implementation of integration initiatives. The empirical basis for the study consists of a corpus of 41 official SCO documents published between 2015 and 2025. Declarations, statements, joint communiqués, and other final documents adopted at two key institutional levels of the organization were included in the corpus: the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Heads of Government/Prime Ministers. The selection of documents was targeted based on several criteria. First, the document was to have an official status and be directly related to the activities of one of the two SCO institutional bodies under analysis. Second, the document was to be for the period 2015-2025. Third, its content should have included meaningful provisions outlining the priorities, directions, principles, or mechanisms for regional cooperation. Documents of an exclusively administrative or technical nature and not containing analytically significant provisions were not included in the body. The chosen time slot allowed for a medium-term transformation of the SCO's official discourse and avoided narrowing analysis to individual summits or single political events. For longitudinal comparison, the building was divided into two analytical periods: 2015-2019 and 2020-2025. This division was primarily used as an analytical tool for comparing the structure of discourse before and after 2020. It did not imply an a priori assertion that there was a one-off institutional breakthrough in 2020. Each document was assigned a unique identifier, and the year of publication, time period, and institutional level were added to the analytical base. This arrangement of the array has enabled consistent analysis at the levels of individual documents, time periods, and institutional bodies.

Unit of analysis and code development. The basic unit of coding was a meaning-unit proposal, a part of the proposal or a semantically complete fragment of text containing an autonomous provision regarding a specific direction of regional cooperation. The formal boundaries of a paragraph were not considered mandatory boundaries of a coding unit: one paragraph could contain several analytically independent entities. In contrast, several interrelated sentences could be interpreted as a single entity. If their separation resulted in a loss of context. Based on the research theoretical framework, research questions, and preliminary analysis of the literature, a hierarchical code system was developed. It included six parent thematic categories: integration (INT), economic cooperation (ECO), policy coordination (POL), energy and transport (ET), humanitarian cooperation (HUM), and security (SEC). The parent categories were further differentiated into narrower subcodes, reflecting the specific content dimensions of each direction. The Integration category (INT) covered institutional development of an organization, expansion and membership, as well as the normative bases of integration interaction, including the principles of the "Shanghai Spirit". The Economic Cooperation (ECO) category included trade and trade facilitation, investment and business interaction, digital economy, production cooperation and supply chains. Political coordination (POL) covered issues of sovereignty and non-interference, multipolarity and international order, and diplomatic coordination. The energy and transport (ET) category included transport, logistics, energy cooperation, energy transition and related infrastructure. Humanitarian cooperation (HUM) included health, education and science, cultural and public relations, climate issues, and sustainable development. The security category covered counterterrorism, extremism and separatism, border security, transnational crime, drug trafficking, and institutional arrangements for regional security. The fundamental methodological significance lay in distinguishing between integration rhetoric and individual forms

of functional cooperation. The use of cooperation, interaction, partnership, and semantically related terms in the document was not a sufficient reason to assign INT. The integration code was used only when the analyzed snippet had strong regional, institutional, or regulatory integration content. This criterion has made it possible to minimize the conceptual overlap between the category of integration and economic, political, transport, humanitarian, and security cooperation.

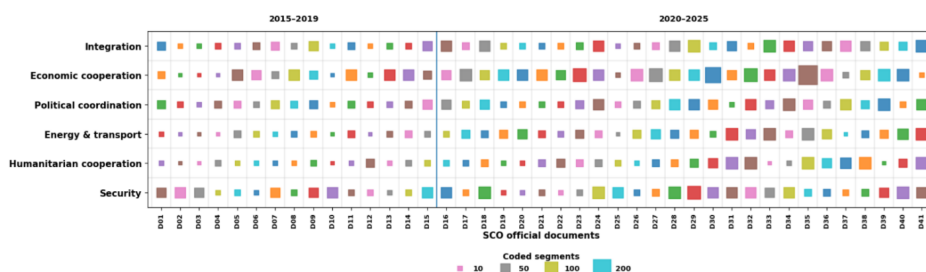
Encoding procedure. The body encoding was performed using MAXQDA. In the first phase, the documents were systematized and provided with metadata. Further, on the basis of the theoretical framework and research questions, an initial version of the codebook was developed, including definitions of categories, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and rules for resolving potentially ambiguous cases. After pre-coding, the definitions of individual categories and subcategories were refined to make them more meaningful. At the main stage, each document was analyzed in its entirety, and the relevant nouns were coded according to their contextual significance. The keywords were purely auxiliary in searching for potentially relevant snippets and did not constitute an independent basis for assigning a code. Multiple encoding was allowed when a single denomination contained several distinct analytical components. For example, a provision on developing an international transport corridor to increase mutual trade could be included under the energy and transport categories, alongside economic cooperation. However, the repetition of a single substantive provision by means of several synonymous expressions within a single entity was not considered as several separate code entries. To ensure transparency in the analytical procedure, research memos and a journal of coding decisions were conducted, in which ambiguous cases were recorded, boundaries between categories were clarified, and encoding rules adopted.

Reliability of the encoding. A cross-coded validation procedure was used to evaluate the code system's reproducibility. The two researchers independently applied a single codebook to the general body of the documents. After independent coding, the discrepancies were compared with operational category definitions and discussed until an agreed solution was reached. The clarifications that arose during this procedure were incorporated into the final version of the codebook and used in subsequent analysis of the body. Inter-coder consistency was assessed using Cohen's kappa coefficient, which allows for the probability of an accidental overlap between two coders. The final value was $\kappa = 0.81$, indicating a high degree of coding consistency. The remaining discrepancies were resolved through a conciliatory discussion based on code definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the context of the snippet being analyzed.

After quality coding was completed, the data were exported from MAXQDA and converted into a structured analytical matrix. For each of the 41 documents, the number of code entries in six parent subject categories was calculated. In the next step, indicators were aggregated by time periods and institutional levels. Quantitative analysis was carried out in three directions. First, the general thematic structure of the corpus for 2015–2025 was determined, which made it possible to establish the relative representation of six directions in the official discourse of the SCO. Second, the periods 2015–2019 and 2020–2025 were compared to identify longitudinal changes in thematic priorities. Third, a comparison was made between the documents of the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Heads of Government/Prime Ministers to identify the institutional differentiation of official discourse. Because the documents

differed substantially in volume and in the total number of coded reference units, absolute frequencies were analyzed alongside relative indices. For each document, the share of each parent category in the total number of code entries was calculated. This approach allowed for the comparison of document thematic profiles regardless of volume differences. The distribution of the six parent codes at the level of individual documents was also presented as a Code Matrix (Figure 1). In contrast to visualizing the absolute number of code entries, the matrix was normalized at the level of each document: the cell intensity reflected the percentage of the relevant thematic category in the document's total number of code entries. The numeric value in each row denotes the dominant category of topics. This visualization made it possible to simultaneously present the inter-document differences and the change in thematic structure of official discourse throughout the period under study.

Figure 1. Code matrix of thematic profiles in SCO official documents, 2015–2025



Source: compiled by the authors

Thus, absolute frequencies were used to characterize the total volume of thematic references, while relative figures were used for comparative analysis of the structure of discourse. The frequency of coding has been interpreted as an indicator of the relative importance of the relevant thematic area in the discourse and was not seen as a direct indication of the intensity of policy implementation. The approach taken examines formal institutional discourse and does not directly measure the actual results of regional integration. Official documents indicate which areas of collaboration are articulated, legitimized, and prioritized by the organization, but do not, in themselves, determine the extent to which the initiatives are implemented. Therefore, the results were interpreted as a characterization of the structure, dynamics, and institutional differentiation of the official discourse of the SCO, rather than as a direct assessment of the organization's effectiveness or the actual depth of regional integration.

4. FINDINGS

As a result of the content analysis, a structured dataset was compiled for 41 official documents of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from 2015-2025. For each document, the frequency of code entries was recorded in six analytical categories: integration, economic cooperation, political coordination, energy and transport, humanitarian cooperation, and security. The analysis was carried out sequentially at three levels: first, the overall thematic structure of the building was determined; then its dynamics between the periods 2015-2019 and 2020-2025 were evaluated; and finally, the thematic profiles of CHS and PM documents were compared. Additionally, the variability of the thematic structure at the level of individual documents was taken into

account. The first stage of analysis aimed to determine the overall structure of thematic priorities in official SCO documents over the entire period under investigation. In 41 documents, 9,477 code entries were recorded in six parent categories. However, their distribution was uneven, indicating that some areas of collaboration were represented at different levels in the organization's official discourse. The source matrix contains values for all documents D01-D41 and allows them to be aggregated into each of the six thematic categories (Table 1).

Table 1. Overall distribution of thematic categories in SCO official documents, 2015–2025

Thematic category	Coded segments, n	Share of total coded segments, %
Economic cooperation	2,450	25.9
Security	1,720	18.1
Integration	1,492	15.7
Political coordination	1,486	15.7
Energy & transport	1,238	13.1
Humanitarian cooperation	1,091	11.5
Total	9,477	100.0

Source: compiled by the authors

As Table 1 shows, the most represented category was economic cooperation, which accounted for 2,450 code entries, or 25.9% of the total array. Thus, approximately one in four code entries in the investigated corpus concerned economic issues. The economic category included provisions on trade, investment, business interactions, the digital economy, production cooperation, and supply chains. The second position was security - 1,720 code entries (18.1%). Although its combined share was 7.8 percentage points below economic cooperation, security remained one of the highest-profile areas on the official agenda. However, the distribution of this category across individual documents was particularly heterogeneous: the corpus included both complex declarations with a relatively balanced thematic structure and specialized documents in which security was the main focus of all code entries. For example, in D02 security accounted for 60 of 90 code entries, in D03 it was 48 out of 70, and in D10 it was 65 out of 83. The categories of integration and political coordination had almost identical aggregate representation: 1,492 (15.7%) and 1,486 (15.7%) code entries, respectively. This is a significant result regarding the body's structure: the integrative component of official discourse was not limited to economic or security issues but formed an independent platform of utterances alongside political coordination. However, in accordance with the adopted coding procedure, functional collaboration was not automatically classified as Integration; this code was applied only if there was separate regional, institutional, or normative-integration content. Energy and transport accounted for a slightly smaller share - 1,238 code entries (13.1%) and humanitarian cooperation - 1,091 (11.5%). However, their lower share in the total does not mean that these directions are peripheral throughout the period under study. Already, the primary analysis of the matrix shows a significant concentration of these categories in individual papers, especially in the later part of the

corpus. For example, in the 2025 documents, there are 89 code entries for Energy & transport and 90-93 for Humanitarian cooperation, which are significantly higher than the corresponding figures for most documents in the first half of the period under study.

The visual structure of the Code Matrix (Figure 1) confirms that the overall distribution of codes comprised substantially different document profiles. In the first part of the study period, documents with a strong focus on security stand out particularly clearly, while several PM-level documents are characterized by a high level of economic coding intensity. For example, in D05, D08, D11 and D14, economic cooperation amounted to 65, 62, 68 and 75 code entries respectively. In the latter part of the matrix, the visual profile becomes more heterogeneous: alongside the preservation of economic and security issues, the intensity of coding energy-transport and humanitarian directions in a number of documents increases. Particularly noticeable is the variability of the 2025 documents, where high values are already distributed among several thematic categories rather than concentrated exclusively in one.

The second stage of analysis aimed to identify changes in the thematic structure of the SCO's official discourse over time. For this, the corpus was divided into two analytical periods: 2015-2019 (15 documents) and 2020-2025 (26 documents). Such a comparison allows one to determine whether the relative positions of the six thematic areas have changed within an organization's formal agenda. There were 2,095 code entries in the first period documents, while 7,382 in the second period documents. The direct comparison of these absolute values is not, in itself, indicative, since the second period includes more documents and some later documents are characterized by substantially more coding. Therefore, the main inter-period comparison was made on the relative structure of code entries within each period.

Table 2. Distribution of thematic categories in SCO official documents by period

Thematic category	2015-2019	2015-2019	2020-2025	2020-2025	Change, pp
	N	%	N	%	
Integration	354	16.9	1,138	15.4	-1.5
Economic cooperation	534	25.5	1,916	26.0	+0.5
Political coordination	362	17.3	1,124	15.2	-2.1
Energy&Transport	189	9.0	1,049	14.2	+5.2
Humanitarian cooperation	161	7.7	930	12.6	+4.9
Security	495	23.6	1,225	16.6	-7.0
Total	2,095	100.0	7,382	100.0	—

Source: compiled by the authors

The results of Table 2 show that changing the SCO's official discourse between two periods did not amount to a simple transition from security to economic cooperation. Economic topics were the most-represented category in 2015-2019, accounting for

25.5% of all code entries. In 2020-2025. Its share reached 26.0%, an increase of only 0.5 percentage points. Therefore, the main change was not the growth of the economic component as such, but the redistribution of the relative representation of other areas on the official agenda. The largest reduction occurred in the Security category, with its share falling from 23.6% in 2015-2019 to 16.6% in 2020-2025. is 7.0 percentage points. In the first period, security was almost comparable to economic cooperation in terms of overall representation: the difference between them was only 1.9 percentage points. In the second period, this gap increased to 9.4 percentage points. However, the decline in the relative safety share has not been accompanied by its disappearance from the official agenda. In absolute terms, the number of relevant code entries increased from 495 to 1,225 due to the expansion of the case and the overall coding volume. Moreover, certain documents from the second period maintained a clearly expressed security orientation. For example, in D25, security accounted for 65 out of 109 code entries, and in D29, security accounted for 95 out of 390. Therefore, the result is more correctly interpreted as a reduction in the relative weight of security within an expanding thematic framework of discourse, rather than a weakening or crowding out of the security agenda. The most notable increase in relative representation was found for Energy & transport. The share of this category rose from 9.0% to 14.2%, a 5.2 percentage-point increase. In the first period, energy and transport issues ranked second-to-last among six categories; in the second, their relative representation was close to that of indicators of integration and policy coordination. At the documentary level, this trend is particularly noticeable in the 2022-2025 materials, where separate documents contain 55, 79, 88, and 89 code entries in this category.

The next stage of the analysis examined whether the thematic composition of official SCO discourse varied across institutional levels. The corpus comprised 32 documents issued at the CHS level and 9 documents associated with the PM. Because the documents differed substantially in length and in the total number of coded segments, comparisons based solely on absolute frequencies could disproportionately reflect document size rather than thematic emphasis. Accordingly, the six thematic categories were normalized at the document level by calculating the percentage of coded segments assigned to each category, relative to the total number of coded segments in each document. Given the unequal group sizes and the distributional characteristics of the document-level proportions, differences between CHS and PM documents were assessed using the Mann–Whitney U test. Rank-biserial correlation ((r_{rb})) was additionally calculated to assess the magnitude of the observed differences. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of document-level thematic salience

Thematic category	CHS, Median (IQR), %	PM, Median (IQR), %	Mann–Whitney U	p	$ r_{rb} $
Integration	13.58 (9.78–21.15)	12.68 (11.67–13.66)	145.0	.987	.01
Economic cooperation	17.98 (15.94–31.58)	41.40 (39.58–42.03)	70.0	.021	.51
Political coordination	15.43 (12.11–18.17)	14.91 (14.49–15.49)	145.0	.987	.01
Energy and transport	9.41 (5.08–15.28)	16.43 (14.08–16.76)	68.0	.017	.53

Humanitarian cooperation	8.23 (3.94–16.21)	8.38 (6.37–9.39)	134.0	.765	.07
Security	20.77 (7.91–28.10)	7.82 (7.64–8.40)	216.0	.024	.50

Source: compiled by the authors

The analysis identified statistically significant institutional differences in three of the six thematic dimensions: economic cooperation, energy and transport, and security. Importantly, these differences were accompanied by rank-biserial correlations of approximately .50 or greater, indicating that the observed contrasts were substantively pronounced rather than being attributable solely to statistical significance. The strongest institutional contrast concerned economic cooperation. Its median within-document share was 41.40% (IQR = 39.58–42.03) among PM documents, compared with 17.98% (IQR = 15.94–31.58) among CHS documents. The difference was statistically significant (($U=70.0$), ($p=.021$), ($|r_{\text{rb}}|=.51$)). The narrow interquartile range observed for PM documents is also noteworthy: economic themes accounted for approximately two-fifths of coded content across the central 50% of documents in this group. Economic cooperation therefore constituted a comparatively consistent component of the PM-level agenda rather than being driven by a small number of exceptionally economy-focused documents. A similar institutional pattern was observed for energy and transport. The median share of this category was 16.43% (IQR = 14.08–16.76) in PM documents and 9.41% (IQR = 5.08–15.28) in CHS documents. This difference was statistically significant (($U=68.0$), ($p=.017$)) and was associated with an effect size of ($|r_{\text{rb}}|=.53$). Thus, the greater prominence of energy- and transport-related content at the PM level remained evident after differences in overall coding volume across documents had been taken into account. An inverse pattern emerged for security. Security-related content accounted for a median of 20.77% (IQR = 7.91–28.10) of coded segments in CHS documents, compared with only 7.82% (IQR = 7.64–8.40) in PM documents. The difference was statistically significant (($U=216.0$), ($p=.024$), ($|r_{\text{rb}}|=.50$)). The wider interquartile range among CHS documents further indicates substantial variation in the salience of security within this institutional group, consistent with the presence of both broad summit declarations and documents specifically devoted to security-related issues. By contrast, no statistically significant institutional differences were found for integration, political coordination, or humanitarian cooperation. Integration accounted for a median of 13.58% of coded segments in CHS documents and 12.68% in PM documents (($U=145.0$), ($p=.987$), ($|r_{\text{rb}}|=.01$)). Political coordination was similarly distributed across the two groups, with median shares of 15.43% and 14.91%, respectively (($U=145.0$), ($p=.987$), ($|r_{\text{rb}}|=.01$)). Humanitarian cooperation also showed little institutional differentiation: its median share was 8.23% in CHS documents and 8.38% in PM documents (($U=134.0$), ($p=.765$), ($|r_{\text{rb}}|=.07$)). Taken together, the findings reveal a pattern of thematic diversification combined with selective institutional specialization in SCO official discourse. Economic cooperation remained the most prominent thematic domain across the 2015–2025 corpus, while the later period was characterized by a lower relative share of security-related content and greater representation of energy and transport and humanitarian cooperation. At the institutional level, the differences were concentrated in specific functional domains rather than extending across the entire thematic structure: PM documents showed significantly greater salience of economic cooperation and energy and transport, whereas security was significantly more prominent in CHS documents. By contrast, integration, political coordination, and humanitarian cooperation did not

differ significantly between the two institutional levels. The results indicate that the evolution of SCO discourse is better characterized by an expansion and differentiation of its functional agenda than by a straightforward replacement of security priorities with economic ones.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings provide a more differentiated account of the evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization than interpretations that frame the SCO primarily as either a security organization or an emerging economic integration project. Across the 2015–2025 corpus, economic cooperation constituted the largest thematic domain, while security remained a major but increasingly less dominant component of the overall discourse. At the same time, the later period was marked by the growing relative salience of energy and transport and humanitarian cooperation. This combination suggests that the principal transformation of SCO discourse has not been a linear transition from a security agenda to an economic one. Rather, the organization's official discourse has undergone functional diversification, in which a historically important security agenda has been retained while the range of policy domains encompassed by regional cooperation has expanded. This finding both supports and qualifies previous interpretations of the SCO's institutional development. Earlier scholarship has emphasized the organization's security foundations and its role in coordinating responses to terrorism, extremism, separatism, and other transnational threats (Wang & Kong, 2019; Cooley, 2021; Pantucci, 2021; Yuan, 2023). The present analysis confirms that security remains structurally important within SCO discourse. However, its declining relative share in the later period indicates that security no longer defines the thematic architecture of the organization to the same extent as it did in the earlier part of the corpus. Importantly, this should not be interpreted as evidence of a retreat from security cooperation. Security-related coded content remained substantial, and several later documents continued to display a pronounced security orientation. What changed was its position within an increasingly multidimensional agenda. In this sense, the findings are more consistent with institutional expansion than with policy substitution.

The growing prominence of energy, transport, and humanitarian cooperation is particularly important in this respect. These domains broaden the functional scope of regional cooperation beyond the security–economy dichotomy that has frequently structured analyses of the SCO. Transport connectivity, logistics, energy cooperation, digital transformation, scientific exchange, public health, environmental issues, and related forms of interaction increasingly appear alongside the organization's established security and economic priorities. Such diversification is consistent with studies describing the SCO's gradual evolution from a relatively narrow security-oriented grouping towards a broader framework of regional governance (Pradhan & Mohanty, 2021; Proń, 2023; Seiwert, 2025). The longitudinal evidence presented here nevertheless adds an important qualification: diversification does not necessarily imply deeper integration. An organization may broaden the number of policy areas addressed in its official agenda without simultaneously developing stronger supranational institutions or binding mechanisms of policy harmonization. This distinction is central to understanding the form of regionalism represented by the SCO. Classical approaches to regional integration have often associated institutional development with increasing delegation of authority, policy harmonization, market integration, or the creation of

supranational governance structures. Such criteria provide only a partial explanation of the SCO. The organization has instead maintained consensus-based decision-making, strong commitments to sovereignty and non-interference, and relatively limited supranational authority. The findings therefore support interpretations of the SCO as a form of flexible or sovereignty-preserving regionalism rather than an incomplete version of a European-style integration project (Allison, 2008; Dadabaev, 2014; Acharya, 2016; Rauf, 2020). From this perspective, the absence of movement towards deep supranational integration should not automatically be treated as evidence of institutional failure. It may instead reflect a different institutional logic in which cooperation is selectively expanded across functional domains, while member states retain substantial control over the depth and form of their commitments.

The results concerning the explicit integration category reinforce this interpretation. Integration-related discourse remained visible throughout the corpus but did not become overwhelmingly dominant despite the expansion of economic, infrastructural, and humanitarian themes. This distinction is analytically significant because the coding framework deliberately separated explicit regional and institutional integration from more general references to cooperation. Consequently, the expansion of functional cooperation cannot automatically be equated with a corresponding increase in the rhetoric of integration. The SCO appears to achieve regional convergence primarily by accumulating sector-specific forms of coordination rather than by an explicit commitment to progressively deeper institutional integration. In this sense, regionalization within the SCO may proceed through what can be described as selective functional institutionalization: cooperation becomes denser across particular policy fields while the political principles governing the organization continue to protect national autonomy. The institutional comparison between the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Heads of Government further develops this argument. The substantially greater salience of security in CHS documents, combined with the stronger emphasis on economic cooperation and energy and transport at the PM level, indicates a degree of functional specialization within the SCO's institutional architecture. The organization's thematic diversity is therefore not distributed randomly across its institutional bodies. The heads-of-state level is more strongly associated with strategic and security-related agenda setting, whereas the governmental level gives greater prominence to the operational and functional dimensions of economic and infrastructural cooperation. At the same time, the absence of substantial institutional differences in integration and political coordination suggests that this specialization is selective rather than constituting a division into separate institutional agendas.

This finding has implications for how the SCO itself should be conceptualized. Rather than operating through a single homogeneous integration agenda, the organization appears to accommodate different layers of regional cooperation within the same institutional framework. Strategic-security coordination and functional-economic cooperation coexist but are articulated with different intensity at different decision-making levels. Such an arrangement may contribute to the SCO's institutional flexibility: member states are not required to agree on a uniform trajectory of deep integration in order to cooperate intensively in selected policy domains. Institutional differentiation can therefore serve as a mechanism through which a heterogeneous membership sustains cooperation despite differences in national priorities, economic interests, and geopolitical orientations. For Central Asia, this flexibility is particularly consequential. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan operate within an institutional environment that includes China, Russia, and an expanding group of other

Eurasian actors. Existing research has increasingly challenged interpretations that reduce Central Asian regionalism to competition between external powers, emphasizing instead the agency of secondary states in navigating overlapping regional institutions and using them to widen their foreign-policy options (Dadabaev, 2014; Nasibov & Gawrich, 2025). The thematic structure identified in this study is compatible with such an interpretation. A multidimensional SCO agenda creates several institutional entry points through which Central Asian states can articulate interests related to security, trade, connectivity, energy, diplomatic coordination, and humanitarian cooperation without committing themselves to a single supranational integration framework. This does not mean that the discourse analyzed here demonstrates equivalent influence among SCO members, nor can document-level content establish which states were responsible for particular agenda shifts. The present evidence therefore does not support a causal claim that Central Asian states themselves produced the observed thematic diversification. It does, however, show that the institutional discourse within which these states operate has become increasingly multidimensional. This distinction is important because it avoids portraying Central Asian agency as an assumption while still recognizing the institutional opportunities created by a broader functional agenda. Future actor-level research could examine the extent to which particular member states shape specific thematic priorities and whether national preferences are subsequently incorporated into collective SCO documents.

The findings also contribute to the constructivist interpretation of SCO regionalism. Official declarations, statements, and communiqués do not merely enumerate areas of cooperation; they also help define which forms of regional interaction are presented as legitimate, desirable, and institutionally appropriate. The persistence of integration and political-coordination themes alongside the expansion of functional policy areas indicates that SCO regionalism is constructed through both material cooperation and a recurring normative vocabulary. In this respect, principles associated with the “Shanghai Spirit”, including sovereignty, equality, mutual trust, consensus, and non-interference, provide a discursive framework capable of accommodating cooperation without requiring supranational convergence (Karrar, 2017; Xue & Makengo, 2021). The coexistence of these principles with an increasingly diversified functional agenda helps explain how institutional expansion can occur without a corresponding abandonment of sovereignty-centered regionalism. The results suggest that the SCO is best understood neither as a conventional security alliance nor as an emerging supranational integration organization. Instead, it operates as a hybrid, functionally differentiated regional platform in which security coordination, economic cooperation, connectivity, humanitarian interaction, and broader integration narratives coexist within a sovereignty-preserving institutional framework. Its evolution between 2015 and 2025 is therefore characterized less by movement along a linear continuum from “low” to “high” integration than by the widening of the domains in which regional cooperation is articulated. This pattern contributes to the broader literature on comparative and non-Western regionalism by demonstrating that institutional development may take the form of expanding functional density and differentiated cooperation without necessarily producing supranational authority or uniform policy integration.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how regional integration in Central Asia is constructed and prioritized in the official discourse of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and

how the relative salience of its principal areas of cooperation evolved between 2015 and 2025. Drawing on a longitudinal content analysis of 41 official SCO documents, the study combined qualitative coding with quantitative analysis of six thematic dimensions: integration, economic cooperation, political coordination, energy and transport, humanitarian cooperation, and security. By examining both temporal change and institutional differentiation between the Council of Heads of State and the Council of Heads of Government/Prime Ministers, the analysis provides a systematic account of how the SCO's formal regional agenda has developed over the past decade. The findings demonstrate that the evolution of SCO discourse cannot be adequately described as a straightforward transition from a security-oriented organization towards an economically oriented one. Economic cooperation remained the largest thematic domain across the corpus, while security continued to occupy an important position. The principal longitudinal change was instead the diversification of the organization's agenda, particularly through the increasing relative prominence of energy, transport, and humanitarian cooperation. Security consequently became less dominant within the overall thematic structure without disappearing from the SCO's institutional agenda. The findings therefore point to an expansion of the functional scope of cooperation rather than the replacement of one dominant policy domain by another. The institutional comparison further demonstrates that this diversification is accompanied by functional differentiation within the SCO. Documents produced at the governmental level placed greater emphasis on economic cooperation and energy and transport, whereas those at the heads-of-state level were more strongly associated with security. At the same time, integration and political coordination displayed broadly comparable salience across the two institutional settings. The SCO's institutional architecture therefore appears to combine a common overarching discourse of regional cooperation with differentiated policy priorities across its principal decision-making levels.

These findings have broader implications for the conceptualization of regional integration beyond supranational models. The SCO does not exhibit a linear trajectory towards the delegation of sovereignty, binding policy harmonization, or supranational governance. Instead, its institutional development is characterized by the expansion of cooperation across multiple functional domains while maintaining consensus-based decision-making and strong commitments to sovereignty and non-interference. The evidence therefore supports an interpretation of the SCO as a form of flexible, functionally differentiated, and sovereignty-preserving regionalism, in which greater density of regional cooperation does not necessarily entail deeper supranational integration. For the Central Asian states, this institutional configuration is particularly significant. The SCO provides Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan with a multilateral framework in which security, economic development, transport connectivity, energy cooperation, political coordination, and humanitarian interaction can be pursued simultaneously without requiring participation in a uniform model of deep integration. In this respect, the SCO should not be understood exclusively in terms of the strategic interaction between China and Russia. Its multidimensional institutional framework also constitutes a regional arena within which Central Asian states can articulate and coordinate their own priorities while maintaining substantial national autonomy. The study nevertheless has several limitations. First, it analyses official institutional discourse rather than policy implementation; the salience of a thematic category in SCO documents should therefore not be interpreted as direct evidence of the effectiveness or depth of cooperation in that area. Second, the corpus is restricted to selected official documents produced at two principal institutional levels and does not capture the full range of SCO bodies, national policy documents,

or informal negotiations. Third, document-level content analysis cannot determine the relative contribution of individual member states to changes in the collective agenda. Future research could therefore connect official SCO discourse with implementation indicators, examine actor-specific contributions to agenda formation, extend the analysis to additional institutional bodies, and investigate how the organization's continuing enlargement affects the balance between functional cooperation and institutional cohesion. The study shows that the SCO represents a form of regional institutional development in which breadth of cooperation may increase without a corresponding transfer of sovereignty or movement towards supranational integration. Its evolution from 2015 to 2025 is best understood as a process of functional diversification and selective institutionalization: security remains important, economic cooperation provides a persistent core, and additional domains of connectivity and humanitarian interaction have become increasingly embedded in the organization's formal discourse. This pattern contributes to the wider debate on comparative and non-Western regionalism by demonstrating that regional integration can develop through flexible, differentiated, and sovereignty-preserving forms of cooperation rather than through a single universal trajectory towards supranational governance.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AB: development of the research concept, formulation of the theoretical framework, review and analysis of the scientific literature, compilation of the empirical corpus, organization and implementation of the content analysis, data processing, interpretation of the results, and drafting of the main manuscript; AK: methodological support of the study, participation in the coding procedure, verification of coding reliability, interpretation of the results, and scientific editing of the manuscript; ZS: contribution to the theoretical framework, review and analysis of the scientific literature, interpretation and validation of the research findings, and participation in formulating the conclusions; CP: contribution to the conceptual and theoretical framework. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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