



SCO and the US: Convergence and Divergence of Interests



Muhammad Ilyas Khan *

Kifayat Ullah †

Ferdos Jamal ‡

Abstract: *There were six autonomous Muslim countries in the area following the collapse of the USSR. They still had economic and security issues and were undeveloped. Together with China and Russia, three Central Asian states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have agreed to establish an organization to settle their border disputes and address security concerns. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), was established as a defence alliance in 2001 to combat three evils (terrorism, extremism, and separatism). Due to the abundance of natural resources in the Central Asian region, regional and extra-regional powers also wish to demonstrate their presence in the area for the sake of their own national interests. By analyzing the secondary sources of data, it has been established that SCO has the capacity to make use of local resources. The USA wants to establish its influence in the Central Asian area as a superpower. The major countries have hegemonic aspirations in the area, particularly Russia, China, and the USA. The SCO and the USA do not directly oppose one another. A conflict between the US and the SCO members may result from the USA's backing for the democratic movement in the Central Asian States.*

Key Words: SCO, USA, Convergence, Divergence, Interests

Introduction

There are few places in the world that might possibly offer a more favourable setting for geopolitical struggle than Central Asia. Major international powers including the United States, Russia, China, and India are all engaged in efforts to increase their political and economic sway in the area. The energy resources that the Central Asian area has, its geostrategic significance for security, and its location as a geostrategic crossroads are the primary drivers of this geopolitical battle among the contending world powers (Hagel, 2014). A sense of anarchy and merciless struggle among the states based on the notion of self-help resulted from this condition of competition among the rival powers

(Kleveman, 2003). The hardest and most unyielding foreign policy issue is to expand its influence in Central Asia. It presents a number of difficulties for those who decide on US foreign policy. The conflict in Afghanistan has thus far proven to be the most difficult. It has significantly strained US resources. Second, by constantly striving to undermine the power of the US, Russia and China are actively influencing the area (Blank, 2007).

The US ties with Iran are the third difficulty it faces. Despite the fact that Iran is not a member of the Central Asian states, it is attempting to expand its influence in the region by maintaining close diplomatic ties with them. The US has kept in touch with several state and non-state entities

* MS Scholar, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

† MS Scholar, Department of Political Science, Bolu Abbant İzzet Baysal Üniversitesi, Türkiye.

‡ MS Scholar of International Trade, School of Economics and Management, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China.

and is collaborating with them in order to successfully address these difficulties. The US Department of Defense is collaborating with NATO and the ISAF to address the difficulties in Afghanistan. Second, the US Departments of State and Defense are collaborating with ISAF, NATO, the EU, and the UN to assist regional democracy and economic growth in order to sustain and strengthen their influence. Thirdly, the US is utilizing its various bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to combat Iran's influence and put an end to its nuclear program in order to address the issue of Iran.

There are still difficulties for the US to fully accomplish the aims, despite the fact that working in conjunction with many organizations has allowed the US to fulfil its goals relatively effectively. The US' inability to fully accomplish its goals is mostly due to the cultural and ideological differences that exist between the US and its supporting organizations, such as NATO, the EU, and ISAF, on the one hand, and the Central Asian governments and the issues they confront, on the other. All of the Central Asian governments and the US have maintained bilateral ties. For these states, the US has based its foreign policy on certain cultural and political traits (Blake, 2010).

In order for these Central Asian governments to be able to affect regional dynamics, it is crucial that the US maintain bilateral connections with them. However, the US lacks a group that could deal with these problems effectively. The US must work with an international organization rather than Western organizations to effectively solve these concerns. The SCO is credited with resolving the aforementioned problems in the Central Asian area. Due to the inclusion of both Russia and China within its ranks, this organization is distinctive in its own right. In contrast to NATO, the EU, and the UN, the SCO has the requisite political and cultural components to address the issues and difficulties facing the Central Asian area. The SCO may offer an appropriate response to the problems the US is now experiencing in Central Asia. It might assist the US in resolving its unresolved issues with Iran as well as the issues it is now having with Afghanistan and

maintaining its political and economic sway in the area.

US Strategic Objectives in Central Asia

The US role in Afghanistan during the past ten years has proven to be the most difficult in the region. The US spent USD \$ 5.7 billion every month to deliver security to Afghanistan, a country that has been ripped apart by conflict (Belasco, 2009). The corruption of Afghanistan's previous regimes has multiplicatively worsened the country's security issues. The Afghan government's corruption prevents the ISAF from carrying out its counter-insurgency strategies and preserving peace in the nation.

On the other side, the US presence in Afghanistan is disliked by both China and Russia.

They perceive the US involvement in the area as a danger to their interests. Both of these nations see the area as solely falling under their purview. They see the US presence in the area as a threat to the powers' current political and economic order (Wishnick, 2009). China and Russia, on the other hand, think that authoritarian administrations may suit their interests in the area well, in contrast to the US, which promotes democracy and an open market economy in the region. (Wishnick, 2009). The main international powers engage in aggressive rivalry in the area as a result of these conflicting interests. Additionally, the US faces the difficulty of being an outsider, which makes it more difficult for the US to advance its interests and overcome its difficulties in the region.

Due to their economic assistance to the area and pledge to refrain from meddling in the internal affairs of the Central Asian countries, China and Russia have an advantage over the US in this regard. They have also carried out a 'no-strings attached' development policy. This offers a superior alternative to the US' pro-democratic agenda for these five Central Asian governments (Peimani, 2009).

Thanks to the SCO, China and Russia have a platform to limit US involvement in the region. The SCO is a group that, in theory, was created with egalitarian principles in mind. However, China and Russia continue to have a significant

impact on key decisions made by the organization. This was made clear by the SCO members' 2005 demand that the US military leave the region after being convinced to do so by China and Russia (Rumer et al., [2007](#)).

The US has faced issues with Iran ever since the Iranian revolution. The tense relationship between the US and Iran has given the US some difficult moments. Iran, being a permanent member of the organization, is still working with Central Asian republics to strengthen its ties with them and broaden its influence in the area, both politically and economically.

SCO and the US: Advantages of Cooperation for the Member States

Central Asia serves as the home location for the SCO, an international organization. The objectives of this organization are to promote economic cooperation and development among the member states, to come to an agreement on a comprehensive security mechanism for the region, and to advance the establishment of a politically democratic order that is both regional and global in scope (Bryant, [2013](#)). The SCO is not inherently anti-Western. However, it was founded by its founders in an effort to limit US influence in the region and to counter developments that the US-sponsored there to increase its influence. The apparent US involvement in the Color Revolutions in states like Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan led to a rise in Central Asian governments' membership in the SCO (Kavalski, [2010](#)).

Both Russia and China maintain their control over the SCO's direction and decision-making through their agreements with the neighbouring states that they will refrain from interfering in their domestic political and economic affairs and that the authoritarian regimes in those states will not be overthrown due to their political views (Snyder, [2008](#)). As a result, the smaller Central Asian republics are content to maintain their subordinate status in the SCO since it offers them both political and economic advantages.

There are undoubtedly a number of challenges that make close collaboration between the SCO and the US difficult. In fact, the organization is mostly driven by a desire to

oppose US actions in the area. However, there are some areas where greater collaboration between the US and SCO members is necessary.

As far as Russia is concerned, stronger ties to the SCO would ensure that it maintains the prominence it has long held in Central Asia, as opposed to China, which might represent a danger to Russia's long-standing dominance in the region (Turner et al., [2005](#)). Russia is worried about the growing influence of China in Central Asia and also believes that if the US departed too soon, China would gain an edge in the area and would immediately undermine Russian influence there. To retain its longstanding position in Central Asia and cooperate with the US in the SCO, would also not be beneficial for Russia (Bobo, [2009](#)).

For China, collaboration with the US may be motivated by Afghanistan's security situation. This may end up serving as China's main justification for accepting US membership in the SCO (Bryant, [2013](#)). Given that China and Afghanistan share a border, China's security is directly impacted by the security situation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's security condition is directly related to the situation in the Chinese region of Xinjiang. China believes that the security situation in Afghanistan has spillover effects that include the issues of terrorism, extremism, and separatism throughout the area (Jian, [2009](#)). Since ISAF and NATO have direct control over preserving the security in Afghanistan, closer ties between China and these organizations would therefore be advantageous for China in helping to find solutions to these issues. China's partnership with these organizations consequently offers a safe and stable platform for China to address the security issues in the region because China lacks the will to engage in Afghanistan independently. According to Reeves ([2011](#)), the US participation in the SCO would protect the interests of the smaller countries from China and Russia, which are both larger nations. The majority of the SCO's members are dubious about the US membership in the group. (Bosco, [2010](#))

SCO and the US: Advantages of Cooperation for the US

The major obstacle standing in the way of the US achieving its security and strategic objectives in the area is the political and cultural divide that exists between the US and the SCO member countries. US policymakers would be able to resolve these issues through collaboration with the SCO. The ISAF and NATO would have the chance to gain some of the cultural and conceptual legitimacy and acceptance that they currently lack through their partnership with the SCO. Legitimacy and acceptance would enable the US to establish stronger ties with the local populace, member state governments, and regional players, which in turn would aid in resolving issues in the efforts at reconciliation.

Both sides of the collaboration between the SCO and the US have issues. The US is afraid that if it cooperates with the group, it would give them legitimacy, which might make them stronger and make them a strategic opponent of the US and other Western-backed organizations. Even though these US concerns are valid, if we were to be overly optimistic, the US would still benefit from cooperation more than it would cost. Additionally, the US won't need to make the SCO a more formidable strategic adversary if it maintains friendly and positive relations with the SCO's member states (Reeves, 2011).

The Central Asian governments' willingness to cooperate with the US also has to be considered, given that the US' 2005 application for observer status in the organization was turned down. However, it should be noted that the Central Asian state at the time worried that the US would meddle in the region when the US applied for the status of an observer state in the organization. The House Research Committee produced a study after the US' bid to join the SCO as an observer state was rejected, in which they claimed that the organization was unnecessary for the US to participate in (Reeves, 2011).

However, the SCO's member states would be forced to work more closely with the US in Central Asian affairs as a result of their collective sense of insecurity over the security situation in Afghanistan and the crucial role that US forces

are currently playing in that situation. Additionally, the US's willingness to cooperate with other members of the SCO serves as a signal to those countries that the US is prepared to rein in its activities of meddling in the Central Asian region.

In addition, SCO appears to be interested in growing its business. In an address given in Tashkent in 2010, the former president of China, Hu Jin Tao, said that the SCO must increase the number of countries with observer status in order to foster greater cooperation and a more cordial environment, advance world peace, prosperity, and stability, and foster a win-win situation ("Hu Jintao to meet with", 2010). If the US effectively communicates its suggestions for the organization's growth, this will help the group develop and make it easier for it to fulfil its stated objectives.

The US may collaborate with the SCO in a number of ways. It might be direct or indirect. Directly, NATO or ISAF may be involved in this. Whether it happens directly or indirectly, this relationship would be favourable and all parties involved may profit from it. However, if the US is permitted to establish a direct relationship with the SCO, this may turn out to be more fruitful as it may allow the US to have a greater impact on the organization's operations and direction. The US would not be able to act unilaterally through ISAF or NATO, but it would be able to influence the organization's growth and development (Sutter, 2019).

SCO, US and Afghanistan

In 2002, the SCO released a statement in which it expressed the opinions of its member countries on the issues in Afghanistan. It stated that the SCO's members supported the overthrow of the Taliban regime, agreed with the US designation of the Taliban as a terrorist organization, supported the establishment of a new government in Kabul, and would help the Taliban regime's overthrow be followed by the establishment of a new democratic government in Kabul (Huasheng, 2009). The SCO member states also declared that they would support democratic initiatives in Afghanistan, oppose any foreign leader who might be appointed there,

facilitate and support the UN in holding free and fair elections there, and work to forge positive and cooperative ties with the future Afghan government under the auspices of the UN.

When the Afghan president Hamid Karzai attended the SCO summit as an observer state in 2004, there was direct communication established between the SCO and the Afghan administration. In addition, the Afghan government and the SCO agreed on a communication protocol in 2005. In 2005, during the Dushanbe Summit, the SCO and the Afghan government reaffirmed their relationship.

The deputy foreign ministers of the SCO member countries attended a conference in 2009 that focused on the situation in Afghanistan. Since participants from the EU, UN, Japan, Germany, Italy, Canada, Turkey, Turkistan, the UK, the US, France, NATO, OSCE, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference were present for the first time, this meeting was unprecedented in the history of the SCO (Huasheng, [2009](#)).

SCO is focusing on collaborating with Afghanistan on anti-terrorism, anti-drug trafficking, and anti-organized crime initiatives ("The SCO member states", 2010). Despite the fact that the SCO has serious concerns about the security situation in Afghanistan and how it may affect its members in particular and the region in general, the SCO has no plans to send troops into Afghanistan in order to play a more active role in establishing and sustaining peace and stability in that country.

Afghanistan is mostly bordered by SCO members, making it a landlocked country that provides SCO members with influence over Afghanistan's political, social, and economic difficulties (Kaibing, [2010](#)). Despite all of these advantages that the SCO member states have over Afghanistan, the security situation that currently exists in Afghanistan is a clear indication that the SCO member states have not utilized their collective resources to their fullest extent to improve the security situation in Afghanistan and have shown no interest in deploying their armed forces there to restore order.

The US would be able to develop

relationships with SCO members on a strategic, operational, and tactical level if they worked together to improve the security situation in Afghanistan. The strategic level collaboration between the SCO and ISAF might increase regional legitimacy and provide the US-led troops with a chance to influence regional and interregional development issues more.

Operationally, the ISAF may assume command of the security and training operations in Afghanistan. By preserving the security corridors along Afghanistan's borders, the SCO can, on the other hand, prevent transnational migrations, the trafficking of guns, and the use of illegal drugs. The SCO has installed certain anti-drug security barriers along Afghanistan's borders without seeking any collaboration from ISAF or the Afghan national troops (Turner, [2005](#)). The cooperation between the ISAF and the SCO member countries at this level is not particularly difficult.

In tactical terms, the SCO and ISAF might work together to attempt to reconcile with some militant factions in Afghanistan. It is necessary to address China's worries over Taliban insurgents in order to engage in collaboration at this level. Nevertheless, this would be advantageous for the SCO's smaller members as well as for Russia (Katzman and Thomas, [2017](#)).

Balancing China and Russia

One may first find it difficult to agree to any recommendation that the US participate with the SCO in order to counteract Russian and Chinese efforts to limit the US influence in the Central Asian area. China and Russia are the SCO's two primary powers, controlling most of the organization's decisions and having a significant impact on the organization's mission. The SCO is frequently seen as a group hostile to NATO and the West. However, if the SCO is closely examined, one may come to the conclusion that it is not primarily an anti-Western organization and that it is not as tightly knit among itself as it may appear to be to an outsider (Bobo, [2009](#)).

The member countries' purpose to deny the US an active role in Central Asia, however, shows that there is unity among them. Russia and China are now rivals in the area as a result (Bobo,

2009 the rivalry between Russia and China for dominance in the area is frequently minimized, but it is expected to intensify in the future, both in Central Asia specifically and globally in general. China and Russia are engaged in a material and strategic type of competition in the area. Both of these nations seek to take advantage of Central Asia's abundant energy resources, which are abundant in material terms (Bobo, 2009). The significance of the energy potential that the Central Asian area holds could not be disregarded by any country. China is currently working to lessen its reliance on energy sources located far away from its borders. This objective of China increases its interest in the energy resources of the Central Asian area and, as a result, seeks to build regional influence in order to increase control over the region's abundant energy resources. With Magnolia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, China has been successful in securing energy agreements thus far.

Both of the major regional players, namely China and Russia, want to expand their exports into Central Asian markets. The export markets of China and Russia are fiercely competitive between the two superpowers. However, China has outperformed Russia in this regard and has seized the majority of the Central Asian export market. Being recognized as a great power by other states is important for it to exist or continue to exist. The same is true for Russia, which must constantly assert its authority over its neighbours in order to preserve its dominance in the region's politics and economy (Bobo, 2009). Russia has always had an exclusive sphere of influence over Central Asia. In this aspect, Russia is hesitant to jeopardize its unity in favour of any other country. Therefore, it is reluctant to cede to China or for the sake of the SCO's unity, strength, and unification the influence it has long held over the region.

The incident when Russia interfered in Georgia serves as evidence of this reality. Russia's intervention in Georgia served as a clear indication to other nations that it would never abandon the influence it has long held over the Central Asian area. Despite repeated protests from the SCO, Russia entered the dispute. However, Russia paid no attention to any of the SCO's worries and was more focused on

upholding its historical dominance in the area (Katz, 2008).

Regarding the future course that the SCO should take, China and Russia do not share the same viewpoints. With a primary focus on regional security concerns, Russia seeks to create the SCO a multilateral organization that only includes the Central Asian area Moscow is also in favour of making the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) a part of the SCO and encouraging future collaboration with this group in terms of regional security. China, on the other hand, views the SCO differently than Russia does. China wants the SCO to concentrate its attention largely on economic matters and is opposed to the growth of the SCO in its scope and membership, whilst Russia wants the SCO to be expanded to other organizations and wants it to be focused on security issues. While Russia has categorically stated its opposition to any such zone and its desire for no such economic expansion, China is determined to establish a free trade zone in Central Asia.

The US may use the instability and differences within the SCO in general and between the two key members in particular to strengthen its position in Central Asia. The US might use this conflict between China and Russia about who will have more power in the organization to weaken their unified opposition to the US membership in the group. The US might take advantage of this circumstance by forging unilateral ties with both countries and assisting both governments in achieving their strategic objectives inside the organization. When the US is able to gain from the tensions between China and Russia, it may drive a hole between their strategic alliances and, as a consequence, weaken the opposition to the US membership in the organization (Bobo, 2009).

SCO, US and Iran

Additionally, Iran has repeatedly expressed its desire to join the SCO as a full member. Iran currently enjoys the status of an observer state in the SCO's operations. Concerning security issues, Iran is also having issues. It also raises issues of economic and theoretical nature. Iran's objectives to get full membership in the

organization are driven by these issues, particularly those related to security, the economy, and ideas (Pikayev, 2008). Iran believes that if it is granted membership in the SCO, it would be able to continue its nuclear program under the protection of the group.

Iran also believes that if Israel or the US launched airstrikes on its nuclear facilities, it would be that organization's responsibility to protect Iran from such a move. Iran believes that by being a part of the SCO, it will be able to exert pressure on Russia to provide Iran with more sophisticated and advanced weapons (Pikayev, 2008). Iran views China and Russia's economies as significant sources of capital investment in terms of their own economies. Iran views these investments as crucial given that the majority of Western corporations have left Iran as a result of the EU and US sanctions that have been imposed on it (Ibid).

The SCO may provide Iran with a meaningful and practical vehicle to increase its influence in the Central Asian region since Iran considers the Central Asian states to be culturally closer to Iran. Although Iran has been able to forge relations with Tajikistan, its efforts to project its soft power in Central Asia have so far been ineffective (Mafinezam, 2008).

Although it is uncertain whether China and Russia would agree to grant Iran permanent membership in the organization, along with the other member states, it must be acknowledged that doing so would give China and Russia access to Iran's energy sector, which would be extremely beneficial for their developing economies. The biggest drawback that the organization would have if Iran were to be given full membership is that it would come to be seen as a wholly anti-Western group, which is what most people think it is. Additionally, it would raise questions about whether China and Russia are promoting nuclear proliferation globally.

There are two ways that the US might gain by engaging Iran through the SCO framework. By forging relationships with the SCO's member countries, the US will be able to exert pressure on China and Russia to deny Iran full membership in the organization. This may also provide the US with the opportunity to use the

SCO as a means of pressuring Iran into giving up its nuclear program in exchange for full membership. ("One Game Barack Obama", 2010).

The second benefit of the US joining the SCO is that, in addition to exerting pressure on Iran over its nuclear program, the US would also be able to do so regarding Iran's contribution to Afghanistan's security. Thus, on the one hand, Iran would feel more secure against the US and Israel if it were admitted as an observer state to the SCO. On the other side, the US participation would provide it with a chance to exert pressure on Iran in order to achieve its goals of stopping its nuclear program and pressuring Iran to improve the security situation in Afghanistan.

The facts are established by the aforementioned reasons if SCO and US collaboration is increased. Such a partnership will be advantageous to both parties. In relation to the security situation in Afghanistan, the US would benefit from this cooperation. A relationship between ISAF and SCO would be advantageous in that both parties would play an active and equal role in enhancing Afghanistan's security and would contribute to regional peace and growth.

If the US were admitted to the SCO, it would also be able to fight Russian and Chinese efforts to limit its influence in the area. Additionally, it would present a chance for the US to collaborate with Russia and China on crucial political, economic, and security issues. Additionally, the US could pressure China and Russia by using the SCO's internal divisions for its own ends and by maintaining friendly ties with the member states. The US may be able to restrain Iran's operations and diplomatically challenge Iran by actively participating in the SCO.

The United States' interests may diverge to the point that they end up supporting a group that is more often thought to be hostile to the West. However, bringing about closer cooperation between the US and SCO shouldn't be hampered by this mistrust of the US. Despite the fact that the US joining the SCO would strengthen an organization that is widely considered to be anti-Western, it is important to keep in mind that the US strategic partnership with the SCO's member

states would also be strengthened, giving it more influence over Central Asian affairs ("One Game Barack Obama", 2010).

Conclusion

If the SCO threatens or confounds US interests in the area, the question is whether. It depends, on how the three major world powers—China, Russia, and the United States—aggressively engage in mutually beneficial cooperation. There is little question that the three major countries are vying for control of the area and to strengthen their hegemony. Obviously, this will result in the region's comparatively smaller and less developed countries being exploited. Although it appears that SCO is not intentionally anti-Western or anti-American, this is the result of China and Russia's desire to limit US influence in the region. Although it might not pose a significant threat to China's security, it is a sort of economic competitor. On the other hand, Russia has never tolerated the United States' presence in the area where it has long held power.

In one way or another, it has been determined that the two major SCO members oppose US dominance in the area, which poses a danger to US interests there.

The USA made an effort to join the SCO in order to use it as a cover to counter China's and Russia's adversarial foreign policy. Between the SCO and the US, there are common and divergent interests. They must collaborate in their conflicting interests and ensure that a compromise is reached in the other party's best interests for it to succeed. The area as a whole would suffer as a result of the Titans' fierce struggle brought on by the convergence of interests. Realistically speaking, major powers will never compromise their own interests for those of others at any point. If we refer to this as a "new great game," then winning the game and refusing to accept one's own defeat in favour of another's success are plainly the goals. The idea of a "win-win" game exists, but this strategy can never succeed in the rivalry between so many powerful countries.

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