

# **The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)**

## **Summit in Astana: The Role of Kazakhstan and Implications for South Korea**

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In recent decades, China and Russia have sought to reduce American influence and shift economic and political gravity toward Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), initially created as a forum to address security issues and economic discussions in Central Asia, has gradually expanded to include major players such as India and Turkey. However, the organization faces internal cohesion due to differences in the interests of its members.<sup>1</sup>

### **The strategic goals of China and Russia in the SCO**

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China sees the SCO as an important tool for realizing its long-term strategic interests. China seeks to ensure stability in Central Asia, which is essential for the security of its western regions.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the SCO serves as a platform for promoting economic integration and implementing major infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>3</sup> Interaction with neighboring countries through the SCO allows China to promote its diplomatic initiatives and strengthen its position in the international arena.<sup>4</sup> One of China's key goals within the SCO is to reduce Western influence in Central Asia. This is achieved by strengthening

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<sup>1</sup> See:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150503173641/http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2001/05/04china-gill>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/chinese-policy-in-central-asia/>

<sup>3</sup> Azizi, S., 2024. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Geopolitical Security and Economic Cooperation. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 14, pp.111-129.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/chinese-view-on-the-expansion-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>

multilateral cooperation and promoting alternative development models.<sup>5</sup> China's promotion of alternative development models within the SCO suggests it is advocating for systems and strategies that may align more closely with non-interference in internal affairs, as opposed to the Western emphasis on democracy, human rights, and market liberalization.

Russia, similarly, actively participates in the activities of the SCO aimed at ensuring regional security. The SCO provides Russia with a platform to strengthen political and economic influence in Central Asia. Russia has been able to promote joint military exercises, such as the "Peace Mission" drills, which enhance its strategic ties with Central Asian states.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the organization supports initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which Russia leads, allowing it to deepen economic integration with countries in the region, thereby counterbalancing Western influence and fostering a sphere of influence aligned with Russian interests.<sup>7</sup>

## **Interaction between China and Russia within the SCO**

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China and Russia, despite differences in their strategic interests, find common ground and actively interact within the SCO. Both countries promote the idea of a multipolar world, where no single country or group of countries dominates the international arena.<sup>8</sup> China and Russia are implementing joint projects in the fields of infrastructure, energy and

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<sup>5</sup> See:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150503173641/http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2001/05/04china-gill>

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://tass.com/defense/1549833>

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://valdaicclub.com/a/highlights/sco-potential-for-expanding-and-deepening/>

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26270816>

security within the SCO.<sup>9</sup> The Russia-Kazakhstan-China gas pipeline is one example of joint infrastructure projects. The pipeline would help Russia, hit by Western sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine, boost sales of its energy and commodities in Asia while also ensuring that Kazakhstan secures supplies for its central, northern and eastern regions.<sup>10</sup>

Despite common goals, China and Russia compete for influence in Central Asia. China's economic power and aggressive investment policy may be a concern for Russia, which seeks to maintain its dominant position in the region. For example, China has invested heavily in building roads, railways, and energy pipelines that connect Central Asia with Chinese markets, thereby increasing its economic footprint and influence in these countries, which could challenge Russia's traditional dominance.<sup>11</sup>

China and Russia have different approaches to economic development and regional integration. China is actively promoting the BRI, while Russia is focused on developing the Eurasian Economic Union. These differences may create difficulties in coordinating economic policies within the SCO.

## **Results of the SCO Summit in Astana**

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The SCO summit, held in Astana in July 2024, was a landmark event demonstrating Kazakhstan's desire to strengthen its position as a key diplomatic platform in the region. The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-

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<sup>9</sup> Azizi, S., 2024. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Geopolitical Security and Economic Cooperation. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 14, pp.111-129.

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/kazakhstan-russia-map-out-gas-pipeline-china-2023-05-16/>

<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-megaprojects-central-asia-belt-road/33007345.html>

Jomart Tokayev pays special attention to the creation of negotiation platforms, as he has a great passion for diplomacy. In Kazakhstan, for this reason he is often called the “President of Foreign Affairs”.

The main purpose of the summit was not primarily decision-making, but rather to demonstrate cooperation between China and Russia within the framework of Astana. The summit became a symbolic gesture emphasizing the alignment of interests of the two major powers in the context of the SCO.

However, despite Kazakhstan’s desire to remain a neutral player between Russia, China, the US and the EU, there are a number of potential sanctions risks associated with the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Kazakhstan's position, although neutral, may be perceived differently by different parties to the conflict. If sanctions pressure on Russia from the US and EU increases, Kazakhstan may face several challenges. To be more exact, Kazakhstan may be at risk of sanctions if it continues to maintain economic ties with Russia.<sup>12</sup> Western countries may pressure Kazakhstan to take a more clear stance towards Russia, which could complicate its diplomatic efforts and multi-vector policies.<sup>13</sup>

To minimize these risks, Kazakhstan needs to continue active diplomacy aimed at maintaining neutrality, strengthening economic ties with various countries and organizations, as well as diversifying foreign economic partners. Therefore, Kazakhstan has to demonstrate that it has alternatives to Western partners. This includes developing trade and investment relations with other major economies such as China, India and the Middle East, as well as strengthening cooperation within regional and international organizations such as the SCO and the EAEU.

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<sup>12</sup> See: <https://thediomat.com/2023/06/kazakhstan-is-vulnerable-to-secondary-sanctions/>

<sup>13</sup> "Multi-vector policies" refer to Kazakhstan's strategic approach to foreign policy, where the country seeks to maintain balanced and diversified relationships with various global powers, such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union.

## Criticism

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During its existence, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has attracted significant attention at both the regional and international levels. Despite its success in strengthening cooperation between member countries and ensuring security in Central Asia, the SCO has also been criticized for a number of reasons.

One of the key problems of the SCO is the significant difference in the interests and priorities of member countries. China, Russia, India, Pakistan and other countries have their own strategic goals, which often do not coincide. This creates difficulties in making joint decisions and reduces the effectiveness of the organization.<sup>14</sup> Despite the existence of a common format for discussion and interaction, SCO member countries do not always manage to achieve unity and coordination in actions. Internal divisions often prevent effective measures to be taken to address regional problems, such as the fight against terrorism and extremism.<sup>15</sup>

The SCO positions itself as an important player in ensuring regional security, but its actual achievements in this area are questioned. Joint military exercises and counter-terrorism operations are often perceived as symbolic gestures that do not bring significant results in the fight against real security threats. One notable example of a joint military exercise within the SCO is the "Peace Mission" series, such as the "Peace Mission 2021" drills held in Russia.<sup>16</sup> These exercises aim to enhance cooperation and interoperability among SCO member states, showcasing a united front and improving mutual understanding. However, they are often

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<sup>14</sup> See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/07/sco-summit-china-russia?lang=en&center=russia-eurasia>

<sup>15</sup> See: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-russia-challenge-global-system/>

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234029.shtml>

criticized for their limited impact on real security threats. While they demonstrate symbolic unity and foster diplomatic ties, they frequently focus on controlled scenarios rather than addressing complex, real-world issues, and may fall short in disrupting actual terrorist networks due to differing strategic interests among member states.

Despite statements of intention to develop economic cooperation and integration, the SCO faces serious problems in this area. Protectionist measures and trade barriers between member countries limit the potential for increased trade and investment. For example, despite the Belt and Road Initiative promoted by China, some SCO member countries have expressed concerns about China's possible economic dominance in the region. The organization's decision-making processes are often opaque, and civil society does not have sufficient access to information about the activities of the SCO.

The SCO is often seen as an alternative to Western international organizations and as a tool to reduce Western influence in the region. This leads to criticism from Western countries, which see the SCO as an attempt to undermine the existing international order and promote authoritarian models of governance. Also, the SCO is criticized for its heavy dependence on China and Russia, which are the dominant members of the organization. This dependence may lead to the SCO becoming a tool for realizing the geopolitical ambitions of these countries, rather than a platform for equal cooperation of all participants.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-russia-challenge-global-system/>

## Implications for South Korea

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The SCO holds significant influence in Central Asia. South Korea, despite not being a member, has made a notable impact in the region through its soft power, including cultural exchanges, economic partnerships, and development aid. As the SCO's influence grows and the geopolitical landscape of Asia evolves, South Korea faces new challenges and opportunities to leverage its soft power and enhance its presence in Central Asia.

The strengthening role of the SCO and its efforts to counter Western influence may prompt South Korea to reassess its foreign policy towards Central Asia. As a key U.S. ally, South Korea faces new realities such as shifting geopolitical dynamics, increased economic competition driven by SCO-led projects, and the need to enhance strategic partnerships. Additionally, the SCO's focus on regional security challenges and its growing influence will require South Korea to adapt its diplomatic and soft power strategies to effectively engage with Central Asia.

South Korea will have to more actively look for partners and allies in Central Asia to strengthen its positions in order to further develop the growing markets of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Strengthening ties with Central Asian countries will help South Korea offset the influence of China and Russia and advance its strategic interests in maintaining its independence and multi-vector policy.

South Korea needs to be ready to adapt to the new geopolitical and economic conditions created by the SCO. This may include changing trade, investment and security strategies, as well as developing new formats for interaction with key players in Central Asia. For example, South Korea could consider creating an economic council in the South

Korea - Central Asia format, within which economic interests could be promoted and investment projects developed.

South Korea can explore new trade agreements and investment opportunities with Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan. Diversifying its trade partners and investment destinations can reduce dependency on traditional markets and enhance economic resilience. Collaborative efforts in cybersecurity, and disaster management can strengthen regional stability. Participation in energy infrastructure development projects, particularly hydropower, in Central Asia could provide South Korea with a strategic foothold in the region.

## **Conclusion**

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Kazakhstan's role in the SCO highlights the organization's potential and limitations. Kazakhstan, playing the role of a geopolitical mediator, economic partner and active participant in security issues, makes a significant contribution to the development of the SCO. However, the internal cohesion and effectiveness of the organization is challenged by the differences in the interests of its members.

For South Korea, the evolving dynamics of the SCO require a proactive approach to foreign policy and economic strategy. Active participation in the regional initiatives, strengthening ties with Kazakhstan and other SCO member countries can help promote the strategic interests of South Korea. In the context of a changing world order and efforts by China and Russia to reduce the influence of the West, South Korea needs to be flexible and ready for new challenges and opportunities that the SCO provides.

The development of the SCO has a significant impact on South Korea, despite its non-member status. Geopolitical shifts, changes in economic



policy, security concerns and the need for diplomatic engagement create both challenges and opportunities. South Korea needs to actively adapt to these changes, develop new partnerships and strengthen its position in the region to successfully cope with the challenges and opportunities provided.

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