

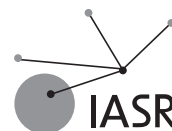


International Area Studies Review

2026, Vol. 29(1) 1–17

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<https://doi.org/10.69473/iasr.2026.29.1.1>



Article

The Mackinder Image Revised? The Development of Shanghai Cooperation Organization under the Geopolitical Perspective

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Abstract

Since its establishment in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been neglected by mainstream Western countries. This disregard stems from its initial leadership by China and Russia as a regional regime focused on specific functional goals such as combating terrorism and maintaining stability among members. However, recent shifts in international and regional dynamics, particularly following the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, have created a potential opportunity for China and Russia to fill the power vacuum in inner Eurasia. Consequently, the SCO has begun to assert itself more prominently on global issues. The accession of new members since 2017 enhanced the SCO's stature as a counter force against the traditional Western blocs. Furthermore, the China rise in recent years not only suggests a potential scenario of "The East is Rising, The West is Declining," but the China-Russia the quasi-coalition seems to call back the idea by Halford Mackinder who imaged the power who control the heart-land will grab the world finally. This paper will check the current situation by focusing on SCO development, and try to observe how it would influence the US-China competition and global geopolitics.

Keywords

Halford mackinder, SCO, Geopolitics, US, Russia, China

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Central Asia Emerging from the Shadow

Five years after the establishment of *Shanghai Five* forum in 1996,¹ the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was officially inaugurated in 2001 leading by Russia and China. From some perspective, SCO was primarily a response to the geopolitical vacuum initially created by the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991 which let its vassal republics in Central Asia declared independence (Iwashita, 2003). Mainly in order to preserve its strategic influence, Russia established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a platform with these newly independent states including those located in his backyard, Central Asia (Willerton & Cockerham, 2018). However, the CIS proved to be limited in its integrative function. Relatively, China's deepening economic reform policy significantly increased its energy demand which heightened its interest in Central Asia and led to initiatives such as the Western Development Strategy announced in 1999 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2013 especially, both aimed at strengthening its engagement with this region and addressing its energy shortfalls. As the non-traditional security threats gradually supplanted inter-state conflict as the new challenge to regional security, and the September 11 attacks in 2001 resulted in the global anti-terrorism, China and Russia decided to integrate Central Asian countries together to construct this mechanism for reinforcing multilateral coordination.

Even though the shared perception of non-traditional security threats did provide an opportunity for enhanced interaction among China, Russia, and Central Asian countries, it is not the sole driver behind the establishment of the SCO. The border disputes that emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet's sudden disintegration constituted another crucial precondition. Moreover, the establishment of "strategic partnership of coordination" between China and Russia in 1996, followed by signing the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001, also played a pivotal role in advancing this initiative. Actually, Russia, China, and the Central Asian countries do share some interests as following: first, to resolute the extensive 7,000-kilometer border disputes among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan; second, to promote some kind of military confidence-building measures (CBM) focusing on border issue; and third, to foster regional security cooperation and promote the regional economic development (Wrobel, 2014).

In particular, the United States tried to extend its influence into Central Asia since 2001 under the slogan of "global anti-terror" which not only prompting heightened vigilance from both Russia and China (Yang, 2008), but pushing them to strengthen institutional collaboration through SCO. Consequently, the initially loose alignment between China and Russia began to escalate from the basic border cooperation into more proactive engagement with non-traditional threats. Meanwhile, as the intensifying confrontation between Russia and US-led Western powers due to NATO begin to extend members eastwardly since 1999, Moscow became intended to develop a partnership with China though the latter always declare "non-aligned, non-confrontational, and not directed against any third party" as principle. However, since India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus accepted as official members one by one in 2017-2024, SCO granted dialogue partner status also to several Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, as well as NATO member Turkey, thereby rapidly expanding its geographical scope and influence.

According to the development of SCO till now and the global geopolitical shift in past decades, it is important to observe the SCO with particular attention following its membership expansion since 2014. The core question in this paper includes: first, what is the main images or theoretical guideline which dominate the major powers' view to the Central Asia? Secondly, what's the background and motives which led Russia and China stand together in this region? Then, what's the implication of SCO's institutional cooperation, and whether or how the new

members will extend or spill over the SCO's influence from Central Asia to the whole Eurasia? And lastly, how the development of SCO influences the global geopolitics and feedback to the theoretical hypothesis? However, under the strategic rivalry between US and China, India simultaneously holds membership in SCO and the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) rendering its dual affiliation strategically ambivalent. Then, following Iran as member in 2023 and the Gaza conflict escalating in the same year, the regional dynamics within the SCO have grown even more complex, and it must be critical about how the SCO members holding different positions deal with above issue together, and how the further institutionalization will push the SCO's internal coordination toward a more multilateral model.

Echo to Traditional Geopolitical Thinking

With the rapid globalization and the breakthroughs in transportation technological revolutions, geopolitical theory has faced a series of challenges recently. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected each other, the implications of geography have also shifted from static interpretations to dynamic environmental variables which led scholars to argue that the character of geopolitical space in the era of globalization may no longer define by traditional anarchic condition (Moisio, 2019). As Thomas Friedman notes "the world is flat" (Friedman, 2005), James Rosenau had long proposed the concept of "framegration" which captures the coexistence of integration and fragmentation focusing the change of contemporary global politics (Rosenau, 1983, 1997). In the same time, there are still some scholars of geopolitics adopt a political economy approach which does not give priority to either economic networks or the politics of state territory (Flint & Zhu, 2019).

In light of the new order, what challenges lie ahead for geopolitics, a field long regarded as a form of statecraft, serving the national power? Since the nineteenth century, as John Agnew has mentioned, the "geopolitical imagination has long framed world politics in terms of an overarching global context in which states vie for power outside their boundaries, gain control over less modern regions and overtake other major states in a worldwide pursuit of global primacy." (Agnew, 2003) Although he also indicates that we must start with seeing the world as a structured whole, in the past two centuries at least, major powers have indeed sought to satisfy their strategic and interests through the control of sea power and the conquest of colonies. This pattern persisted into the mid-twentieth century and ultimately contributed to the outbreak of two world wars due to the partitioning of strong geopolitical influence. Nonetheless, the mainstream of geopolitical thought which focus on acquiring strategic strongholds as buffers and to isolate states from one another in pursuit of strategic advantage has basically remained unchanged (Cohen, 2015). Even in the era of so-called globalization, critical approaches to geopolitics have yet to formulate a comprehensive alternative to the classical notion that geographic factors fundamentally determine national power (Tamnes & Offerdal, 2014).

It is worth to note that, although the majority of human activity throughout history has taken place on land, the expansion of European maritime power since the fifteenth century significantly reshaped strategic thinking. And it is why Alfred Mahan asserted that any state possessing a central strategic position, combined with sufficient naval strength and a resolute blue-water strategy, could dominate the seas and even ultimately commanding global power. As such, sea power was imbued with undeniable political authority in the international system (Holmes, 2004), and especially the rise of US offers considerable empirical validation of above propositions. However, even though control of sea power played crucial role to the story of modern West powers, land remains the fundamental basis of power. For example, Halford Mackinder focused

on so-called Eurasia, the largest contiguous landmass on Earth, then introduced the concept of the “World Island” and argued how important that control of a specific geographic “pivot” or “heart-land” for dominating this area (Lacoste, 2012; Mackinder, 1904). He believed only by encircling the heartland could global peace and order be preserved, and noted that the advent of modern railways had benefited the heartland power—here implied Russia—by granting land-based resources and project influence toward the periphery of Eurasia, thus shifting the global geopolitical balance from a maritime-dominated order to one increasingly favorable to land power (Sloan, 1999). It must be noted that Mackinder’s concept not only offered the background of the so-called “Great Game” between Britain and Russia in the late nineteenth century (Hopkirk, 1992), but also influence US containment strategy in the Cold War Era. The difference is—according to Nicholas Spykman’s suggestion—US focused on the “rim-land” more than the heart-land (Spykman, 1942). During the Cold War era, though technological advance introduced entirely new spatial dimensions prompting critical reassessment of geopolitical concepts such as outer space and cyberspace (Rovner, 2019), Zbigniew Brzezinski still tried to argue his concept of “grand chessboard,” described geo-strategy as the synthesis of geopolitical considerations (Brzezinski, 1997), and believed that the reason why US possesses global power just because it could controls all major ocean and deploy integrated military capabilities for controlling sea and land simultaneously.

However, the rim-land concept as core of containment implies the reality that US could not control the Eurasia in fact. Meanwhile, situated deep within the interior of the Eurasian continent, Central Asia occupies a critical crossroads which is just the “heart-land” in Mackinder’s theory (Fittweis, 2003; Hynek, 2020). It is not difficult to understand why US regard Soviet’s control this region and invade Afghanistan in 1979 as main threat to its strategic interest. Following the Soviet Union disintegrating in 1991 and five Central Asian republics got independence in next year, Russia’s position became increasingly isolated since the end of Cold War, and the 911 incident in 2001 also offered Washington the chance to extend influence to the heart-land by launching Afghanistan War. This development may enhance the China-Russia cooperation in Central Asian affairs (Ni, 2003).

Since Central Asia has long regarded as Russia’s traditional sphere of influence, any moves by the US or China in this region must attract attention from Moscow (Marketos, 2009). It implies Russia’s involvement in the SCO from a global strategic perspective who views this participation as a means to promote a multipolar international order and restore its status as major power. In contrast, China views its engagement as a way to break out of the isolation imposed by US and its Western allies. For Beijing, participation in the SCO plays an important role in shaping a more favorable outside environment, and even for dealing with its internal threat of Xinjiang separatism (Tsai, 2014). As core members of the SCO, both China and Russia exert substantial influence in the political sphere and have been actively involved in security cooperation. In the area of economic collaboration, Russia’s attitude is more ambivalent and tends to prioritize this issue through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)(Konarovsky, 2016; Libman, 2017). It implies the dynamic has led to latent tournament for regional leadership between China and Russia.

Origins of the SCO and Its Geopolitical Implications

The establishing of SCO could trace its origins to the *Shanghai Five* since 1996 which was born as a forum for discussing cross-border issue under a Russia-China co-initiative, and signed *Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field in the Border Area* and the *Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in the Border Area* together in 1996 and

1997. Then, China formalized the *Shanghai Five* as a regular summit since 1997 for supervising border de-militarization. At the summits held in 1998 and 1999, the member countries adopted *Almaty Statement* and the *Bishkek Statement* which established the basic guidelines of regional multilateral security cooperation and created a regular communication mechanism among the security agencies, laying the basis for relations characterized by “mutual trust, good-neighborliness, and friendly cooperation.” Beginning in 1997, the agenda of the summits gradually expanded from border issues to broader regional security concerns. In 2001, they convened in Shanghai, where Uzbekistan was admitted as a new member, they held the first Council of Heads of State and sign the *Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization* formally. The newly founded SCO comprised six members, five observer states (Mongolia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan), and three dialogue partner countries (Belarus, Sri Lanka, and Turkey).

To maintain border stability was one of the fundamental prerequisite for security cooperation among those neighboring states and also the first major challenge faced by the *Shanghai Five* forum (Bailes et al., 2007). First, though China and Russia normalized their diplomatic relations in 1989 after decades of confrontation dating back to the 1960s, unresolved territorial disputes persisted. Second, following the collapse of Soviet Union, approximately 3,300 kilometers of the former Sino-Soviet western border were instantaneously transformed into new borders between China and four states which includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In response to this sudden geopolitical shift, these four countries formed a joint delegation to engage in their negotiations with China. China signed a treaty with Russia for their western part border in 1994 firstly,² then finished bilateral talks with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1996 and 1999, which laid the positive groundwork for the regular *Shanghai Five* summit and served as basis to enhance mutual trust in border-related security affairs. There were five summits totally held in 1996-2000 which laid the institutional practice for the subsequent establishment of the SCO which is one of the prominent cases of inter-state regional partnership in the Greater Eurasian macro-region (Alimov, 2018b).

As mentioned above, the *Shanghai Five* summit was initially established to address the border issues mainly. Through the negotiated demilitarization along their shared borders, the mechanism aimed to foster mutual trust and prevent the outbreak of conflict. However, it did not include any permanent institutions or organizational structures, indicating that mutual confidence and consensus among the participating states remained limited at that stage. Nevertheless, after five meetings, the member leaders decided to convene the first Council of Heads of State in 2001 and establish the SCO formally, then adopt the *SCO Charter* in next year which offering a comprehensive organizational structure with clearly delineated levels, including the Council of Heads of State, Council of Heads of Government, Council of Foreign Ministers, meetings of department heads, and the Council of National Coordinators. After establishing its Secretariat office in Beijing, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) were set up in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan (Wang & Kong, 2019).

Since establishment in 2001, the scope of consultation among SCO member states has gradually evolved from the passive focus on military confidence-building measures to more proactive efforts in regional security cooperation and economic engagement. This evolution has significantly broadened the basis for shared interests. For instance, following the 2003 Moscow summit, the SCO agenda expanded beyond the traditional realms of security and economic affairs to include boarder cooperation in transportation, environmental protection, energy, culture, education, and information security. By this point, the SCO had gradually transformed from a limited regional security cooperation platform into a more comprehensive regime characterized by clearly defined common interests and a broad range of strategic concerns. It also introduced

formal mechanisms for observer states and dialogue partners, thereby progressively expanding its regional and international influence. To sum, the SCO institutional framework have since moved toward greater systematization and long-term stability (Oresman, 2004). It is worth noting that, aside for countering the “three evil forces” (terrorism, extremism, and separatism), the SCO plays an important legitimizing role for its member states’ security policies. In this regard, Roy Allison has outlined that an important political function of the SCO “is that of protective integration—the solidarity it offers provides symbolic political legitimacy and equality to Central Asian regimes that struggle to assert this on the broader international stage.”(Allison, 2008)

More importantly, as the aforementioned geopolitical theories, particularly within the framework of Mackinder’s “World Island” idea, Russia and Central Asia are geographically situated in what he termed the “pivot area” or “heart-land.” From this perspective, the Soviet Union possessed the latent potential to dominate the World Island in the aftermath of World War II and thus challenge maritime power which the US as the representative and leader. In response, the latter largely adhered to Nicholas Spykman’s “rim-land” theory by constructing the two-line strategic containment on the flanks of Eurasia since very beginning in the early Cold War period: NATO in Europe and the other network of island alliances in the West Pacific both preserved the global geopolitical equilibrium throughout the Cold War. However, this configuration shifted dramatically after the Soviet Union collapsed. Weakened by economic decline, Russia could no longer credibly project deterrent power, and the independence of the Central Asian countries created a strategic vacuum in the heart-land. Simultaneously, including the emergence of the “China threat theory” in 1995 (Al-Rodhan, 2007), the revision of the US-Japan Defense Guidelines in 1997, and NATO’s eventual eastward expansion since 1999, all signaled that the US-led West was seeking to exploit the retreat of a rival power to intensify pressure on the World Island. Thus, the newly independent Central Asian states intended to adopt the “hedging” policy among the major powers to avoid overdependence on any single actor.

From the perspective of this post-Cold War geopolitical context, one can clearly observe that during the formative phase of the SCO’s predecessor, the *Shanghai Five*, border issues offered an opportunity for multilateral dialogue. Nevertheless, China and Russia consistently maintained obvious dominant positions in both the substance and the process of negotiations. Critical agenda items were typically addressed through bilateral consultations between China and Russia, after which each would separately engage with the Central Asian states to build consensus and try to arrive at mutually acceptable compromises. Following the formal establishment of the SCO, the number of participating countries increased slightly, elevating the importance of Central Asia within the organization. At the same time, institutionalization became a central objective of the SCO’s development. In view of some Central Asian officials, this confirmed that SCO members—especially Russia and China—were more reliable security collaborators than Western states (Chung, 2006), though there are some different interests between these two powers (Ting, 2020).

More symbolically, what initially appeared to be a structure of “four states plus China” under the *Shanghai Five* evolved into a formal multilateral platform among five members. While this shift seemed to reflect greater equality on the surface, it in fact reinforced the preexisting dynamic of China-Russian primacy. The SCO regime may be interpreted as a vehicle for China-Russian joint-management of the strategic vacuum in Central Asia, the heart-land of World Island, and as a countermeasure against the strategic retrenchment and containment efforts by Washington. Especially under the Clinton administration (1992-2000), the United States began to place more emphasis on economic security and preferred a gradual “engagement” strategy in its dealing with China and Russia (Kamath, 1998; Kasim, 2019). This created a strategic opening that enabled both Beijing and Moscow deciding to sign the *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly*

Cooperation in 2001 which served as a crucial basis for the SCO's institutionalization and formal development.

Moreover, in contrast to the early *Shanghai Five*, which primarily focused on advancing the individual interests of its members and lacked a unified external agenda, the SCO has gradually developed a more coherent normative orientation. Although later declarations under the *Shanghai Five* framework articulated opposition to neo-interventionism and great power politics, these principles rarely translated into concrete action. In this regard, the *Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization* clearly stipulates that while the member states are united in their opposition to terrorism, they are also jointly committed to resisting hegemonism and power politics which implied some anti-American intention (Ziegler, 2013). To this end, SCO members have not only conducted regular bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises to coordinate security practices, but have issued multiple consensus-based statements on major international concerns, such as the reform of the United Nations and opposition to great power (US) military interventions. All above activities demonstrate that the SCO's priorities have expanded beyond narrow regional affairs and now encompass broader international issues.

The Institutional Evolution of the SCO

Like most other international regimes, the SCO which is also the first and only regional institution initiated by China (Cheng, 2018), has undergone various phases of adjustment and transformation since its inception. It could be commonly observed that the SCO's declarations and signed agreements to date have exhibited a tendency toward "more advocacy than implementation" and a disconnect between rhetorical enthusiasm and practical outcomes. Taking into account the earlier period of the *Shanghai Five*, the operational characteristics and concrete achievements of the SCO can be broadly categorized into four distinct phases of transformation, as summarized in the Table below.

According to which outlined above, several key observations emerge. First, as noted earlier, in response to the strategic vacuum created by the breakdown of the Soviet and the concurrent pressure from US strategic encirclement along both sides of the Eurasian continent, China and Russia pursued a joint-manage strategy of Central Asia to promote the creation and institutionalization of the SCO (Mirza & Ayub, 2021; Ramanand, 2022). Second, the identification of the "three evil forces" (terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism) as the primary threat served as a strategic focal point that enabled member states to simultaneously address both external and internal challenges. For instance, counterterrorism efforts were framed in part as response to the US global anti-terrorism campaign, allowing SCO members to resist Washington's intervention under that pretext. Meanwhile, labeling separatism and religious extremism as threats provided Russia, the Central Asian states, and China with a shared rationale for addressing domestic issues, such as internal ethnic tensions and the Uyghur question in China's Xinjiang region (Shichor, 2008). Third, in the context of the post-1990s surge in new regionalism and the growing salience of non-traditional security threats, the SCO adapted by expanding its thematic scope (Koolae & Tisheyar, 2015). This included exploring the possibility of transitioning from a purely security-oriented organization to one with more economic cooperation agenda. As part of this institutional evolution, the SCO intensified dialogue on economic issues—exemplified by the Samarkand Declaration adopted in 2022. Notably, the declaration's assertion that "the implementation of unilateral economic sanctions not authorized by the UN Security Council adversely affects other states and international economic relations" can be interpreted as a diplomatic victory for Russia in countering US and EU-imposed sanctions.

Table 1. Phases of development from Shanghai five to the SCO

Main characteristics	Key achievements
Phase I: Border Dispute Resolution and Confidence Building (1996–2001)	
<p>Functioned as international conference, deal with the bilateral border tensions following the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union between Russia, China and Central Asian states.</p> <p>Established summit mechanism that provided a dialogue platform among the five countries and lay the groundwork of mutual trust.</p>	<p>Transited from bilateral negotiations between China and individual post-Soviet states to a five-party summit.</p> <p>Uzbekistan invited to participate in the 2000 summit.</p> <p>Expanded the scope of discussions from resolving border disputes and enhancing military confidence to a wider agenda encompassing security, politics, diplomacy, economics, and military affairs.</p> <p>Established the Shanghai Spirit which emphasizes mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diversity and pursuit of common development.</p> <p>Signed the <i>1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field in the Border Area</i> and the <i>1997 Agreement on the Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in the Border Area</i>, thereby establishing a Military CBM that enabled future possibilities for trade and economic cooperation.</p>
Phase II: Platform of Institutionalized Multilateral Coordination (2001–2006)	
<p>Shared threat of terrorism and other non-traditional violence as basis for pushing multilateral security cooperation.</p> <p>Signed agreements and initiated a series of inter-departmental consultation mechanisms through the ministerial-level meetings.</p>	<p>Signed the <i>SCO Charter</i>, the <i>Declaration of Heads of State</i>, and the <i>Agreement on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure</i>, which provided the legal and institutional foundation and established of a Permanent Secretariat.</p> <p>Signed the <i>Convention on Combating the Three Evil Forces</i>, which defined the scope, modalities, and responsibilities among the member states.</p> <p>Affirmed that the primary tasks of security cooperation for combating terrorism, separatism, extremism, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal migration, etc.</p>
Phase III: Legal Consolidation and Operational Deepening (2006–2017)	
<p>Shifted from consensus-building to practical implementation.</p> <p>Adopted and implemented phased cooperation programs according a three-year cycle.</p> <p>Enhanced counterterrorism coordination capabilities through joint military exercises.</p> <p>Diversified the scope of cooperation to include finance, energy, information security, food security, border control, and cybersecurity.</p>	<p>Signed a series of documents titled <i>Concepts for Cooperation in Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism</i>, including the 2007–2009 Cooperation Program, which marked the first phased operational plan.</p> <p>Conducted joint military exercises code as Peace Mission, Tianshan Anti-Terror, and Cooperation with all member states participation.</p> <p>Established auxiliary institutions including the SCO Business Council, Interbank Consortium, etc.</p> <p>Submitted a revised draft of the <i>International Code of Conduct for Information Security</i> to the United Nations on behalf of all member states, and actively promoted the construction of a comprehensive information security protection system.</p>

Table 1. Phases of development from Shanghai five to the SCO(continue)

Main characteristics	Key achievements
Phase IV: Expansion and Globalizing Strategic Cooperation (2017–Present)	
Admitted India, Pakistan, Iran, and Belarus as new members for expanding its geographic reach from Central Asia to South and West Asia.	Affirmed global strategic stability as the highest-level objective of cooperation, and committed to advancing the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.
Deepened various forms of international cooperation based on shared interests aiming to maximize regional security benefits.	Transformed from a security-focus organization into a comprehensive regional regime and economic cooperation become a parallel strategic pillar alongside security, forming a long-term dual-track model.
Strengthened efforts to establish cooperative platforms for building military confidence in border areas and preventing territorial disputes.	Established expert working groups under the meetings of defense ministers, signed a supplemental protocol to the <i>Agreement on Joint Military Exercises</i> , and maintained ties with other international entities such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).
	Emphasis on preventive diplomacy has emerged as a key mechanism for the SCO in addressing potential conflicts.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Fourth, although the initial China-Russia initiative to establish the SCO was rooted in “defensive” strategic considerations, the weakening of US global leadership—due to its setbacks in Iraq War and the shock of global financial crisis—coincided with China’s sustained economic rise, which increasingly positioned it as a potential challenger to American hegemony. This trend culminated in the 2023 SCO Summit of Heads of State, where all participants (India as except) formally expressed support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signaling that the SCO has evolved into the vital platform for China and Russia to challenge the US-centric international order and advance a multipolar world (Malyshev, 2024). And finally, SCO organized a special conference on Afghanistan issue in 2009, then began to discuss this topic in its annual summit continually. Since the unplanned withdraw of the US forces in 2021 created a power gap and the following worsened situation, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group which established in 2005 soon plays an active role as the bridge for bilateral communication. Due to its long-term strategic importance and Afghanistan as SCO observer state since 2015, the next step for SCO’s intervening must bring a crucial influence (Akhtar & Javaid, 2024).

SCO Expansion and the Global Geostrategic Shifts

The current international system continues to be shaped by the legacy of the Cold War. With US emerging as the sole global hegemon (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2002; Krauthammer, 1990), its grand strategy shifted toward expanding geopolitical space and fill the vacuum naturally. It means that US became increasingly focused on limiting the continental powers, contain the ideological and geopolitical influence from potential enemy like China, and prevent the emergence of any land-based power that could control Eurasia and threaten its maritime hegemons (Grygiel, 2021). As home to some major powers—China, Russia, EU, India, and even some Islamic oil countries, Eurasia accounts for approximately over two thirds of the world’s population, global GDP, and energy reserves. It is the background of World Island concept and has made the region a focus

of intense geostrategic rivalry. The US has viewed Eurasia as the central “grand chessboard” for shaping a unipolar world order in the 21st century. In the west side, US has partnered with its European allies to expand NATO eastward aiming to contain Russia continually, that’s why Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 interpreted as threat against the US-led maritime powers. In response, Russia sought to find possibility for promoting the initiative of Russia-China-India “strategic triangle” to resist US geopolitical expansion (Pant, 2006).

China rise is absolutely the event with more influence. Its comprehensive national power has brought about significant changes to the global geopolitical environment and regional strategic configurations, particularly in East Asia and then to Eurasia. From a grand strategic perspective, China occupies a pivotal geopolitical position in between the maritime powers of the US-Japan alliance and the continental power of Europe and Russia. Due to its rapid economic ascent and especially surpassing Japan in 2010 to become the second economy, China has triggered strategic anxiety to White House and it might be why the latter declared the re-balancing strategy to Asia-Pacific in 2012 (Saunders, 2014). Furthermore, as China continues to expand national power, not only US tries to against the former’s potential to disrupt the existing balance of interests in the region, China also launches the BRI strategy since 2013 originated from Xi’s two speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, not to mention that China geographically own both land power and sea power (Kaplan, 2010).

Perhaps mainly because facing pressure from US in the same time and their back-to-back position, China and Russia have experienced obvious upgrades in their strategic partnership since the normalization of relations in 1989, they declared the formation of Constructive Partnership in 1994, established Strategic Partnership of Coordination in 1996, and elevated to Enhanced Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination since 2014—the same year of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. These developments have fostered a trilateral pattern of economic interdependence, political mutual support, and diplomatic reliance between them. Though pressure exerted by the US might offer the origin of deepening China-Russia relation, their growing quasi-alliance has posed the greatest threat to vital US national interests (Blackwill & Fontain, 2024). Except the SCO as the key symbol of mutual strategic coordination between Moscow and Beijing, in response to US forward defense deployment in NATO and the first island chain, it led China and Russia to share the burden of external pressure. For example, after the US and its allies imposing sweeping sanctions against Russia due to the Ukraine War and US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in 2022, China decided to dispatch forces from army, navy, and air force to participate in Russia’s “Vostok-2022” joint exercises which stand as a demonstration for both countries countering US suppression together.

Despite shared incentives for cooperation, tensions persist between both powers, particularly due to the competitive overlapping between Russia’s Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) initiative and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China’s BRI. Though they seem to choose cooperation over competition (Sahakyan & Zheng, 2024), within the SCO framework, Russia has consistently approached China’s growing influence in Central Asia with caution and has covertly obstructed certain cooperation projects between China and Central Asia. As a result, while China-Russian leadership within the SCO has yielded some progress in regional security and economic collaboration, Russia’s concern over China dominating regional trade and investment—thereby undermining Russia-led projects such as the EAEU—has limited its enthusiasm for further institutionalizing the SCO.

Nevertheless, as the US continues to reinforce its maritime alliance network with Japan, South Korea and certain ASEAN countries in Asia-Pacific, interactions among China, Russia, Iran and North Korea have increasingly been labeled by US as the systemic competitors or even

the potential counter-alliance to US-led camp (Gates, 2023; Kendall-Taylor & Fontaine, 2024). Especially following Iran's formal accession to the SCO in 2022, the China-Russia-Iran axis has maintained close relations and frequent coordination on major international issues. A notable example is the joint communiqué issued at the 2024 Islamabad SCO Summit which declared that "unilateral sanctions violate international law." From some perspective, this statement reflects a coordinated continental response—led by China, Russia, and Iran—to US efforts to constrain the strategic space available to land powers. Whether this continental alliance will eventually narrow the structural gap between land and sea powers remains an open question, one that requires continued long-term observation.

More symbolically, since SCO established in 2001 including Uzbekistan, it never accepts new member until 2014. Even accepting Mongolia, India, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan as observer states starting in 2004, then Belarus (which became an observer in 2015), Sri Lanka, Turkey, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, Armenia, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Maldives, Myanmar, UAE, and Bahrain as dialogue partners since 2008, the SCO approval of the *Procedure for Granting Member State Status* in 2014 show a crucial step and implicate that the Central Asia would not yet as its geographic and political core. After India and Pakistan became full members in 2017, this expansion expresses striking significance as it covers 40% of the world's population and 20% of its GDP in the strategically critical Eurasia-South Asia landmass (Yuan, 2022). After Iran joining in 2021, Belarus was accepted to bring SCO total membership to ten by 2024.

It is evident that the SCO's three rounds of membership expansion reflect not only intensifying geopolitical competition, but have profound implications. First, though the SCO maintained a sustained strategic focus on Central Asia affairs in 2001-2016 and reaffirmed in the 2022 summit declaration which still identified this region as the "core area," the admission of India and Pakistan still extended its influence into South Asia. Along with its role in the BRICS group and the China-India-Russia trilateral framework, India's joining SCO implicates US's efforts for inviting New Delhi to check China's challenges in Indo-Pacific could be certain restrained. In the same time, India's participating the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member might further suggest it was attracted to the potential economic and security benefits from the China-led organizations. Then, the admission of Iran as member, and the designation of Egypt and Saudi Arabia as dialogue partners have enabled the SCO to stretch its strategic influence into the Middle East (Lukin & Novikov, 2021). Especially with the inclusion of India—an key actor in South Asia, the SCO now "spans east to west from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea, and north to south from the Arctic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, granting the organization a wholly new perspective for engaging with the Greater Eurasian region"(Alimov, 2018a), which significantly reinforced its identity as a Eurasian platform while diluting its earlier Central Asian orientation and positions at the forefront of Eurasia's geopolitical and economic transformation (Yefremenko, 2019).

The SCO Summit produced the *Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation* and the *Agreement on the Facilitation of International Road Transport* as early as 2001 affirming its commit to deepening economic collaboration (Scott-Smith, 2020). They were institutionalized through the establishment of bodies such as the Interbank Consortium and the Business Council, which helped reframe the SCO's role for advancing Eurasia's advantages. Furthermore, the SCO's growing focus on mutually beneficial trade and infrastructural connectivity has strengthened Eurasian integration in shaping the future global economic development (Alimov, 2018b). At least, by maintaining China-Russia primacy, the above SCO expansion serves as a strategic counterweight to the US's efforts to consolidate containment through traditional alliances and through mechanisms like the QUAD.

As a maritime power, US has long exhibited a strategic preference for expanding its presence

across the Pacific by establishing forward military bases, and this approach enabled to secure its homeland while projecting power globally (Green, 2012). According to the official statement released in 2024, US now faces strategic challenges from three major adversaries: China, North Korea, and Russia. Though still maintain maritime military supremacy, US's dominance is actually and increasingly being contested. China has systematically invested in global port infrastructure, maritime logistical hubs, and dual-use assets such as armed fishing fleets. Worth noting is that Russia possesses the third-largest navy in the world with particular advantages in nuclear submarines and oceanographic research vessels. Since 2012, China and Russia have institutionalized their naval teamwork through the "Joint Sea" series of maritime exercises (Paul, 2019), which signaling similar geopolitical ambitions, promoting the implementation of maritime strategies, and offering a quiet stable basis for bilateral naval interoperability. These developments collectively pose a substantial threat to US existing maritime dominance, and even its global hegemony.

To response the new geo-strategic challenge, current US strategy toward China closely mirrors its Cold War approach to the Soviet Union, based on the premise that maintaining a balance of power in Eurasia requires sustained and calibrated military deployments (Gray, 2015), in particular the inclusion of the area surrounding Japan (Schreer, 2019). According to US version of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, this entails reinforcing military deployments and base infrastructure centered around the First Island Chain, while also enhancing maritime capabilities led by the US Navy. These efforts are foundational to preserving US maritime superiority. Recognizing the urgency of sea control and emerging geopolitical crises, the US Navy, Indo-Pacific Command, and other service branches jointly released the 2020 official report which outlines an operational concept designed to deter and, if necessary, defeat China and other adversarial challenges to US command of the seas. In response to the intensifying threat to its maritime dominance, US has accelerated the formation of mini-lateral coalitions (Henke, 2017), such as the US-Japan-Philippines and US-Japan-South Korea frameworks which aim to heighten bloc-based competition and facilitate resource sharing, then reinforce the connective infrastructure and military capabilities of the US-led Indo-Pacific system. While these developments have significantly raised geopolitical tensions, the Ukraine War since its outbreak in 2022 has further deepened the rift between the US and Russia and strengthened strategic coordination between China and Russia. This evolving alignment now increasingly pits US-led maritime powers—including Japan and Australia—against the land powers, most notably China and Russia (and the regime led by them, such as SCO) in a more confrontational geostrategic configuration.

Conclusion: A New Geopolitical Image?

As many observers have noted, the depth and breadth of the SCO's economic cooperation remain less developed than in the realm of non-traditional security significantly. About its next step, we may focus on several key variables as following: first and most important, the two principal powers—China and Russia—not only differ in their attitudes toward trade and energy issues, but never really reached a concrete consensus on coordinating economic strategies within SCO actually. For instance, China is enthusiastic for promoting transnational infrastructure agreements and has spearheaded the signing of the *Agreement on the Facilitation of International Road Transport* since 2014 aiming to reduce cross-border barriers and support its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Russia, however, has consistently shown reluctant to engage with above agreement. Similarly, Russia is unwilling to relinquish control in the energy sector. Nevertheless, the origin of SCO was rooted in a shared China-Russian interest in jointly managing Central Asia

which leading to its founding in 2001. The multilateral coordination on counterterrorism provided a confidence-building effect, which—when coupled with wave of economic globalization and regional integration—offered the SCO an opportunity to spillover its effects from security into economic sphere. What more crucial is that, though the interest gap between both countries has been narrowed due to facing US together, and as Robert D. Kaplan argued that China, by consolidating continental power, could extend its influence into maritime domains (Kaplan, 2010), the current reality suggests otherwise. Comparing to the US-led coalition of maritime powers—especially Japan and Australia—the combined strength of China and Russia still reflects a significant imbalance. Even with more close coordination, the observable geopolitical configuration still indicates that the continental bloc may be still unable to match the strategic capabilities of the US-led power in the near future.

The second one is the uncertain US global strategy. According to the principle of “chase the enemy when they escape” and following the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the SCO began advancing institutional expansion including start to absorb new members and approve the accession of India and Pakistan officially in 2016. The subsequent withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for Iran’s nuclear issue in 2018 and retreat from Afghanistan in 2021, set the stage for the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group playing more active role and then Iran—who played a traditional role in Central Asia for a long time (Altynbek et al., 2025)—accepted as full member in 2022. The organization has increasingly taken on characteristics reminiscent of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War era, gradually embodying a form of counter-alliance. Since Iran’s join the SCO officially in 2023, it has rapidly deepened its interactions with key SCO members. For example, the China-Russia-Iran joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman which began in 2019, illustrate a obvious growing trend of trilateral security cooperation aimed at safeguarding shared strategic interests.³ As former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley had warned, China, Russia, and Iran would perhaps be a problem for the US “for many years to come” as the three are working more closely, and it could pose a serious challenge finally to the US-led global order, especially the new Trump administration since 2025 seems to show obvious sign for reducing US’s overseas promise and concentrate on its own domestic economic issue, though Iran’s admission into the SCO still affirms growing US concerns that these continental powers—represented by China, Russia, and perhaps also Iran—may be forming the credible counterweight in the future for contesting and potentially reshaping the existing maritime-centric world map.

Some recent events suggest that the SCO’s focus has been gradually shift from geopolitics toward geo-economics. A notable indicator of this trend was the joint public statement issued in 2023 by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan expressing support for China’s BRI, only India remained the member state never declared support for the initiative till now. This shift was further underscored by the 2024 SCO Summit which concluded with the issuance of the Astana Declaration, called for greater unity in confronting various geopolitical conflicts and reflected China and Russia’s intention to use the SCO as a platform for gradually expanding their involvement in military, political, trade, and investment matters in the Middle East. Such engagement allows Beijing and Moscow to channel strategic resources into the overland “middle corridor” of the Silk Road, beginning in China’s Xinjiang region. As observers point out, not only the heavy sanction pressure from West has encouraged the China-Russia relations as a “historic high” after the outbreak of Ukraine War in 2022, in the wake of Donald Trump’s victory in the 2024 election, but US launching a global tariff war which seems to express a willingness to resume hegemonic duties also offered a crucial variable to the current global geopolitics. Such as Barry Posen argued, the US has grown incapable of moderating its ambitions and preferred to conclude it grand strategy as unnecessary, counterproductive, costly,

and wasteful (Posen, 2015). One of the result is that the postwar liberal international order (LIO) which created largely by US has regarded outdated since the first Trump administration (Stokes, 2018). Though the new Indo-Pacific strategy since 2017 still showed effort to defend the decline of its primacy, a shifting global distribution of power and wealth from West to East may prompt the US to reembrace isolationism and retreat from its global leadership.

The third point is, as US's potential strategic retreat may loosen its containment to the World Island, the expansion of SCO in almost the same time will offer what implication to the Eurasian geopolitics. Furthermore, if Halford Mackinder's famous concept that "who rules the heartland commands the World-Island, and who rules the World-Island commands the world" (Mackinder, 1996), will work in the future? It is worth to note that, though Romanov Russia and its successor Soviet Union had controlled the heartland (Central Asia) and the latter even owned East Europe as sphere of influence, both show as failure cases to the Mackinder's hypothesis due to the Great Game with Britain and US's successful containment which also reflect the dominant position of maritime power. If US really abnegate policy to contain Eurasia in the future, it is perhaps hard to image another maritime power to assume this strategic job, not to mention that the environment of sea use has undergone geopolitical changes in recent decades (Allahverdizadeh, 2023). In the same time, though the SCO based on China-Russia joint management to Central Asia may offer an emerging approach for governing Eurasian geopolitical order, it looks obviously different from the Mackinder's concept due to its multilateral character rather than single leadership. Moreover, except the SCO itself still need further institutionalization, if US would really give up its strategy to monitor the World Island remains uncertain, and more crucially, the final key factor would be the prospect for China-Russia coordination. Even China and Russia need each other to jointly counterbalance the US, this couple still face a serious of challenges, including the inner contradiction of both national interests, the next step of Trump's "reverse Nixon" strategy, the uncertain position of EU in transatlantic alliance and the US-China competition.

Finally, the development of some ongoing vital conflict, especially the continuing Ukraine War since 2022 and the US's sudden attack to Iran in early 2026, must offer other uncertain variable to the Eurasian geopolitics. Since China seems to stand by Russia in the Ukraine case, and the SCO expresses its serious concern over the Iran situation, though it is still hard to predict the next scenario of US's Middle East policy, the SCO under China-Russia coordination will show its influence to the geopolitical stability in Eurasia. As the 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin highlighted the growing relevance of this framework as a forum for consolidating regional stabilization and strategic coordination in facing recent global turmoil, and offered signal for against US foreign policy postures in Eurasia, it is meaningful to keep watching the growing role of SCO in facing the uncertain new world order.

AI Acknowledgment

Generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete essential authoring tasks in this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in this research.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The Shanghai *Five's* members includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and China.
2. In September 1992, plenipotentiary representatives of the five governments held joint negotiations in Minsk, the capital of Belarus. In February 1993, the Chinese working group and the joint delegation of the other four countries convened in Moscow for talks on their respective border issues. In May 1994, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin visited China and signed seven major agreements, including the *Agreement on the Management of the China–Russia Border Regime*. In September of the same year, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Russia to sign the *Agreement on the Western Section of the China–Russia Border*.
3. Since the launch of economic and security cooperation between China and Iran in 2020, bilateral relations have grown increasingly close. Meanwhile, Western sanctions imposed on Russia following the 2014 Crimea crisis and the 2022 Russia–Ukraine conflict have further incentivized Iran and Russia to strengthen their cooperation in response to shared external pressures.

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