

Re-Envisioning Non-Traditional Security in a Multi-Polarizing World: The Case of the SCO*



EBRU ŞAHİN

International Relations Specialist

Ebru Şahin completed her BA in International Studies at Ankara University. She holds an MA degree in International Relations from the Adnan Menderes Social Sciences Institute. Her dissertation is entitled “The Role of International Cooperation in China’s Rise As a Global Power”. She currently serves as an editor for the Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly, while pursuing a BA degree at Dokuz Eylül University's Law Faculty.

* Translated from Turkish to English by Ayçe Feride K rođlu

ABSTRACT

The 21st century is witnessing the shattering of unipolar politics in the international system. The notion of a multi-polar world order and the idea of generating a more equitable system thus gain greater acceptance in international and regional cooperation platforms. A strong case in point is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This article uses content analysis and process tracing by focusing on the SCO's treaties, declarations and other documents. The research aim is to reveal how the SCO reframes international security away from traditional understandings. Despite being widely depicted as a security-based organization, the SCO offers a much more comprehensive perspective into international cooperation by addressing its economic, cultural and energy-related aspects. This perspective defies traditional understandings of security constrained to military concerns. The SCO showcases non-traditional approaches to international security predicated on the complementarity of security and economy. This can be deduced from the fact that the insecurity of strategic trade routes arrests international development and renders the regions situated near strategic routes vulnerable to terrorist, separatist and extremist activities. Not surprisingly, these activities are part of the SCO's main agenda of struggle. In this respect, one could argue that the SCO has strong potential to advance the global struggle against terrorism, while enabling international development via economic cooperation. My analysis also suggests that the SCO's non-traditional approach to international security is strongly predicated on the notion of multipolarity, which is portrayed as the sine qua non of global peace and prosperity.

Keywords: Economic security, multi-polarity, mutuality, SCO, security

FROM THE LAST QUARTER OF THE 20TH century onwards, the world has witnessed unprecedented transformations in political, social and economic areas. These transformations have been challenging us to rethink some of our foundational assumptions about security, which has gained a deeper international dimension under globalization beyond military concerns. Contemporary understandings of security favor much more inclusive and international perspectives that prompt us to address the military dimensions of security alongside its economic, energy-related, cultural and environmental dimensions. These dimensions also entail the rise of unconventional threats such as arms, drugs and human smuggling, religious fundamentalism, and terrorism as well as the intensification of regional cooperation efforts such as intelli-

gence sharing, economic aid and diplomatic initiatives (Caballero-Anthony, Emmers & Acharya, 2016).

Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States, now freed from its perception of communist threat, regarded itself as the sole master of the international realm and developed a new security conception that favors a unipolar world order and military interventionism (Gürcan, 2019/2020). Within this framework, it focused its efforts on fighting terrorism (Islamic terrorism in particular) with the aim of expanding the reach of its military interventionism on a planetary scale. Yet, this design only lasted for about ten years and faced strong opposition from Asian powers. A strong case in point is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Despite being widely depicted as a security-based organization, the SCO thus offers a much more comprehensive perspective into international cooperation by addressing its economic, cultural and energy-related aspects

This article uses content analysis and process tracing by focusing on the SCO's treaties, declarations and other documents. The research aim is to reveal how the SCO reframes international security away from traditional understandings. Content analysis is a popular technique often used in textual analysis and relies on "coding based on research aims in order to enable a systematic categorization" (Gökçay, 2019/2020: 58). In turn, process analysis uses logical inferences to reveal decisive historical developments that shape social phenomena (Gürcan, 2017; Tutan 2019/2020). My analysis suggests that, despite being widely depicted as a security-based organization, the SCO thus offers a much more comprehensive perspective into international cooperation by addressing its economic, cultural and energy-related aspects (Aris, 2009; Song, 2014, Gürcan 2019a, Gürcan 2019b, Gürcan 2019/2020). This perspective defies traditional understandings of security constrained to military concerns. The SCO showcases non-traditional approaches to international security predicated on the complementarity of security and economy. This can be deduced from the fact that the insecurity of strategic trade routes arrests international development and renders the regions situated near strategic routes vulnerable to terrorist, separatist and extremist activities. Not surprisingly, these activities are part of the SCO's main agenda of struggle. In this respect, one could argue that the SCO has strong poten-

tial to advance the global struggle against terrorism, while enabling international development via economic cooperation. My analysis also suggests that the SCO's non-traditional approach to international security is strongly predicated on the notion of multipolarity, which is portrayed as the sine qua non of global peace and prosperity.

Revisiting the Literature on International Security

The literature provides two competing understandings of security: traditional/conventional versus non-traditional security (Swanström, 2010). The traditional understanding, originally adopted by realist theories, restricted national security to military threats, which is why this understanding primarily focuses on issues such as military power, defense, research and development enterprises, national security and nuclear policies (Walt, 1991). This traditional security understanding dominated by realist theories regarded states as actors seeking to maximize their power within a zero-sum system (Viotti & Kauppi, 2012). However, this framework seems to be failing in fully explaining the 21st century's key challenges.

Richard Ullman (1983) indicates that the classical approach to security should be questioned, because that national security cannot be restricted to military elements. In this vein, he asserts the importance of providing securing for the environment, economy and trade in ensuring national security. At the end of the Cold War, this idea marked an important step forward in advancing nontraditional understandings of security. Indeed, the end of the Cold War as well as that of the arms race between the Eastern and Western Blocs may have reduced the weight of military elements in international security (Miller, 2001; Swanström, 2010). Consequently,

the non-traditional security approach engages in a multidimensional analysis of security and posits that security does not merely involve military threats but also incorporates different dimensions such as economic, environmental and energy safety on a global scale. This being said, some observers adopting the non-traditional view abandoned the state-based understanding of security based on an idea that changing dynamics in globalization has weakened states by rendering national boundaries less and less important (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde, 1998). However, the world is still too far from a truly globalized system where national boundaries are insignificant, given that domestic and foreign policies are still being determined by states. In contemporary capitalist international relations, nation-states continue to play a decisive role in formulating local policies as well as in regulating international trade and competition (Desai, 2013; Gürcan 2019b; Pratschke, 2015). Accordingly, the multidimensional character of international security does not necessarily lessen the importance of nation-states. On the contrary, the newly emerging aspirations of contending nation-states to build a multipolar world order is also part of non-traditional security. Here, the concept of world order is understood as a global governance system that institutes international cooperation led by a state or groups of states (Gürcan 2019/2020).

As a security-based organization adopting a nation-state-based non-traditional security approach, the SCO's attitude of anti-interventionism reveals its distinct status from hegemonic security organizations serving to preserve the unipolar system.

Non-traditional security predicated on the declining importance of nation states seems to provide intellectual support for hegemonic theses that legitimize foreign interventions. Particularly, the US is known to have taken advantage of similar “humanitarian” concepts in legitimizing its military interventionism after the 9/11 (Gürcan, 2019/b). In the literature, this finds its counterpart in the idea of establishing “regime security” (Koblentz, 2013), which paves the way for an interventionist stance. Regime security postulates that states designated as “authoritarian” have a natural inclination to use biological and chemical weapons towards local separatist elements. Therefore, regime security must be preserved by mobilizing interventions against these “authoritarian” states (Koblentz, 2013). This theory seems to have two major problems: The first problem involves its broad definition when conceptualizing the term “authoritarian”, which reflects a strong liberal-democratic bias. The second one is the portrayal of local separatist elements as inherently “democratic”. This approach, also adopted by Buzan (2008), serves to legitimize support for separatist activities and interventions that violate the principle of sovereign equality of states.

My analysis below suggests that the SCO situates itself in opposition to the hegemonic world order by reference to a nation-state-based understanding of non-traditional security. As opposed to Western hegemony represented by global governance instruments such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the SCO mobilizes nation-states to oppose Western hegemony and lay the ground for a multipolar world order via alternative institutional mechanisms (Gürcan 2019b). As a security-based organization adopting a nation-state-based non-traditional security approach, the



Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit 2019.

SCO's attitude of anti-interventionism reveals its distinct status from hegemonic security organizations serving to preserve the unipolar system (Gürcan, 2019a, 2019b). Moreover, as regards the SCO's non-traditional security approach, the present article reveals this organization's multidimensional goals of economic, environmental and energy security along with military security constitute. The remainder of this article will discuss the SCO's historical formation, goals and operations in order to fully grasp these above-mentioned features.

"The Shanghai Five", commonly accepted as the extension of mutual military and security negotiations between Russia and China since the end of 1989 (Yuan, 2010: 855; Bekcan, 2012: 74), was initially formed on April 16, 1996 via a treaty among Russia, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China signed in Shanghai (Koppel, 1996). With the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, this initiative was renamed as the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization". The founding treaty was signed in 2002 at the meeting of the SCO's Heads of State in St. Petersburg. It was then brought into force in September 2003 (SCO, 2003a). The

SCO's institutionalization was initiated with the formation of the organization's permanent structures in the Moscow Declaration by Heads of States of SCO held in May 2003 (SCO, 2003b). Since 2004, new member statuses (i.e. observer member, dialogue partnership) have been incorporated, which served to expand the organization. The SCO's enlargement process, starting with Mongolia's acceptance into observer membership, was followed in 2005 by that of India, Pakistan and Iran (Norling & Swanström, 2007: 429). In 2017, India and Pakistan were accepted to full membership (SCO, 2017a). In 2019, the number of the organization's observer members was extended to Mongolia, Iran, Belarus, Afghanistan. Currently, the SCO involves dialogue partners such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka.

The SCO and International Security

The first article of the SCO's foundational treaty designates the organization's founding members while the second article states its goals. Stressing mutuality, the organization puts its goal as follows:

improving cooperation in various areas such as politics, economics, science, technology and culture; providing security and stability; and striving to build an equitable international political-economic order (SCO, 2001a). In addition, member states agree to closely cooperate to apply the Shanghai Treaty to their struggle with terrorism, separatism and extremism. In this treaty, parties agreed to cooperate in conformity with their national law as well as to prevent terrorist, separatist and extremist activities as defined in the first article (SCO, 2001b). Within this treaty's framework, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) has been founded for combating terrorism, separatism and extremism, portrayed as the "three evils". In this scope, common operation guidelines have been designated and a RATS headquarters has been founded in Uzbekistan's Taskent city.

As clearly inferred from numerous meeting declarations underscoring the need for a multipolar world order, the organization's genuine attitude reflects an opposition to foreign interventionism and the continuity of nation-states rather than an orthodox rejection of globalization by itself.

At the SCO's Heads of States meeting in 2002, the SCO's foundational treaty was signed with the aspiration that the 21st century would be based on collective solution mechanisms and the organization would foster cooperation among member states in an emerging multipolar system of international relations. It was emphasized that the organization is not a structure founded against any state, group or bloc (SCO, 2002). The SCO is not part of any polarization; rather it is merely a reaction to the unipolar sys-

tem globally imposed by hegemonic powers. As clearly inferred from numerous meeting declarations underscoring the need for a multipolar world order, the organization's genuine attitude reflects an opposition to foreign interventionism and the continuity of nation-states rather than an orthodox rejection of globalization by itself. The following statement published after the 2002 meeting of the SCO's Heads of States clearly instantiates the above-mentioned perspective:

"Globalization and national interests of states are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually complementary structural elements of an emerging world order. The international community needs to elaborate a new type of security concept based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and cooperation, conducive to a radical weakening of the factors undermining security and to the eradication of sources of new threats" (SCO, 2002: 3).

The SCO's security dimension focuses on terrorist activities, as the region predominantly harbors elements that are part of non-state actors threatening regional security. Member states are indeed surrounded by terrorist, separatist and extremist activities. Afghanistan, the region Andican in Kyrgyzstan, the Kashmir region between India and Pakistan, Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region in China are regions that both harbor intense fundamentalist and separatist activities and constitute the routes for trade, petrol and natural gas lines. Thus, security efforts for reflecting the traditional understanding of mere military elements do not offer any long term solution for the region.

The 2002 Declaration also emphasizes the need for tackling security based on a non-traditional approach. It refers to the various dimensions of security that have to do with economy, energy, the environment, culture and health, be-

sides military challenges. In this perspective, it is possible to argue the SCO attempts to preserve the principle of sovereign equality of states and lay a concrete ground for a nation-state-based understanding of non-traditional security. An important point to emphasize in this understanding is that in case of a regional conflict, the SCO is to adopt an anti-interventionist method based on the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs instead of the Western “responsibility to protect” (R2P) doctrine (Aris, 2012). Adopting this former doctrine, Russia and China refused many UN solutions pioneered by the US as part of the UN Security Council. For example, they blocked or abstained from the 2006 Sudan and 2011 Libya peacekeeping operations. In the case of the SCO, SCO member states provide an alternative method by upholding the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. As such, instead of peacekeeping operations, the organization focuses on intelligence sharing within RATS and a strong diplomatic and political cooperation (Aris, 2012: 452-453; Gürcan, 2019a, 2019b).

Accordingly, the SCO Business Council and Interbank Consortium have been formed and charged with the execution of the organization’s development and infrastructure projects.

Although, the SCO’s economic dimension has been present since it was founded with the intention of improving cooperation among member states, more concrete steps in this area have been taken since 2009 via treaties among member states. In this respect, the 2008 economic crisis also revealed the necessity for multilateral cooperation to overcome the negative

effects of global crises in the future (Gürcan, 2019a, 2019b). In line with this need, economic development has been emphasized for the provision of regional security (SCO, 2009: 1, SCO, 2011:1). Accordingly, the SCO Business Council and Interbank Consortium have been formed and charged with the execution of the organization’s development and infrastructure projects. That is, while the SCO Business Council attempts to coordinate development projects via investments, the Interbank Consortium executes coordination among member states’ banks to finance infrastructural investments (Gürcan, 2019a, 2019b).

The 2013 Heads of State meeting pointed to the need for building transportation roads among member states, which will serve for faster development and is geared towards enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of international and regional transportation corridors. Relatedly, greater cooperation was planned to build international transportation roads and to establish new generation logistic centers (SCO, 2013). In 2014, member states signed a treaty for creating favorable conditions for international highway transportation and agreed on inaugurating six different roads (SCO, 2014). The operation of these roads is not only expected to increase the trade volume among member states but would also serve the development of cities located near the highways. These six roads outlined in the treaty are expected to be opened after 2020:

- 1- Barnaul - Veseloyarsk (Russia)/ Auy (Kazakhstan) - Semey - Bakhty (Kazakhstan)/ Bakhtu (China) - Tacheng Airport - Kuitun - Urumqi.
- 2- St. Petersburg - Orenburg - Sagarchin (Russia)/ Zhaisan (Kazakhstan) - Akto-be - Kyzylorda - Shymkent - Taraz - Almaty - Khorgos (Kazakhstan)/ Horgos

- (China) - Urumqi – Lianyungang.
- 3- Urumqi - Kashgar - Karasu (China)/
Kulma (Tajikistan) - Murghab - Khorog
- Dushanbe (Vahdat).
- 4- Urumqi - Khorgos (China)/ Korgas
(Kazakhstan) - Almaty - Taraz - Shyim-
kent - Konysbaeva
(Kazakhstan)/ Yallama (Uzbekistan) -
Chinaz.
- 5- Kant - APT “Ak-Tilek” (Kyrgyzstan)/
Karasu (Kazakhstan) - Taraz - Shyim-
kent - Kyzylorda -
Aktobe - Zhaisan (Kyrgyzstan)/ Sagar-
chin (Russia) - Orenburg - Saint Peters-
burg.
- 6- At-Bashy - Torugart (Kyrgyzstan)/
Turugart (China) - Kashgar - Urumqi -
Lianyungang.



SCO map: Green: members; Light blue: observers;
Dark blue: dialogue partners.

The SCO's 2025 development strategy was designated based on the prediction that the coming era will witness important changes to the international relations system, including the constitution of a new multipolar world system. Considering the interdependent relationship between security and well-being, the importance

of economic development for ensuring a stable regional security towards a new world order was underlined (SCO, 2015).

At the 13th SCO Heads of States meeting, Xi Jinping indicated the Belt and Road Initiative shares the same goals as the SCO. He suggested synchronizing the SCO's treaties towards creating transportation and logistics roads and facilitating trade and investment with the Road and Belt Initiative in the name of enhanced regional development (Xi, 2017: 399; Gökçay, 2019/2020; Gürçan, 2019/2020; Koray, 2019/2020; Tutan, 2019/2020; Yi, 2019/2020). The significance of this suggestion stems from the fact that the current members of the Belt and Road Initiative make up 65% of world population and 40% of global gross domestic product (Kaptan, 2019: 31; Şahin, 2019: 102). Positively responding to China's demand, Rashid Alimov, then General Secretary of the SCO, stated in an interview to CCTV2 that the relationship between the SCO and the Belt and Road Initiative would significantly serve the organization's future and accelerate member states' development via enhanced regional cooperation (SCO, 2017b; Şahin, 2019). This synchronization process is expected to improve economies of regional states and thus weaken elements disrupting the region's stability. In line with the SCO's Development Strategy emphasizing the relationship between economic well-being and security, the Belt and Road Initiative is to be seriously considered for the SCO's future prosperity (Sadovnikova et al., 2019).

In 2017, with full membership of Pakistan and India, the third largest economy following the US and China, the SCO has become Eurasia's most important organization. Its cooperation aims encompass a broad region ranging from Arctic area in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south, from Kaliningrad in the west to Li-

anyungang in the east (Alimov, 2018: 116). In 2016, the gross domestic product in the organization grew by 4.84% reaching two times the global average. In 2018, with eight members, the SCO reached one fourth of the global gross domestic product. Member states are regularly increasing their foreign currency and gold reserves amounting approximately to 4 billion US dollars (Alimov, 2018: 117). Additionally, considering that member states' population constitutes one half of the world's total, the organization's regional and international importance becomes more apparent.

With India's membership, the International North-South Transport Corridor Project (ISTC) aiming to connect India and Russia via highways, sea and railroads was also incorporated into the SCO's scope. This project can be advanced via regional states' coordination in upholding the SCO's treaties for "Facilitating Access to Trade Routes" (Alimov, 2018: 120; Hillman, 2017). The project is indicated to dovetail nicely with the Belt and Road Initiative. Both the Belt and Road Initiative and the International North-South Transport Corridor interconnect the SCO geography and therefore will importantly contribute to socio-economic development via diversifying member states' economic tools and transportation routes.

The SCO geography also possesses considerable importance for member states in terms of energy security. This geography includes a proximately 25% of world's petroleum reserves, more than 50% of natural gas reserves, 35% of coal reserves, and half of the known uranium reserves. In other words, the SCO geography is located at a highly significant spot for the world's energy supply. Both energy demanding countries (China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan, and Mongolia) and the providing countries (Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Iran) are SCO members which, in turn, will deepen the organization's cooperation in this area (InfoSCO,

2015). In this respect, with the aim of proposing projects in terms of energy and exchanging ideas, the SCO Energy Club was formed as an advisory mechanism. It does not serve any function in terms of project implementation yet, but it provides the ground for bilateral or multilateral cooperation (Mastepanov, 2017). Although the Energy Club remains at the level of consensus, it is a useful enterprise to ideologically and culturally foster Eurasianism (Gürcan, 2019a: 74).

The SCO also installs cooperation mechanisms among member states in the area of health. This reveals that the organization does not only regard member states' development in terms of economy, but also forefronts a socio-economic framework advancing social development. In accordance with this, member states declared their willingness to firmly cooperate in the area of health, particularly in combating epidemics (SCO, 2018). As from January 2020 onwards China has been facing such an epidemic, and also benefiting from member states' support in terms of material and technical aid to combat the new Corona virus (SCO, 2020). Although the epidemic is still not yet fully prevented, emergency interventions are being efficiently implemented. Upholding the "Shanghai Spirit", regional states do not leave each other in isolation regarding threats in military, economic, health and energy areas and continue to cooperate for enhanced development and mutual benefit.

Finally, another dimension underlying the SCO's security provision encompasses cultural matters. In this respect, the SCO Youth Council founded in 2009 may be regarded as an important step for the future of regional cooperation. Additionally, this step may also contribute to goals for realizing a new multipolar international system. While SCO's member states struggle against "three evils" in the region, the Youth Council encourages the creation of a bet-

ter future, promoting the physical, mental and spiritual development of younger generations in order to provide the sustainability of regional security (Kazakh TV, 2019). Moreover, by means of new youth networks established by the Council, the impact of youth groups led by the North's nongovernmental organizations via color revolutions may also be constrained (Gürcan, 2019a:75)

Conclusion

In the new millennium, the changing world order has also shaped the content of the security concept. As the contemporary era does not merely involve military threats, the provision of security is not viable through solely undertaking military enterprises. Security can only assume a sustainable existence when considered along its dimensions related to economy, politics, the environment and culture. The Western interventionist perspective, although recognized as valid in the post-modern literature, also tackles the multidimensional assessment of security and the need for reducing military elements' weight in an individualistic context. Thus failing to thoroughly interpret current developments, it serves the preservation of a unipolar world order and ignores the principle of nation states' sovereign equality, despite the fact that nation-states are still among the major players in global politics. The present article introduced the SCO as an exemplary case of non-traditional security based on the principle of the sovereign equality of nation-states.

Within the framework of the nation-state-based understanding of non-traditional security, the SCO stands out by its struggle against the most salient threat elements in the region, that is, the "three evils" (terrorism, separatism, extremism). In doing so, it addresses the military, economic, energy-related and cultural aspects of international security. Aiming to cooperate in all

of these areas, the SCO particularly emphasizes two points regarding mutuality and non-interference in domestic affairs: Respecting the principle of nation states' sovereign equality in the struggle against security threats, the SCO refuses to get involved in activities that might entail interventions to states' internal affairs. As such, it is only engaged in combating threats which may undermine regional security and states' existence. By this token, the SCO predominantly focuses on other dimensions of security striving to preclude the rise of threats. Employing an analogy about human health, one might argue the SCO aims to bolster the immune system to prevent disease.

Trying to empower the emerging multipolar system, the SCO tries to approach military topics in relation with economic, cultural, energy and environmental issues (Gürcan, 2019a, 2019b). Hence, in its efforts to install regional safety, it tries to build a system based on the win-win principle rather than following a zero-sum structure. In order to fully realize this system discursively adopted via several treaties, the organization is to accelerate the implementation of its declared intentions. In the age of nation-states, conflicts will be commonly occurring around states' individual interests. Yet, these interests may be welded into enhanced cooperation on the grounds of win-win principles. From the view of the SCO members, for example, there is a common threat against regional security, which is rooted in terrorist, separatist and extremist activities. Damages that might stem from these activities would not be restricted to countries where terror activities take place, but would also impact the whole region. Since the region is currently interconnected via trade and energy routes, consequences of terrorism would be destructive for all countries. A much-needed multidimensional cooperation environment for preventing this destruction is being forged

by the SCO. The organization has the necessary material ground to enable both regional and international socio-economic development and the constitution of a multipolar world order. ☁

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