

# The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Light of Organization Theory

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### Introduction

Since the end of the First World War, international organizations (IOs) have sprung up at a rapid pace, and particularly after 1945, they gradually evolved into becoming integral components of global governance. IOs have gained prominence by engaging actively in the processes of interpretation, production, and promotion of norms, principles, and policies in the global political system. The ambit and jurisdiction of IOs vary depending on the basic structure and content of their founding charters, although the purview of their activities encompasses a wide variety of issue-areas.

As different types of IOs expand, the question arises whether or not their avowed purposes and overall functions comport with widely-held rules and democratic values, and if there is any universal model or replicable institutional structure that can be possibly utilized as a definitive example of a successful international institution. For instance, the European Union (EU), which is perceived as a supranational entity with an extraordinarily wide range of competencies, has successfully managed to profile itself as a bureaucratic organization capable of expanding its power while avoiding, albeit not entirely successfully, the risk of weakening its legitimacy. In this regard, the matchless evolution of the EU since 1951 has often weighed heavily in some academic papers which may advocate and prescribe an EU-esque model of organizational evolution for many other IOs without taking into account the important but underappreciated issue of the context of and the circumstances under which they evolve. Adopting such distinction as our analytical springboard, this paper seeks to challenge the universalist cliché in some research which presupposes that there is such a thing as an all-inclusive and generalizable model of an international institution with a pre-determined set of indices for its democratic and legitimate conduct. To this aim, it will investigate how an international organization, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which operates in a diametrically different cultural and normative setting, continues to perform its role and expand its sphere of influence even beyond its organizational borders. This case study lends valuable insight into a plethora of oft-ignored problems facing various regional or international arrangements, which may be located outside Western liberal democracies, but may or may not share similar problems and challenges related to their roles, functions and legitimacy. To begin with, I will provide a brief genealogy of the SCO in order to shed light on various aspects of the political system of the organization and how it can be examined from the viewpoint of theories of international organizations. The proceeding analysis will be premised on three main suggested features of international institutions, namely the role/function, authority, and legitimacy, which will serve as guideposts throughout the argument.

### Seizing up the Shanghai Spirit: Theoretical Perspectives

Three months before the September 11, 2001 attacks, six Central Asian heads of states met in Shanghai to establish an intergovernmental organization which would, a decade later, pose new challenges for the international security landscape. In June 2001, the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan agreed to transform and upgrade the previously-established "Shanghai Five" club into a new organization of security-based regional cooperation.[1] Today, the six abovementioned states are permanent members of the SCO. The Organization provided observer status to Mongolia in 2004 and to Iran, Pakistan and India in 2005 and has granted

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dialogue partner status to Belarus and Sri Lanka.[2] Afghanistan and Turkey were accepted as acquiring observer status and dialogue partner status respectively in 2012.[3] The geo-strategic, political and economic implications of the SCO are of particular importance, as its members and observers collectively possess 17.5 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves, 47-50 per cent of world's known natural gas reserves and 45 per cent of the world's population.[4] With its rapid institutional expansion, the SCO has been developing its own organizational infrastructure, including some permanent bodies such as the Secretariat, and the regional Anti-Terror Structure, which are operating alongside four main councils: Council of Heads of State, Council of Heads of Government, Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and Council of National Coordinators.[5] Despite this bureaucratic progress, some IR scholars posit that the SCO can be considered a rare case of regional arrangement that is somewhat operative and effective but may not be viewed by other institutions as democratic and legitimate.[6] Moreover, it is often argued that due to Russia and China's considerable influence in Central Asia, the SCO is essentially governed by the logic of *realpolitik*, because the organization is being used by the two powers as a countervailing force against the intrusion of the US in the Central Asian states.

However, it is important not to overlook the fact that the SCO has set ambitious objectives of not only deepening mutual trust and good-neighborliness among its members, but also of promulgating the "Shanghai Spirit", which is a new concept and framework of development based on a certain set of norms and values that are exclusive to the region under investigation, that is Central Asia.[7] Therefore, it is not unwise to conjecture that focusing on one theoretical perspective in describing and exploring the SCO's actions will inevitably obscure our vision and at times hinder us from gaining a balanced insight into some less obvious dimensions of the bloc's activities. Accordingly, and to avoid lapsing into this analytical pitfall, it is necessary to scrutinize on the whole spectrum of the SCO's activity from its early inception to the present day by using multiple theoretical lenses. Such detour from one-sided analytical observation concerning the working of IOs will protect scholars from having their vision clouded or distorted by universalist assumptions that we discussed in the introduction.

Drawing on this argument, some scholars tend to combine different theories in explaining why states create IOs in the first place. For example, Rittberger postulates that the creation of IOs is possible provided that each of the three conditions stemming from the institutionalist, the constructivist, and the realist perspectives—that is, the problem, the cognitive and the hegemonic conditions are met simultaneously.[8] Correspondingly, if we apply this condition to the establishment of the SCO, then it is possible to gainsay one-dimensional assessment of the IOs' performance on several grounds, and shift the focus of the debate from state-centric approaches to broader normative issues that may be largely ignored in the study of IOs, particularly security-based arrangements. As for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it can be argued that the structural problem of how to defuse tensions between the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China over their shared borders prodded the two states to embark on forming an alliance based on mutual cooperation (the problem condition). This occurred precisely when the former Soviet republics in Central Asia were gaining independence in 1991. Since the immediate post-Cold War world was largely unipolar— with the United States considered the sole remaining superpower—Russia and China were quite fearful of the potential rise of the US in Central Asia (the cognitive condition). Therefore, Moscow and Beijing endeavored to take the initiative and induce a semblance of stability in the region through cooperation in the military, economic, social and cultural venues by means of creating an international organization (the hegemonic condition). Such were the theoretical underpinnings of the SCO evolution, which affords us the opportunity to convey a more balanced view of the phenomena at hand. Meanwhile, a growing body of literature on regionalism concentrates on the presupposition that a meaningful and legitimate regional cooperation is only possible in liberal democracies similar to those in the Western hemisphere.[9] In the same vein, some scholars argue that whereas modern IOs tend to operate with gradual detachment from the classical model of sovereignty, the SCO continues to remain sovereignty-bound with its meticulous attention to regime legitimacy and survival as primary concern for the Central Asian states.[10] Clearly, progressive international organizations such as the EU and UN possess the various organs of IOs, such as the administrative staff and independent judicial bodies whereas the SCO Charter provides limited means of democratic agencies, such as dispute settlement bodies.[11] Therefore, lack of comprehensive democratic organs will leave the door open for more powerful states to attain and retain a monopoly position in the process of decision making at the expense of civil societies and other institutions that manifest democratic representation. The aforementioned deficiencies and challenges are thus being regarded as overarching reasons behind the SCO's low international status; thereby lending credence to the argument that security based organization, in essence, may

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have a limited lifetime.[12]

## Pillars of IOs: The Potentials and Pitfalls Facing the SCO

As discussed earlier in the introduction, the question of IOs efficiency can be adequately analyzed only if the indices by which a particular IO is being investigated are defined or delimited in a clear and focused manner. In order to achieve this analytical goal, and to further expand the theoretical perspectives into a broader discussion of the challenges and problems of the SCO, three important variables have been singled out as integral features of IOs: role or functionality, authority and legitimacy. These interdependent variables are seen as leading indicators of how IOs can function in an efficient and effective fashion. The durability and efficacy of IOs are chiefly contingent on the sum total of correlation and interconnectedness between three variables. Where interdependence is greater, the likelihood for efficient functioning will increase, thereby leading to increased longevity of the respected international organization. The proceeding section will discuss in greater details the application of the three parameters into the institutional structure of the SCO, seeking to uncover some of the least-noticed and under-appreciated challenges and problems of the IOs. Normally, no scholarly investigation can afford to neglect the significance of the role of the organizations and their goals and missions that are enshrined in their founding Charter. This is precisely because constitutional and institutional structures of IOs have a substantial bearing on their policy-making process.[13]

It is also worth mentioning that IOs are unlikely to succeed in many aspects of their mission unless the discrepancy between broad goals and limited organizational capacity are resolved through innovative means and initiatives that may transcend the initial constraints of their charter.[15] With regard to our topic, the SCO Charter contains member states' adherence to the UN principles, and places emphasis on the SCO's 'Shanghai Spirit' of mutual trust, equality, consultation, respect for different civilizations, and common prosperity.[16] Contrary to some arguments that posit the SCO is devoid of normative values and principles—a focal point for critics of the SCO and its organizational structure—it should be emphasized that, since its formation in 2001, the SCO model has incorporated a normative framework based on the theory of “three evils”, [17] which are considered a set of objectives defined by the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism.[18] In light of this argument, some critics argue that the 'Shanghai Spirit' denotes the exercise and promotion of authoritarian norms in Central Asia[19], as evidenced by Russia's resistance to regional democratic transformations, including the color revolution in Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan as well as China's crackdown on political dissenters and human rights activists in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. There are also questions concerning the lack of precise definitions of the three menaces from a legal point of view, with criticism pointing at the SCO for its failure to delineate the precise boundaries between terrorism and secessionism. [20] Admittedly, and as a result of this approach, one can argue that the SCO has cultivated an ill-defined and non-traditional concept of security that does not share commonalities with that of the EU or the UN. These assertions provide plenty of fodder for realists to insist that international organizations, and in this respect the SCO, are used by powerful states to further their interests and to implement their power politics.[21]

## The SCO's Need for Self-Appraisal

Nevertheless, this is only one way of looking at the kaleidoscopic patterns of political, economic, social and cultural change that brought about the need for more cooperation among the SCO member states by means of creating a regional polity. What merits attention here is the underrated importance of the context of, and circumstances under which IOs are created.

“The SCO is situated in an exceptional region, set up under exceptional circumstances and faces a special situation. Accordingly, it will have to come up with unique solutions ... and has to strike its own developmental route according to the local conditions.”[22]

History serves as a valuable asset in the study of the contextual growth and evolution of IOs in Central Asia and elsewhere. For this reason, some scholars focus on how being located in a particular geographic space can shape the behavior and views of different players toward the international system. They argue that

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“Central Asian countries were perceived to be the passive recipients of the external focus and domination as manifested throughout colonialism, Cold War bipolarity, and now democratization.”[23]

Kavalski contends that Central Asia has thus been treated as a context for the agency of external actors, who are actively in pursuit of ‘deliberate construction’ of the region as a context for their own policies.[24] Notwithstanding the foregoing, one should not rush to the conclusion that the SCO as an influential organization in Central Asia is hostage to the region’s historical background. This is precisely where the gist of the matter, that is the need for possible and required shift from looking outward to looking inward, carries great weight and analytical bite in our analysis concerning the functionality of the SCO. Instead of an inward-looking examination of its institutional structure and moving toward striking a balance between its goals and institutional capacity, the SCO has expended the bulk of its activities in articulating the divergent interests of the two major powers vis-à-vis other member states as well as engaging in geopolitical rivalry with other great powers such as the US. Hence many scholars, particularly in the West, tend to treat the SCO via a prism that demonstrates only the parochial pursuit of Russia and China’s self-interests, as well as other member states’ tendency to give precedence to regime survival rather than democratic reformations. [25] The aforementioned assertions link us to the two remaining factors that are regarded as constitutive elements of every functioning international organization: authority and legitimacy.

As we discussed earlier, the SCO has substantially undermined its capacity to transform itself into a supranational polity similar to modern liberal and democratic institutions. This is chiefly due to the SCO’s fixation with safeguarding sovereignty, instead of sovereignty-pooling in the case of Western organizations, and its desire to prioritize security and economic concerns over human rights. Hence, on top of the need for domestic political reforms, structural changes are also needed for the SCO in the sense of creating changes on multiple fronts, for instance, in the Secretariat and its administrative staff. Central to this argument is that the staff of IOs hold great potential to amalgamate their ‘objective’ nature of their knowledge with the states’ preferences, and to legitimize the SCO’s authority through their impartial stance. Under the circumstances, the SCO faces a structural problem where the authority of the SCO is predominantly located outside the circular-shaped parameters shown in the graph above. Such dislocation of authority leaves little room for the SCO to promote and enforce collective decisions according to the needs and preferences of all the member states. Further to this, the SCO has yet to create homogeneity in terms of shared norms and values and foster socialization among the member state’s population.[26] Barnett and Finnemore perfectly illustrate the notion that IOs can project their independent authority by using their bureaucratic capacities. They conceive of IOs as bureaucracies, which are also authorities in their own right.[27] They posit that authority provides the IOs with a great deal of autonomy vis-à-vis states, and other global actors.[28]

Theoretically, much of the bureaucratic power lies in the hands of the staff of IOs and top civil servants. Since the SCO is a relatively under-developed international organization, and still caught in great power politics, it has largely failed to interpret, generate and promote its norms autonomously and independently of what Russian–Chinese relationship has to offer. It remains to be seen if the SCO can acquire a high degree of autonomy and whether it can induce deference from Russia and China. Using the SCO as the battering ram for furtherance of their interest, the two powers seek to shape the normative base of the international system, whereas little attention has been paid to the fact that high levels of cooperation between the two will increase the autonomy of the SCO and its legitimacy on the world stage. In addition, much of the criticism of the IOs center on lack of accountability and legitimacy. For example, the SCO Secretariat, which is responsible for providing organizational and technical support for the organization is not as efficient and fully-fledged as the executive organs of other IOs such as the EU. The SCO has yet to create mechanisms aimed at strengthening and legitimizing the normative dimensions of its conduct. It has to explain what exactly ‘the Shanghai Spirit’ entails and if it resonates well with the people in and around Central Asia. The dilemma facing the SCO is whether to continue catering to particular interests or moving in the direction of advocating widely-held values and democratic principles.

## Conclusion

The case study of Shanghai Cooperation Organization revealed the least-known nuances and complexities of the IO’s functionality as well as the diversity of views and theoretical perspectives in defining the future of international order. In sum, three generic propositions can be distilled from this analysis: First, there is no rule of thumb for

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determining whether an international institution has been effective and highly efficient. For that matter, considerable attention should be accorded to the underlying argument that many goals and objectives of contemporary IOs, especially those in the Western hemisphere, are imbued with liberal qualities. However, lack of such qualities does not necessarily mean that an international organization located in a different part of the world, i.e., the SCO, will cease to function or fail to deliver on its avowed objectives. Illiberal properties may jeopardize the organizations' longevity and legitimacy but their authority and desire for influencing the international order are likely to remain intact. Second, the SCO is widely perceived as a nascent and emerging entity that despite its rapid institutional structure during the past decade lacks fully-fledged institutional and democratic organs similar to that of the EU, the UN and World Trade Organization. In this regard, the SCO should avail itself of institutional capacities that can be provided by its observer and permanent members to improve its organizational structure and enhance its legitimacy and accountability. Creating impartial administrative staff, engaging civil society arrangements, appointing apolitical technocrats (legitimacy index), establishing a judicial body for settlement of internal disputes among the member states, promoting liberal practices, facilitating regional and global welfare, and delineating the exact boundaries between terrorism and secessionism (the functionality index) are among a wide variety of proposed challenges that should be dealt with if the SCO wants to survive. Moreover, in the context of great power politics in Central Asia, the SCO needs to detach itself from the notion of being an anti-Western entity by not letting external forces define its regional and international goals and changing preferences. Like any other international institutions, it is necessary for the SCO to gain autonomy in its actions and policy-making processes by persuading other actors to accept new preferences and defer to collective decisions, instead of following the preferences and policy recommendations of its founding and powerful members (authority index). Lastly, the issue of the nuances of the region under investigation, as well as circumstances under which the SCO has evolved is of paramount importance. Located in a vast, rich and diverse region with outstanding energy resources, the SCO has always been concerned about regional stability and security, thus it has been largely unsuccessful in rectifying the member states' internal problems. In other words, the SCO's obsessive scrutiny of what's going on outside has impeded the polity from gaining an unfiltered insight into what's going on inside. This is why the past, present and future dynamics of Central Asia makes it a uniquely exceptional region in the world and any study of IOs activities in the region a *sui generis* case. In Ahmed Rashid's words, "Central Asia has always been different." [29]

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