

# Sino-Russian Security Cooperation Within Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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**Abstract**—This article focuses on the Sino-Russian security cooperation within the SCO. The authors consider the security cooperation as the one of the most important parts of bilateral relationships of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a platform which was founded for Central Asia regional safety. Both China and Russia have an interest in preserving stability of Central Asia, which makes the SCO a unique and promising platform for Sino-Russian security cooperation. The authors come to conclusion that, although these states have different senses of the SCO future prospects, as the unofficial leaders they can morph it into more effective mechanism for their own cooperation by the way of combining their interests with mutual concessions and interaction with another regional organizations.

**Keywords**—China; Russia; cooperation; security; threat; the SCO

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, an important anniversary will be celebrated — 70 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. Both states closely interact with each other on the bilateral level and within the framework of international organizations for many years. The cooperation in terms of defense and security is one of the most important part of their relations. It was made possible thanks to the complete demarcation of the Sino-Russian border. After military collisions in the end of 1960s, which almost detonated the war, Soviet former President Gorbachev began to ease tensions between the countries. The problem had been solving during 1990s, and in 2004 Russian President Vladimir Putin and former President of China Jian Zeming signed some agreements that allowed settling a case of boundary demarcation. In addition, Beijing and Moscow signed a number of agreements that created a demilitarized zone on both sides of the border. The Crimea crisis in 2014,

when Western countries imposed sanctions against Russia, also was a great success for their collaborative relationship: the crisis allowed Russian party to strengthen relations with other influential international player — China. Beijing has become a strategic partner for Moscow, and only with this country Russia has strengthened cooperation in all areas, in particular in the sphere of military training, arms sales, Arctic security, cyber security, as well as security on the territory and border of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states.

The SCO was founded in 2001 as a result of the Shanghai Five, which was founded in 1996 and included Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China. (The name change occurred with the addition of Uzbekistan in 2001) The initial goal of the Shanghai Five was relatively simple: to identify the disputed borders of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, both with each other and with China. But as soon as this task was completed, the organization began to look for a new goal. In the end, its gaze turned to multilateral security concerns in the region.

## II. SINO-RUSSIAN SECURITY COOPERATION: THE OUTLOOK

As noted above, the security cooperation is one of the most important part of the Chinese-Russian relationships. For these proposes the sales of Russian weapons to China should be noted as the major piece of this cooperation. The imposing of arms embargo on China by West after Tiananmen incident in 1989 forced Chinese party to buy Russian weapons. Russia has sold numerous weapons to China, such as submarines, destroyers, helicopters and jet engines, etc. [15]. There are some aspects in the sales of weapons that led to some tensions between the partners. For example, Russia blamed China for the reengineering of its weapons [14]. China is currently competing with Russia on the international arms market, and Moscow should consider

whether this situation launched a threat against Russian own security or not. In fact, China wants to develop its military industry more and more and not to depend on Russian arms imports, and Chinese government has already made a significant progress in this direction. However, the continuation of arms sales and its volume show bring to the front that such relationships are still strong and promising. Beijing is buying the most advanced Russian systems, including 24 Su-35 multi-role fighters [3]. China is also the first country to acquire the Russian S-400 air defense system, one of the most efficient in the world [17]. All of that doubtless enhance military potential of China.

Russia and China also held joint military exercises both on a bilateral level and multilateral level on the basis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The first large ground exercises, in which Russia and China, as well as the forces from five SCO member countries, participated, was in 2003 [19]. During the recent decades, eight missions of the SCO "Peace Mission" were held, and in almost a half of them included only Russia and China [25]. The first official bilateral naval exercises took place in the Yellow Sea in 2012 [10]. Since then, one or even more exercises have been held annually, increasing the level of complexity and coordination. It is noteworthy that in 2014 and 2015, Russian and Chinese naval vessels passed in the Mediterranean, demonstrating the wizardry of the both countries fleets [11]. Joint Sea 2016 was held in the sensitive area of South China Sea, showing that Russia is on side of Chinese position in the territorial dispute in this region [12]. In 2017 the Russian and Chinese fleets conducted maneuvers near the Russian border with North Korea [26] and on the Baltic Sea, carrying on a current tradition of holding military exercises with political stripe [20]. These naval drills not only improve the skill of two armies, but also shows Russian and China opponents the confidence level between these states.

However, the security cooperation between China and Russia based on not only arms sales or military exercises. Both countries consider the stability of their regimes as a top priority of their policies. In view of this, Sino-Russian security cooperation also focused on countering non-traditional security threats including color revolutions, cybernetic and information security, terrorism, and violent extremism. Chinese and Russian parties believe that subversions and color revolutions cause negative implications and serious challenges and are encouraged or even organized by the West. In this case, Russian and Chinese governments remain wary of non-governmental organizations funded from abroad which they see as threats, and conduct a similar hard-line policy towards such organizations. In the same way, China and Russia see threat in a cyber sphere. Beijing and Moscow consider cyber threats much more widely than other states, mostly because of information that could undermine or destabilize their regimes. In 2015, the governments of PRC and Russian Federation signed an agreement on cooperation in the field of global information security in which they agreed not to use cyber-attacks against each other, and in 2016 an additional agreement was signed, too [6]. Both countries conduct censorship and supervision on the Internet, which is

especially effective in China (much more effective and strict than in Russia). Besides, under the active actions of Moscow and Beijing the United Nations submitted "The International Code of Conduct for Information Security" [4] that stressed state sovereignty in the digital space above all else, and was based on the principle of national security and regime stability. Finally, Russia and China cooperate in countering terrorism and extremism. These two countries have established mechanism for holding regular consultation on strategic balance on deputy ministerial level and a counter-terrorism working group, and both sides are holding large-scale joint anti-terrorism exercises. In addition, China and Russia cooperate within the SCO and coordinate their positions on extremism within the framework of the BRICS.

## II. THE ROLE OF CHINA AND RUSSIA IN THE SCO

Over the past decade and a half, the SCO attention in different directions has been attracted by its largest and most influential members, Russia and China. There is no doubt that China and Russia are indisputably the two leading powers of the SCO. It can be said that the SCO acts to some extent as an additional platform for strategic interaction between China and Russia. In regard to the SCO, both countries formed their own strategic conceptual framework, which reflected not only the fundamental national interests of China and Russia, but also new challenges and opportunities in the region. Comparing the strategic concepts of China to Russian's in relation to the SCO, it seems obvious that these concepts have similar features. Firstly, both countries have a common goal in relation to the SCO. Purpose of both countries in the SCO is to ensure territorial integrity, promote economic growth in relatively underdeveloped regions, put the penetration of Western hegemonic countries in the region on hold, counter terrorism, separatism and extremism in Central Asia, establish economic relations and good neighborliness with the Central Asian countries, strengthen the position of the two countries in Central Asia. Secondly, both countries unanimously perceive the SCO as one of the important sites for the implementation of regional governance in Central Asia. The priorities of this diplomatic platform include the joint fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism, the prevention of domestic instability in the form of colored revolutions and restraining the negative interference of Western countries in the internal affairs of Central Asian states, etc. Third, China and Russia refer the SCO to a regional intergovernmental organization that is the mainstay of democratization and multipolar international relations. In this regard, it is clear that China and Russia do not lean toward to expand the composition of the SCO member countries in the near future. However, this does not mean that the SCO is a sheltered institution. On the contrary, China and Russia all the time contribute to increasing the openness and transparency of the SCO work and establish new forms of cooperation called "partner for dialogue" in order to effectively develop contacts with other countries or organizations in relevant fields. Fourth, long-term military presence of the US and NATO has a negative impact on regional stability in Central Asia. Because of this China and Russia should use the SCO as a new regional united force to restrain the spread of the US and NATO influence in the

region [16]. Despite the fact that China and Russia have different approaches to this phenomenon, the two countries do not allow United States to participate in the SCO, but at the same time do not allow the SCO to become an anti-American military-political coalition.

However, these two countries also have some points of difference in how they see the SCO oncoming focus. In Moscow, it was assumed that this organization would become a security alliance that would compete with NATO. Russia also highly appreciates its influence in the region and tries to expand it for the good of stabilization of the security situation at its eastern border. Meanwhile, Beijing wanted the SCO to become an economic platform with which it could expand its own influence in Central Asia, which worries Russian party. Russian and Chinese positions over the fight against what they call the “three vices”: terrorism, separatism and extremism, - also slightly diverse. The conflict between the two power plans slowed down the progress of the SCO, and for many years the members of the organization took few real steps. However, in recent years, the SCO is gaining momentum, as the views of its members on the value of cooperation in the field of economy and security gradually begin to level off. The growing threat to stability in the region is forcing the SCO members to coordinate more on the “three vices”. These are threats that all member states fear, both within their own countries and beyond. In 2014, five of the six members of the SCO - Uzbekistan was absent — gathered in China for the largest of the regular counter-terrorism exercises of the group, called peacekeeping missions [25]. About 7,000 troops, including ground, air and special forces, were trained in unmanned aircraft, early warning aircraft, air defense missiles, tanks and armored vehicles.

### III. THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF SINO-RUSSIAN SECURITY COOPERATION WITHIN THE SCO

Summarizing the above, we can say that the similarity and differences of the positions of China and Russia with respect to the SCO is determined by their foreign policy tradition. Starting from the imperial time and until today, the foreign policy tradition of Russia characterized by the principle “the European direction is more priority than the Asian one, the western direction is more priority than the eastern”. In this regard, the SCO, by adjusting the foreign policy tradition of Russia, is able to fill the weak link in the southern and eastern segments of the field of national security of Russia. China has a different foreign policy manner; for Chinese party, the north-west direction of its foreign policy looks more stable than the south-east direction. In the Chinese foreign policy agenda, the SCO is a tool for implementing the concept of “Harmonious society”, which was put forward by the former President of the PRC, Hu Jintao, in 2005. In short, China does not intend to build military bases in Central Asia. However, on the other hand, it also does not want to neglect its role in regional governance. It should be noted that Central Asia has already become a region in which special back-to-back relations of China and Russia are manifested in the sphere of ensuring national security. Being the only regional organization that includes

both China and Russia, the SCO is capable of deepening and expanding strategic cooperation and partnership between the two countries and settling the interests of countries in this region. However, in their essence, the strategic concepts of China and Russia in relation to the SCO do not always coincide with each other. The reason for this is seen in the fact that continuously expanding their interests in Central Asia, China and Russia will inevitably face some issues. First, unlike in Russia, China in Central Asia is a new and growing external player. Russia therefore considers China to some extent its potential rival in Central Asia and believes that the SCO brings China more benefits than Russia. Secondly, in the Russian understanding of the SCO, it boils down to a pivot point for the realization of multipolarity in international relations and counteraction to the US penetration into Central Asia as the zone of its special interests. However, in the perception of the Chinese leadership, the SCO is important for creating favorable prerequisites for development in the western, close to China, region in order to pursue a political course towards the realization of the task of “the great revival of the Chinese nation”. Therefore, among the Chinese and Russian experts and politicians there will always be discussions on the most favorable for each of them model of the development of the SCO in the future. In whole, it seems that China is clearly focused on internal development within the organization itself, and Russia - on the importance of the SCO at the regional and global levels. Based on the above, one can say that Russia has a dilemma of its further relations with the SCO. On the one hand, Russia is trying to take a leading place in the SCO, but it does not want to take responsibility for the socio-economic development of Central Asia. On the other hand, Russia seeks to fight with the United States for the geopolitical spheres of influence in Central Asia, using the power of China in the region. However, it also fears a gradual increase in the importance of China in Central Asia. Thus, according to many Russian experts, China’s energy cooperation with Central Asian countries is a challenge and a threat to Russia’s traditional status as a regional metropolis. Despite this, the implementation of Russia’s foreign policy interests at the global level continues to focus on interaction with leading geopolitical players such as China, India, Iran, etc. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that the deepening of integration processes within the SCO and the development of relations with China and India in the context of the new Central Asian geopolitical conditions for Russia is the stark choice. In our opinion, it seems certain that in the SCO China pays more attention to the economic component, and Russia - to ensure regional security [21]. It is accepted to recognize that the problems of economic development and regional security differ significantly from each other. When the problem of economic development is solved successfully, it always causes a more relaxed attitude to security in society; when the problem of regional security is solved successfully, this sphere becomes secondary, even unnecessary for the state life of this or that country. This situation can be observed, for example, in the Nordic countries.

One of the most important structures of the SCO, through which it is possible to trace the strengthening of security cooperation between the PRC and the Russian Federation, is



the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure with headquarters in Tashkent, which was established in 2004 [1]. According to the data presented in the speech of the SCO Secretary General Rashid Alimov at the conference on Russian-Chinese relations in the Russian International Affairs Council on May 31, 2016, 150 terrorist organizations were eliminated by the RATS and over a thousand members of international terrorist organizations were arrested, about 200 were criminalized men, unlawful possession of more than 2,000 weapons and explosive devices and 160,000 ammunition [2]. Moreover, 12 terrorist organizations and more than 200 people were additionally entered in the international register; the table of registration of persons involved in armed conflicts outside the SCO has been replenished by 1,246 participants [2]. In recent years, the work of preventing the propaganda of terrorist activities in cyberspace has been intensified, too. About 130 sites and more than 4500 photos of similar content were identified [23]. An effective mechanism for working out the opposition of the SCO member countries to the forces of terrorism, religious extremism and separatism was a series of anti-terrorism exercises, most of which were named "Peace Mission". Army and special units of the SCO states numbering up to 10 thousand people were involved in their conduct [18]. A special place in the interaction of the republics of Central Asia, Russia and China took neutralization of threats emanating from neighboring Afghanistan, including stopping drug trafficking, preventing the penetration of terrorist groups into the region, hostile to the legitimate authorities of the states of the "SCO region", and in the last year or two — supporters of the so-called "Islamic State Iraq and the Levant" (ISIS). The problems of promoting the transition of Afghanistan to the track of peaceful development have been repeatedly discussed in the SCO format and at special conferences held under the auspices of this organization. In recent years, China's participation in solving the problems related to Afghanistan has intensified in the framework of the Istanbul Process (its 14 participants also include Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). The new format of cooperation "China — Afghanistan — Tajikistan" is aimed at combating terrorism and cross-border crime. Negotiations are underway to attract Pakistan to it. It was noted and announced in 2016 by the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation S. Shoigu, who offers to assist Turkmenistan in strengthening its defense capability on the border with Afghanistan [23]. In whole, however, in the Russian expert community, the opinion that military-force cooperation within the framework of the SCO needs to be substantially expanded and deepened is very widespread. One of the most apparent areas here could be the establishment of cooperation between the SCO and the CSTO. At present, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is the main format for the practical interaction of Russia with Central Asian states to ensure strategic stability and security in the region. It was created on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty of 1992, which expired in 1999, and in 2002 acquired the status of an international regional organization [8]. The CSTO includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Belarus. In 2006–2012 CSTO consisted of

Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, which has had the status of a neutral state since 1995, does not maintain official contacts with the CSTO.

On June 9–10, 2018, the following summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was held at the International Congress Center of the Chinese city of Qingdao (Shandong Province). It had a symbolic meaning - the presence of a developed infrastructure, which plays an important role in Beijing's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and for its partners within the SCO. Following the talks, the leaders of China and Russia adopted a joint statement, according to which "in the conditions of growing instability and uncertainty in the world, the sides will continue to deepen consultations on strategic security issues, maintain an intensive dialogue between foreign ministries, and increase bilateral coordination at specialized international platforms. Russia and China intend to further increase strategic contacts and coordination between the Armed Forces of the two countries, improve the existing military cooperation mechanisms, expand cooperation in the field of practical military and military technical cooperation, jointly confront the challenges of global and regional security" [22]. In addition to several signed contracts, Russian President Vladimir Putin noted that the "feasibility study of a broad Eurasian Economic Partnership" agreed by the two countries. According to him, "this is <...> compatible with the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), which we are developing, and with the Chinese initiative "Silk Road" in its economic dimension in this case" [22]. Moscow and Beijing are also preparing an agreement on the Eurasian Economic Partnership, which is supposed to be open to all SCO members. Following the meeting, the leaders of the SCO member states approved 17 different documents, including the Qingdao Declaration, in which they confirmed that there was no alternative to the political process as a way out of the Syrian crisis and called on all conflicting parties to take steps to implement the de-escalation zones. The Ukrainian crisis also must be resolved by political means on the basis of the Minsk agreements [24]. The heads of the SCO states called on the participants of the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan on the Iranian nuclear program to fulfill their obligations under this transaction. Participants of the meeting in Qingdao refrained from open criticism of Washington's policy, which, not least of all, is the extremely complex and controversial thing for the current Chinese-American dialogue. However, the change in Beijing's position on the need to expand military-political cooperation within the framework of the SCO was obvious.

The growing danger of the spread of terrorist threats dictates the improvement of information exchange mechanisms on the cross-border movements of militants. As known, many immigrants from Central Asia and the neighboring Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China gained (and still receive) combat experience in Syria and Iraq, and more recently they are moving closer to the exit points and to the borders of China. In Qingdao, a decision to approve the Action Plan for 2018-2022 on the implementation of the provisions of the Treaty on Long-Term Neighborhood, Friendship and Cooperation of the

SCO Member States, as well as the document approving the Cooperation Program of the SCO Member States in countering terrorism, separatism and extremism in 2019-2021 years, was taken [5]. The Anti-Drug Strategy of the SCO Member States for the period up to 2023, the Action Program for its implementation, the Concept on the Prevention of the Abuse of Drugs and Psychotropic Substances have been approved [5]. Issues of healthcare, environmental safety and countering the use of information technologies for criminal purposes were not ignored. The right words were said about the inadmissibility of trade protectionism and for the general improvement of the climate of world trade.

As can be seen from the above, if the governments of the SCO member states develop it properly, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will play a strong role as a mechanism of regional stability. In this case Russia and China as unspoken — and also factual — leaders of the organization, should undertake a commitment to become the point men of upcoming institutional transformations. First of all, they should find the way to reduce their contradictions within the SCO. In our opinion this can be reached by combination of their own expectations from the SCO with, of course, mutual concessions. For instance, the development of economic cooperation within the organization can also be used as the instrument for fight with the “three vices” and other threats.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Sino-Russian bilateral relationship has been formed for 70 years already. During this entire period, their relationship has both ups-and-downs. However, the events of recent date, such as Crimea crisis, drew them together.

One of the most important part of Sino-Russian cooperation is security cooperation. Most of all it consists of Russian sales of weapons to China and also bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises, but they also realize the danger of non-traditional security threats such as color revolutions, non-governmental organizations funded from abroad, cyber threats and etc. The single role in the security cooperation of China and Russia play the Shanghai Cooperation organization (the SCO).

Since its formation, the SCO has been playing the more and more important role in Central Asia. Most of all it depends on the differences of Russian and Chinese approaches to the SCO way of development. The two countries have both like-mindedness and differences in their standings, and in the beginning the differences thwarted the progress of the cooperation within the SCO, but the consciousness of the threats that surrounding China and Russia in Central Asia made them to intensify the collaboration between the members of the organization. Nowadays it is a promising platform for intensification of cooperation to fight such threats as terrorism, extremism and separatism, which also known as the “three vices”.

The security cooperation between China and Russia within the frameworks of the SCO can and should be intensified, too. First of all it can be reached with such

mechanism as the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, which has already founded within the SCO, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which exists independently, but also can play a great role. Secondly, it should be reached by developing and extending of aims and goals of the SCO in concern with continually changing threats. These steps were taken during the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Qingdao, when the SCO members signed some agreements over the solution of Syrian, Ukrainian and Iranian crises. Finally, by mutual concessions China and Russia should combine their own interests in the region and the organization to grant them oncoming transformation. This will equate to not only use the SCO more effectively, but also intensify the cooperation between these two countries.

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