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## Expanding the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: mechanisms, perspectives, and challenges for the region and beyond

by Eva Seiwert

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is preparing to expand for the second time since its establishment in 2001, welcoming Iran as the ninth full member state in 2023. The next candidates – Belarus and Türkiye – are ready to follow Iran’s accession path. Additionally, at the Samarkand Summit in September 2022, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia became dialogue partners. The recent and upcoming SCO enlargements present several challenges, both for the organisation itself and for decision-makers in Europe. The once clearly Central Asia-centred organisation must ensure that its expansion into Western Asia and Europe does not lead to a loss of focus and efficiency. European policymakers, on the other hand, will be required to pay more attention to the long trivialised organisation and take seriously China’s alternative institution building, albeit without falling into exaggerated paranoia. Rather than blaming Beijing for its increasingly assertive foreign policy, Europe should interpret this as a wake-up call to reform its thinking and invest more attention in Central Asia.

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## Introduction

The SCO is a regional organisation founded in June 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It grew out of the Shanghai Five – China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan –, which met for the first time in 1996 to settle border disputes between China on the one side and the four post-Soviet republics on the other. Along with negotiating resolutions to their territorial disputes, the states engaged in confidence-building measures and strengthened cooperation on issues such as terrorism, separatism, and drug trafficking.

The meetings of the five countries were institutionalised with the founding of the SCO in 2001, which now also included Uzbekistan. The SCO's functions are many, and include cooperation in the political, security, economic, and cultural spheres.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the first few years, SCO activities were dominated by regional security and economic cooperation, and its membership was strictly limited to the six founding countries, which worked on further institutionalising the organisation by establishing, among other things, the SCO Secretariat in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent in 2004. Over twenty years after its establishment, however, the once narrowly Eurasian-focussed organisation has expanded its membership from six neighbouring states to a total of 21 full members and associate countries.

This contribution outlines the enlargement of the so-called “SCO family.”<sup>2</sup> It highlights that, while the organisation is still rather unknown beyond its region, its “circle of friends” already

extends far beyond the original geographical focus of Central Asia. While enlargement has brought about opportunities, it has also generated new challenges for SCO members and partners. Observers from the European Union must now pay more attention to this growing organisation that can be judged as representative of China's alternative institution building, and reform their own institutions and thinking.

### The SCO: From narrowly Central Asia-focussed to the largest regional organisation worldwide

Non-member states of the SCO can formally cooperate with the organisation in three different ways: by becoming dialogue partners, observer states, or full members. In 2004, the founding members accepted new states as partners to the organisation for the first time, creating the status of observer state. Observers have the right to “attend public meetings of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Organisation and leaders of various departments,”<sup>3</sup> and participate in discussions (with the prior consent of the president of the conference). They “may be invited to participate in public meetings of the Council of Heads of State and the Head of Government (Prime Minister),” but do not have the right to vote, to participate in drafting and signing documents, or in drafting resolutions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> SCO, “Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi chengli xuanyan” (“Declaration on the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”), June 15, 2001, Shanghai, Art. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Global Times, “‘SCO Family’ Shows Unique Value: Global Times Editorial,” September 18, 2021, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234604.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> SCO, “Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi guanchayuan tiaoli” (“Regulations on observers of the SCO”), June 17, 2004, Tashkent, Art. 7.

<sup>4</sup> SCO, “Regulations on observers of the SCO”, Art. 6-8.

COUNTRY	DATE OF ADMISSION AS OBSERVER STATE
<b>MONGOLIA</b>	2004, Tashkent Summit
<b>(INDIA)</b>	2005, Astana Summit (full member since 2017)
<b>(PAKISTAN)</b>	2005, Astana Summit (full member since 2017)
<b>IRAN</b>	2005, Astana Summit (finalisation of full membership in 2023)
<b>AFGHANISTAN</b>	2012, Beijing Summit
<b>BELARUS</b>	2015, Ufa Summit

*Table 1: SCO observer states (as of 2022).*

There are no strict requirements that a government wishing to become an observer state must fulfil. The regulations regarding application for observer state status merely expect the applicant to adhere to the “respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality of the member states and recognition of the fundamental purposes, principles and actions of the Organisation.”<sup>5</sup> Whilst this requirement seems to be quite lax, the SCO has rejected at least one application for observer status in the past, namely that filed by the US in 2005. Since the American application was reportedly rejected on the grounds that it does not share any borders with member states of the regional organisation,<sup>6</sup> it could be expected that some unofficial requirements exist, such as geographical proximity. All current SCO observer states can be loosely described as

situated in the wider SCO region of Eurasia.

A second associate status, that of dialogue partner, was created in 2008. Dialogue partners have fewer rights than observers. According to then SCO Secretary-General Alimov, “any country or organisation that agrees with the purposes and principles of the SCO can become a dialogue partner.”<sup>7</sup> At the time of approval, the SCO and the applicant sign a memorandum determining their areas of interaction. Subsequently, the dialogue partner can participate in meetings of heads of ministries, working groups, and scientific and expert meetings related to the areas of cooperation outlined in the memorandum. In addition, dialogue partners can request a meeting of “SCO member states + Partner(s)” at the ministerial level.<sup>8</sup>

COUNTRY	DATE OF ADMISSION AS DIALOGUE PARTNER
<b>(BELARUS)</b>	2009, Yekaterinburg Summit (observer since 2015)
<b>SRI LANKA</b>	2009, Yekaterinburg Summit
<b>TURKEY</b>	2012, Beijing Summit
<b>ARMENIA</b>	2015, Ufa Summit
<b>AZERBAIJAN</b>	2015, Ufa Summit
<b>CAMBODIA</b>	2015, Ufa Summit
<b>NEPAL</b>	2015, Ufa Summit
<b>EGYPT</b>	2022, Samarkand Summit
<b>QATAR</b>	2022, Samarkand Summit
<b>SAUDI ARABIA</b>	2022, Samarkand Summit

*Table 2: SCO dialogue partners (as of 2022).*

<sup>5</sup> SCO, “Regulations on observers of the SCO”, Art. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Dilip Hiro, “Shanghai Surprise”, *The Guardian*, June 16, 2006, accessed May 17, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jun/16/shanghaisurprise>.

<sup>7</sup> SCO Secretariat, “La Alimofu: Shanghe Zuzhi xianzai de yicheng shizhi shang shi zhengge diqu de fazhan yicheng” (“Alimov: SCO’s current agenda is essentially development agenda for the entire region”), December 19, 2017, accessed April 30, 2020, <http://chn.sectsc.org/news/20171219/367771.html>.

<sup>8</sup> SCO, “Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi duihua huoban tiaoli” (“Regulations on dialogue partners of the SCO”), August 28, 2008, Dushanbe. Art. 2, Par. 2-3.

In addition to the nine existing dialogue partners, the SCO has reached an agreement on admitting Bahrain, the Maldives, the UAE, Kuwait, and Myanmar as new dialogue partners which is expected to be finalised in 2023.<sup>9</sup> With these most recent admissions, the SCO has irreversibly moved from a Central Asia-focus to a much wider organisation in geographical terms.

While it could be argued that observer states and dialogue partners are only present at the margins of the SCO and do not influence the organisation's decision-making, the SCO has also expanded its full membership to include countries not traditionally perceived to be part of Central Asia. Five years ago, the first membership enlargement took place when the South Asian states of India and Pakistan joined. Additionally, in 2021, Iran's accession process formally commenced. It will be the ninth full member state once the process is completed next year.

Concerning enlargement, the SCO is open to accepting membership of states in the region that respect the principles and objectives of the Charter.<sup>10</sup> In 2010, the organisation laid out the precise conditions for future admissions of new members, stipulating that applicant states should:

- be situated to the region of Eurasia;
- maintain diplomatic relations with all member states of the organisation;
- have observer state or dialogue partner status;
- maintain active economic and humanitarian relations with the member states;
- have no international commitments in the security field which are in conflict with the relevant international treaties and other documents of the organisation;
- have no armed conflict with any state;
- consciously fulfil its obligations under the UN Charter and comply with the recognised norms of the international community;
- not be under UNSC sanctions.<sup>11</sup>

India and Pakistan filed their formal membership requests at the Dushanbe Summit in 2014, during which the “Procedure for Granting Member State Status of the SCO” and a “Model Memorandum on the Obligations of Applicants to join the SCO” were devised as the legal framework for future membership expansion. A year later, the admission procedure for India and Pakistan was officially initiated at the Ufa Summit. Another year later, at the Tashkent Summit in 2016, India and Pakistan signed their respective memoranda of obligations, which marked the official commencement of their accession process. At the Astana Summit in June 2017, the two states were granted full membership.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “President Xi Jinping Attends the 22nd Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of State and Delivers Important Remarks”, September 16, 2022, accessed October 26, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202209/t20220916\\_10767162.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220916_10767162.html).

<sup>10</sup> SCO, “Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi xianzhang” (“SCO Charter”), June 7, 2002, St. Petersburg.

<sup>11</sup> SCO, “Shanghai Hezuo jieshou xin chengyuan tiaoli” (“Regulations on the admission of new members to the SCO”), June 11, 2010, Tashkent, Art. 1, Par. 2.



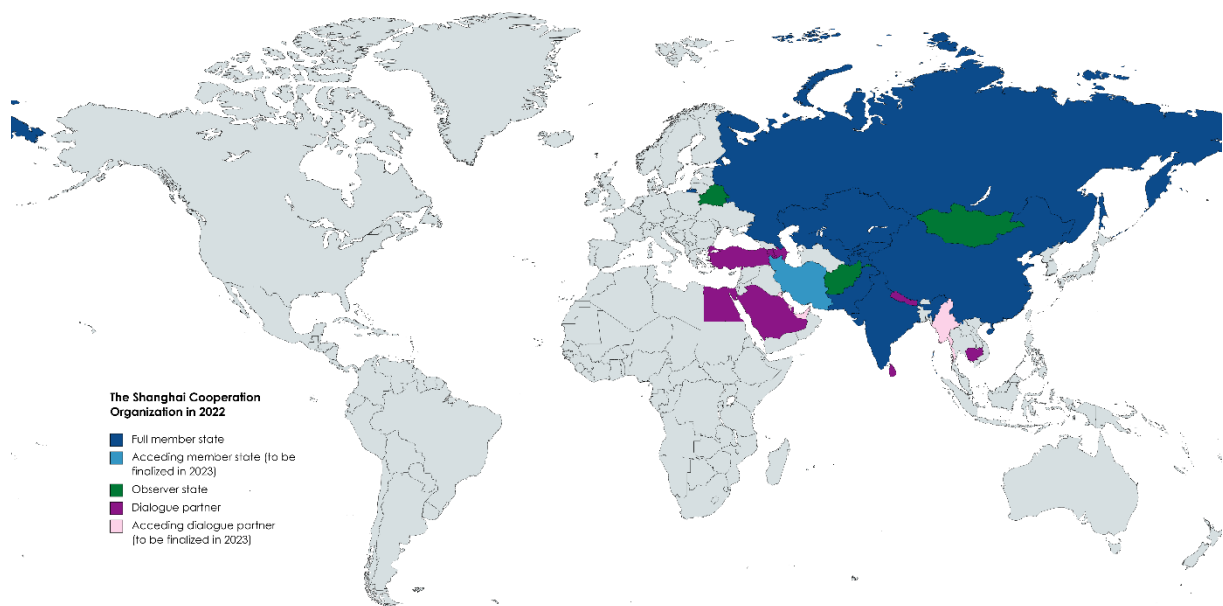


Figure 1: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2022.

As mentioned above, at the Dushanbe Summit in 2021, the admission process to include Iran as a full member commenced. Iran has been an SCO observer state since 2005. In 2008, the country applied for full membership, this was for a long time impossible owing to the requirement that applicant states must not be under UN sanctions. Once the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) came into force on 16 January 2016, observers and policymakers began extensively discussing the possibility of Iran joining the SCO as a full member,<sup>12</sup> and at the Samarkand Summit 2022, the SCO signed a memorandum of obligation on Iran's membership. It is also clear who the next acceding country will be; in Samarkand, the procedure for Belarus' accession to the SCO was started. In addition, Türkiye reiterated its interest in becoming a full SCO member, which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan contemplated publicly for the first time in 2012.<sup>13</sup>

## Challenges and recommendations

Accepting new full members and granting observer state and dialogue partner status undeniably increases the SCO's visibility. While it originally had only six founding members, the wider "SCO family" of full members, observer states, and dialogue partners included 21 countries as of 2022. In granting associated states access to important summits and meetings, the SCO increases the likelihood that they will adopt the SCO norms and working style.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it is assumed that countries associated with the SCO will support its members beyond simple cooperation within the framework of the SCO.

Several challenges, however, have arisen from the SCO's enlargement. At the time of its first expansion, observers began to caution that the large diversity of cultures among SCO members would increase, and that this would lead to further deterioration of the organisation's ability to find cohesion and to work towards a common identity and values.<sup>15</sup> In 2015, one scholar

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee 11, Beijing, 2018; Interviewee 14, Shanghai, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Hürriyet Daily News, "President Erdoğan: EU Not Everything, Turkey May Join Shanghai Five", November 20, 2016, accessed June 26, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-eu-not-everything-turkey-may-join-shanghai-five-106321>; European Parliament, "Parliamentary Questions, 5 February 2013, Subject: Turkey and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", February 18, 2013, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=WQ&reference=E-2013-001174&language=GA>.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Why States Act Through Formal International Organizations", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 42, no. 1 (1998): 10; Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations", *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (1999): 719.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee 01, Shanghai, 2018; Interviewee 03, Shanghai, 2018; Interviewee 14, Shanghai, 2018; Interviewee 15, Beijing, 2018; Xianghong Zeng and Tingkang Li, "Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi kuoyuan de xueli yu zhengzhi fenxi" ("Academic and political analysis of SCO expansion"), *Dangdai Yatai*, no. 3 (2014); Jinfeng Li, "Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi kuoyuan: tiaozhan yu jiyu" ("Enlargement of the SCO: challenges and opportunities"), *Eluosi Dong'ou Zhongya Yanjiu*, no. 6 (2015).

maintained that the SCO was still searching for and forming its identity and “common values” and that its sense of belonging was weak.<sup>16</sup> He suggested that SCO members first increase their mutual respect, cooperation, and adherence to the Shanghai Spirit<sup>17</sup> before expanding this “common identity” further. Even if official documents make it seem as though SCO member states have always shared a common identity and values, in reality this is something they are still striving for.<sup>18</sup>

A more tangible consequence of enlarging the SCO is the danger that Central Asian members lose their agency and standing within the regional organisation.<sup>19</sup> Some measures have been taken to alleviate Central Asian states’ fears of being side-lined. For instance, according to then SCO Deputy Secretary-General Wang Kaiwen in 2018, “the proportion of the membership dues of new members cannot exceed those of the lowest among the founding members,” i.e. Tajikistan.<sup>20</sup> New members such as India, Pakistan, and soon Iran are accordingly allowed only as many representatives as Tajikistan, even if they were willing to and capable of making larger monetary contributions. This regulation appears to be aimed at preserving the relevance of smaller original members. However, such measures have led one observer to refer to new members as “second class members” who do not have the same rights as the founding states.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, this high-

lights a discrepancy between the SCO’s official norm of equality of all states and its practice.

Going forward, the SCO should first ensure that the original goals of its founding members are retained and that it does not abandon its initial objectives for the sake of increasing its status as a geopolitically powerful actor. If the SCO wants to remain relevant as a security actor dealing with intraregional security issues, it should extend its original mission, moving from simply settling border disputes between China on the one hand and post-Soviet republics on the other, to becoming a platform for relevant Central Asian governments to negotiate their persistent disputes. While several observers have argued against the SCO’s utility in helping to settle intraregional disputes,<sup>22</sup> one scholar made the following compelling assessment during an interview with the author: “If [as a regional security organisation] you cannot even solve the water resources problems in your region, what else are you talking about concerning maintaining regional security? [...] If the SCO cannot solve any problems, people will lose their confidence in the organisation.”<sup>23</sup> Considering the particular urgency of climate change-related issues – and the absence of any better suited regional institution – it is worth considering reorienting the SCO’s mission to include mediation of climate-related conflicts (such as over water) between member states.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Jinfeng Li, “Enlargement of the SCO: challenges and opportunities”, 37, 44.

<sup>17</sup> The ‘Shanghai Spirit’ is a 20-character long set of norms, namely ‘mutual trust’, ‘mutual benefit’, ‘equality’, ‘consultation’, ‘respect for cultural diversity’, and ‘common development’. It is the most prominent set of norms associated with the SCO and has been termed “the underlying philosophy and the most important code of conduct of the SCO”, see: SCO, “Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi wu zhou nian xuanyan” (“Declaration on the 5th anniversary of the SCO”), June 15, 2006, Shanghai.

<sup>18</sup> It should be emphasised that this problem is not unique to the SCO and that constructing a shared identity and common values commonly takes much more than 20 years. This becomes evident when considering that the EU has been struggling with this for almost 60 years. The author thanks an anonymous reviewer for this important remark.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee 06, Beijing, 2018; Interviewee 09, Beijing, 2018; Interviewee 15, Beijing, 2018. The 2022 Samarkand Declaration addresses this elephant in the room by emphasising: “The Member States consider Central Asia to be the core of SCO”, see: SCO, “Samarkand Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, September 16, 2022, Samarkand, Art. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Yuandan Guo, “Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi mishuzhang Wang Kaiwen: 17 nian lai. Shanghe kao shenme yingde qi” (“Wang Kaiwen, SCO Deputy Secretary-General: in the past 17 years, what has the SCO relied on to win the times?”), *Huanqiuwang*, June 4, 2018, accessed June 19, 2018, <http://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1602295322803780773&wfr=newsapp&from=singlemessage&isappinstall=0>.

<sup>21</sup> Interviewee 07, Beijing, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee 07, Beijing, 2018; Interviewee 09, Beijing, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee 16, Beijing, 2018; also: Interviewee 03, Shanghai, 2018; Interviewee 12, Shanghai, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the gaining of independence by the five Central Asian republics, several disputes between the upstream countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the downstream countries of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan emerged, most of which focus on the region’s main rivers, the Syr Darya and Amu Darya. These disputes have recurrently triggered violent clashes and instability in the border regions. With climate change further reducing water availability, regional conflicts over water access are expected to intensify in the coming years. For more on the origins and development of water conflicts in Central Asia, see,

Second, if the SCO wants to be respected as credible in promoting principles such as equality, fairness, and mutual benefit, as well as mitigate against some outside observers' persistent perceptions of the regional grouping as an "anti-Western" organisation,<sup>25</sup> it should make its workings and objectives more transparent. At the same time, observers in Europe must pay close attention to the SCO's future development. As an organisation encompassing mostly authoritarian governments – many of which have appalling human rights records and engage in activities contradicting core European values (as well as in some cases clearly violating international law<sup>26</sup>) – the SCO will likely remain antithetical to 'Western' organisations such as the EU. This is only logical; however, scandalising the SCO as an "anti-Western alliance" or an "anti-NATO"<sup>27</sup> – for which there

is no evidence – is not helpful in the increasingly polarised international environment of today. Rather, although the fates of the EU and SCO are not directly connected, it is important to acknowledge the SCO's growing attractiveness for a number of states on the one hand and the EU's fading normative power on the other. This could help European democracies recognise the need to improve the attractiveness of their own norms and institutions. If Europe wants to retain its normative power, it should act in accordance with its own norms (cf. treatment of refugees at the EU's borders<sup>28</sup>), challenge the still widespread Eurocentric view of the world held by many of its representatives (cf. Borrell's "jungle/garden" metaphor<sup>29</sup>), and invest more genuine interest and attention in regions beyond Europe.

e.g., H. Peimani, *Conflict and Security in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2009); J. Rheinbay et al., "A Threat to Regional Stability: Water and Conflict in Central Asia", *PeaceLab*, April, 20 2021, accessed December 06, 2022, <https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/a-threat-to-regional-stability-water-and-conflict-in-central-asia>; K. Szálkai, "Resettling Water Relations in Central Asia: The Perspectives of Uzbekistan's Cooperative Foreign Policy Turn", *OSCE Academic Policy Brief*, no. 74, July 2021, accessed December 06, 2022, [https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/20210723\\_PB.pdf](https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/20210723_PB.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş et al., "Rogue NATO: The New Face of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 16, 2022, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/rogue-nato-to-the-new-face-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/>.

<sup>26</sup> John B. Bellinger III, "How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Violates International Law", *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 28, 2022, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-russias-invasion-ukraine-violates-international-law>.

<sup>27</sup> Ebbighausen, "Anti-Western alliance in Asia"; M. K. Bhadrakumar, "The New 'NATO of the East' Takes Shape: The SCO and China, Russia and US Manoeuvres", *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 5, no. 8 (01 August 2007)

<sup>28</sup> Judith Sunderland and Bill Frelick, "EU's Approach to Migrants: Humanitarian Rhetoric, Inhumane Treatment," *Human Rights Watch*, April 15, 2015, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/15/eus-approach-migrants-humanitarian-rhetoric-inhumane-treatment>.

<sup>29</sup> European Union External Action, "European Diplomatic Academy: Opening Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the Inauguration of the Pilot Programme", accessed October 27, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration_en).

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