

Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A NATO of The East

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Abstract

By the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was dissolved, the Warsaw Pact has been abolished and constituent republics under the Soviet influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus emerged as independent post-soviet states. Although Russia, which did not want to lose its influence over the region, wanted to continue its influence in the region by establishing the *Commonwealth of Independent States*, the gap of the emerging power was honored in the interest of non-regional actors. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was established under the leadership of Russia and The People's Republic of China (PRC) and defined as the “*NATO of the East*” and “*Western-style organization*” against the unilateral world order imposed by The United States of America (USA), emerged as the Shanghai Five in 1996 and in 2001 with the accession of Uzbekistan, a political, economic and military organization has been transformed into an institutional structure. In June 2017, the characteristic structure of the organization was transformed by the membership of India and Pakistan. Among members of SCO in South East Asia, Central Asia, Near East and Europe, two of them are permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council. The organization harbors 4 nuclear-armed states and covers 40% of the world's population. The total limit between the member countries and the observer countries is 37 million square kilometers. Russia and PRC are among the top three largest military forces in the world. On the other hand, Russia is the energy exporter with the largest arms trade volume; while Uzbekistan,

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Iran and Kazakhstan are energy suppliers in the region, both India and PRC are the countries that export this energy. The process of the SCO's evolution has been an important parameter in global competition and has led to controversy in the international literature as rival organization to NATO. In this context, the main objective of the study is to discuss whether the SCO will turn into a NATO-like organization.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, NATO, Russia, People's Republic of China, United States of America

INTRODUCTION

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Cold War ended, the Warsaw Pact against North Atlantic Treaty Organization(NATO) was annulled and many states in Central Asia and the Caucasus became independent.¹The end of solid political domination brought about by the bipolar system revealed the power gap in the region. The states that won their independence were exposed to religious and ethnic problems, economic difficulties, inequities in income distribution, problems caused by national identities and environmental pollution, political pressures, rapid population growth, intense migration from rural areas to cities, nepotism, bribery and corruption, and natural resources, had to fight these emerging conflicts (Yardımcıoğlu ve Koçarslan, 2012: 164).

Emerged changes in the region transformed the policies of both regional actors and global actors. Indeed, 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO has pursued in Eastern Europe towards the enlargement policy (Hoffman, 2008: 11), Turkey seeking to increase its influence in the region, pioneered the establishment the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)², the effort to improve Russian Commonwealth's relations with states

¹States that gained independence in Central Asia; In Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the states that gained their independence in the Caucasus are Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia.

²Founded on June 1992 the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation members are Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Albania, Romania and Serbia. The BSEC aims to diversify and further develop its bilateral and multilateral economic, technological and social relations, taking advantage of the potentials of its member countries, their geographical proximity, and their complementary economies, as well as to ensure peace, stability and prosperity, encouraging friendly and good-neighborly relations in the Black Sea region. To achieve this aim, the chosen instrument is economic cooperation (BSEC, 2018)

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region through Community (Kubicek, 2009: 244) and rapprochement with Russia and the PRC has come into question (Li, 2007: 477-478). The regional integration efforts that have become more evident in the region stem from the desire to take measures against security problems in the region and to be the decisive force in global energy policies.

The gap of power that emerged after the Soviet has been tried to be filled by the regional and non-regional actors and the organizations formed in the context of economic, political and security tried to solve this gap. The SCO, which found itself in such a conjuncture, constitutes the cornerstone of this study. In this context, the main purpose of the study is to discuss whether the SCO can be considered as a NATO. This study, has been divided into four sections based on a historical and chronological readings and it will be discussed taking into account the discussions found in scholarly writings. The first section constitutes the establishment, development, institutional structure, purpose and objectives of the Organization; the second section for the reason of States' participation and expectations; the third will discuss the USA's view of the SCO and its relations with Russia and PRC, and in the final section, the capabilities of the SCO to become as a NATO will be examined.

I) FROM REGIONAL COOPERATION TO INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**1.1. From The Shanghai Five to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

PRC was established by Mao Zedong after the communist win over the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Although PRC was recognized by the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, the PRC's bilateral relations with the Soviet Union began to erode. The Soviet Union remained neutral, especially in the question emerging between the PRC and India; in 1959, the Soviet leader, Khrushchev's

rapprochement with the US and his attitude contrary to the policies of PRC; Damansky (*Zhenbao*) island conflict on the Ussuri River in 1969 (Gerson, 2010: 22-27); the aim of the PRC to resolve its ideological differences from the Soviet Union, to head the leadership of Communism and to improve its relations with third world countries developed the problems between the PRC and the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Ryabushkin, 2007: 76-78).

In the post-Cold War era, the efforts to fill the gap of power resulted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union by regional and global actors, concern for the existence of the US in the region, richness of the region in terms of energy and natural gas resources, border problems and maximizing the interests of regional actors such as PRC and Russia, have accelerated regional cooperation and integration initiatives. In this context, the Shanghai Five was formed with the *Agreement on strengthening confidence building measures in the border area*, which was signed on 26 April 1996 by PRC, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Haas, 2007: 247). This Agreement was accepted as the constitutive document of the SCO and entered into force. The States Parties to the Agreement undertook to withdraw their military assets a hundred kilometers in order to eliminate the environment of insecurity and to maintain the military presence in the border areas only within the framework of the detective measures (Büyükbaş, 2006: 565). In 1997, at the summit held in Moscow, the “*Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions*” was signed. In order to prevent treaty tensions and mutual distrust, it is provided to reduce the military forces at the borders, to inform the member states of the military exercises/trials at the borders in advance and to establish transparent relations in the relations between the member states (Akihiro, 2004: 262-263). At the summit held in Almaty in 1998, the biggest obstacle to regional security was emphasized as acts of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, drug trafficking and ethnic separatism (Yuan, 2010:

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861). At the summit held in Bishkek in 1999, the establishment of *anti-terrorism center* was approved and it was decided to establish regular and institutionalized channels for the foreign policy, defense, public security and protection of borders among member states (Yuan, 2010: 861). The last summit held prior to the establishment of the SCO was Dushanbe Summit in 2000. The US declaration of the *Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty* signed with the Soviet Union was considered by the top member states as the imposition of a US unipolar order (Bakshi, 2002: 266). The attitude towards unipolarity in the Dushanbe Summit is important for the strategic transformation from the regional security architecture to the unified security architecture (Erol, 2001: 72).

1.2. Establishment, Development and Organizational Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The SCO is an inter-governmental organization established on 15 June, 2001 with the participation of Kazakhstan, PRC, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan which joined later in 2001. In June 2017, the organization has increased the number of its members to eight by the participation of India and Pakistan. In addition to the permanent members, four members; Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia are observers Turkey, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Armenia and Sri Lanka form six dialogue partners (Maduz, 2018: 7-8). The SCO that emerged against Western hegemony was defined with names such as “*NATO of the East*” (Weitz, 2007: 104) and “*Western-style organization*” (Pushkina and Zincavage, 2011: 3) and had its own exclusive characteristic features. Indeed, two members of the SCO (Russia and PRC) are permanent members of the UN Security Council. The organization harbors 4 nuclear-armed states (PRC, Russia, India and Pakistan) and covers 40% of the world's population.³ The total limit between the member states and the

³ According to 2018 data, the population of the member states is as follow: Russian Federation: 142,122,776, People's Republic of China: 1,384,688,986, Kazakhstan:

observer countries is 37 million square kilometers.⁴ Russia and PRC are among the top three largest military forces in the world. On the other hand, Russia is the energy exporter with the largest arms trade volume; while Uzbekistan, Iran and Kazakhstan are energy suppliers in the region, both India and PRC are the countries that export this energy. (Haas, 2007: 259).

In 2002, the member states convened in the city of *St. Petersburg* and signed the charter of the Organization. The main objective of the organization according to this charter: i) strengthening mutual trust, friendship and goodneighborliness between the member States; ii) development of multifaceted cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace; iii) security and stability in the region and promotion of a new democratic; iv) joint combating terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations, fighting against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking and other types of transnational criminal activity; v) promoting enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with the international obligations of the member States and their national legislation (The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2018). In the *Moscow Declaration* in 2003, the Moscow Declaration emphasized the necessity of resolving international problems by the UN Security Council, it has been suggested that change of UN security policies is essential and it was decided to open the Anti-Terrorism Center in Tashkent until 2004 (Altundağ, 2010: 21-23). 2004 The Anti-Terrorism Center was opened at the Tashkent Summit and Mongolia joined the SCO with observer

18,744,548, Kyrgyzstan: 5,849,296, Tajikistan: 8,604,882, Uzbekistan: 30,023,709, India: 1,296,834,042 and Pakistan: 207,862,518 (CIA Factbook, 2018)

⁴ The geographical area covered by the member countries is as follow: People's Republic of China: 9,596,691; Russian Federation: 17,098,691; Kazakhstan: 2,724,900; Kyrgyzstan: 199,951; Tajikistan: 143,100; Uzbekistan: 447,400; India: 3,287,263, Pakistan: 796,095 km square (CIA Factbook, 2018).

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status. At the 2005 *Astana Summit*, India, Pakistan and Iran joined the organization as observers. At the 2006 *Shanghai Summit*, Iran joined the “*leader-level*” summit despite being an observer member. At the 2007 *Bishkek Summit*, a consensus was reached that the terror and conflicts that emerged and became widespread with globalization could be carried to a peaceful dimension under the leadership of the UN. At the *Summit of Dushanbe* in 2008, issues such as the peaceful solution of the South Ossetia and the dissemination of human rights were discussed. In the *Yekaterinburg Summit* of 2009, Belarus and Sri Lanka were accepted as dialogue partners and in 2010 the Tashkent Summit was held. At the 2011 *St. Petersburg Summit*, while Afghanistan became member with observer status, Turkey has been included in the 2012 *Beijing Summit* as dialogue partner to the Organization. Summit held in *Dushanbe* 2014, *Ufa* 2015 and *Tashkent* 2016 highlighted the importance of combating terrorism, extremism and separatism. With the 2017 *Astana Summit*, India and Pakistan have become permanent members of observer status (The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2018).

The Heads of State Council, which is the most important organ of the SCO, meets once a year, all decisions are made and instructions are given here. *The Heads of Government Council*, which meets once a year on a regular basis, is a secondary sub-mechanism in which economic and other key areas of cooperation, strategy development and annual budget preparation are addressed. The organization has two permanent organs. These Beijing-based *SCO Secretariat* and the *Regional Anti-Terrorism Center* in Tashkent. The Secretary General of the SCO and the director of the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Center are elected by the heads of state for a period of three years. Since January 1, 2016, Rashid Alimov (Tajikistan) has been the Secretary General of SCO, and Yevgeny Sysoyev (Russia) is the director of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Center Executive Committee. In addition, the organizational structure of the SCO includes the *Council of*

Representatives, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Council of National Coordinators responsible for the organization and coordination of the Organization (The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2018).

II. EXPECTATIONS OF THE MEMBER STATES AND SHANGAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

“Conflict and cooperation” is the basis of the international system and regional sub-systems in the discipline of international relations (Büyükbaş, 2006: 555). The international system is a structure composed of states, whose basic elements are separated by certain boundaries and have regular and dependent relations between them (Ari, 2008: 493). States are, by their nature, rational actors. In this context, the SCO’s interest perceptions and attitudes of the member states are among the leading conditions in ensuring the continuity of the cooperation.

For Russia, which tends to minimize the effects of USA and NATO in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the USA is a strategic threat. Because it is in an effort to preserve the area of influence through the *“near abroad doctrine”*, which is a new form of relationship between Russia and other republics of the former Soviet Union. The most natural reflection of this, is the SCO. This initiative of Russia emerged as an effort to create a multi-polar world against the unipolar world order. Russia, which wants to balance the US concern with PRC, aims to regain its lost prestige through the SCO. In addition, with the SCO, Russia aspires i) to play the role of balance between East and West; ii) be a strategic partner with Central Asian countries; iii) to establish a safe, economic, political and social space; iv) to stimulate trade with regional countries (Mokhtari, 2002: 9001); v) to prevent the criticism of the West and the USA against human rights violations, especially in the Chechnya issue; vi) to set a basis for NATO's enlargement policies (Stobdan, 2008: 528); and vii) to bring fundamentalist

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approaches, separatist acts and international terrorism to the security umbrella with SCO (Özdaşlı, 2012: 111).

The PRC has adopted the protection of the status quo and resolving the problems within the framework of reconciliation and cooperation until it reaches the power it targets, rather than revisionist actions in its foreign policy. With this kind of political approach, PRC aims to increase the capacity of political, economic and military power. Giving importance to these policies in the context of the SCO, the PRC aims i) to establish peaceful friendly relations with Central Asian states, while trying to maintain the status quo in various fields (trade, economy, such as transport and energy) (Bakshi, 2002: 270); ii) to solve border disputes under the most reasonable conditions (Stobdan, 2008: 527); iii) to restrain the separatist structures and extremist groups in Turkestan and Taiwan; iv) to take Central Asia as a strategic base among its political priorities (Laumulin, 2006: 10-11). Furthermore, PRC aims v) to create a multi-polar world in the framework of strategic cooperation with Russia against unipolar imposition of the US; vi) to establish a set against NATO in the western borders of PRC (Carroll, 2011: 2-3); vii) to create a safe environment for achieving economic development and to shape energy supply sources around their energy needs; viii) to form a political bloc together with Russia and to change Central Asia under its control (Mokhtari, 2012: 9001; Cohen, 2006: 2-4).

The Central Asian states, together with the SCO, need to continue their independence by neutralizing the negative effects of the PRC and Russia in the region, to increase their prestige by taking part in an international organization, to ensure the continuity of regional cooperation and stability, to improve the trade between the member states (especially PRC), to meet the need for security environment, to eliminate the economic problems, to ensure the continuity of the reforms and to eliminate terrorist, extremist and separatist acts as the

three great evils (Mokhtari, 2012: 9000-9001; Maksutov, 2006: 14-26).

With the 2017 Astana Summit, India and Pakistan's membership to the SCO is important to enable the settlement of border conflicts between the two countries through dialogue and to ensure regional peace (Rowden, 2018: 7). On the other hand, India and Pakistan's membership to the SCO has been seen as a tool by Russia to balance the PRC (Rowden, 2018: 7-8). The main expectations of India and Pakistan to join the organization were to make military cooperation on terrorism and to ensure the safety of TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline (Vasudeva, 2018: 3-4; İsmayıl, 2017: 2-3).

III. THE VIEW OF THE USA ON THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND RELATIONS WITH THE RUSSIA- PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

In the early years of the Shanghai process, the SCO, which was ignored by the USA, was interpreted by some analysts as the futile efforts of Russia and PRC. However, the Central Asian states and other states request to join the SCO, being accepted in 2004 to SCO as a member observer status for Mongolia which has established a close relationship with the USA, Turkey and South Korea's intention to take part in the SCO, the fact that Iran, India and Pakistan were included in the SCO as observer members in 2005 changed the US and the West's view of the SCO completely (Lukin, 2007: 149).

The West's unstable attitude towards the SCO has caused the USA to increase its influence in the region (Bakshi, 2002: 272). Particularly after September 11, the relations between the US and Russia focused on international terrorism and the war in Afghanistan. The United States needed Russia's support for two reasons to implement its policies in the region: i) the military activity of Russia in the region and ii) the experience gained in the war with Afghanistan

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during the Soviet Union is one of the most important components of this support. Russia, on the other hand, has favored cooperation with the USA to maintain its influence in Central Asia and to eliminate the blurring of the crisis in Chechnya (Çolakoğlu, 2004: 182-183). In the context of the fight against terrorism, the USA established a military base in Uzbekistan's Hanabat, but the US's secret support of the events of Andican abused its relations with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan, moving away from the USA, made rapprochement with Russia, the base of Hanabat, which was allocated to the USA was closed, it also became a party to the *Collective Security Treaty Organization* and played an active role in the *Eurasian Economic Community* (Yesevi, 2013: 2). Relations between the United States and the PRC developed at a strategic partnership and visits between the two countries pioneered cooperation in the field of economy, trade and energy. The PRC established close relations with the United States after North Korea declared it had nuclear weapons. The convergence with the initiative of the USA, PRC became a member of the *World Trade Organization* (Ekrem, 2011) though it has brought cooperation, the distrust between the two states has been manifested under the SCO umbrella.

The leading actors of the SCO, Russia and PRC's first problem with the USA is the NATO's enlargement policy towards Eastern Europe. NATO's enlargement policy is contrary to the "*near abroad doctrine*" that Russia declared as a vital area of interest for the economy and security of the former Soviet Union in 1993 (Kibarlıoğlu, 2001: 97-98; Tellal, 2010: 206). The second problem; Russia's (Chechnya) and PRC's (Urumqi, Tibet and Xinjiang) are subject to harsh criticism by Western and USA for human rights abuses (Kasım, 2009: 140-141; Ekrem, 2010; Çolakoğlu, 2004: 188). The third problem; The unilateral sanction decisions by the USA in the post-Cold War period have caused the reaction of North Korea, Yugoslavia and Iraq-PRC and Russia. The fourth problem; the economic and military issues as well as nuclear competition have changed the course of relations between USA, Russia and PRC. As a

matter of fact, in the report published by the USA Congress, the economic and military growth of PRC has been perceived as a threat to the American national interests (Çolakoğlu, 2004: 185). The fifth problem; the lack of confidence in the regimes of Russia and PRC; the offensive regimes, the closure of non-governmental organizations, the pressure on the media, the intimidated political opponents, the espionage; have led the parties to pursue prudent policies (Link and Kurlantzick, 2009; Kenar, 2014). The sixth problem; States considered *rogue states* by the United States and Taiwan issue. The seventh one, a problem that arised between the USA, the PRC and Russia relating to the trade wars on tariffs and quotas (Çolakoğlu, 2004: 188).

IV. CAN THE SHANGAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION BE A NATO?

The SCO organization has emerged as a regional international organization with its institutionalization and expansion process. The SCO, which emerged as the locomotive of Russia and PRC, determined the basic principles and objectives to find a solution to the unilateral world impositions of the USA and the border conflicts between the member states. NATO was founded after the Second World War under the leadership of the USA. NATO's founding purposes are to form a set for the revisionist policies of the Soviet Union, to become a hegemonic force under the leadership of the USA, to increase its own interests and to prevent the emergence of total wars (Gözen, 2006: 175-176). NATO, a defense organization that continued its existence after the Cold War, has the property of renewing itself against the changing situations apart from security, military and technical fields. There are many discussions concerning for the SCO as Eastern alternative to NATO, a Western-style organization. The discussions made a comparative analysis of the two organizations:

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NATO, during and after the Cold War, under the leadership of the US created its space of activities in the SCO, PRC and Russian locomotive. This situation raises the problem of leadership between Russia and PRC concerning authority and the use of authority in the context of SCO. The use of authority and authority with the competitiveness of leadership among the other members of the SCO, - despite the lack of a struggle against the PRC and Russia-, attempts to protect or maximize the interests of the two states blocked the institutionalization and development of the organization. On the other hand, there is no leadership struggle in NATO dominated by the US, and there is a structure based on relatively common interests (Stobdan, 2008: 536-537).

SCO, which emerged as a security-centered organism, has taken on a structure that is committed on cooperation in economic and political fields over time. The basis for cooperation in these areas is the structure of security. Although the SCO cooperates with key organizations in Central Asia, it lacks many of the features of NATO. These include permanent operational headquarters, rapid reaction capability and institutional effectiveness in the political negotiation structure. However, the SCO lacks such maneuverability (Haas, 2008: 29).

Another difference between the two organizations is on the risk perception. NATO prioritizes external security risks. The SCO promotes the protection of the territories under their domination rather than eliminating external security risks and supports the organizational development on regional security perception (Haas, 2008: 30).

The threat perceptions of member states vary between the two organizations. As a matter of fact, while member states within NATO do not perceive any threat from each other, there is a threat perception among the members of SCO. This situation raises the problem of trust among the SCO members. For instance, although the border conflict between PRC and India ended in a short time after 1962, the

likelihood of re-emergence of frozen problems is one of the main reasons for distrust between the two states (Norling and Swanström, 2007: 436).

The defense budgets allocated to the organization emerge as another reason that sharpens the difference between the two organizations. NATO's defense budget in 2017 was about 957 billion dollars, but the defense budget of the SCO is too limited to be compared with NATO (Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries, 2018).

The common political attitude of the member states of the organization varies between the two organizations. Indeed, while NATO can act within its own political and strategic harmony, there are differentiations between Russia and PRC within the SCO. For example, while Russia has a mission in the context of security and co-operation to the SCO, the PRC wishes to transform the organization into a military, political and economic multi-faceted mechanism. On the other hand, while the PRC declares that the SCO will be transformed into a NATO-like regional security organization, Russia claims that the *Collective Security Treaty Organization* would be sufficient for the regional security (Özdaşlı, 2012: 119-120).

Finally; Another dimension of the differences occurring between the two organizations is the issue of the compatibility of the weapons and defense systems used. While the weapons and defense systems used in NATO are compatible between the member states, the SCO is deprived of such an agreement. Because the problems of trust between the member states of the SCO prevent them from forming a common policy and getting a harmonized weapon and defense system.

CONCLUSION

The SCO, which has been referred to a “*Western-style organization*” and “*a NATO of the East*”, has caused the US and the

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West to draw attention to the characteristic of its own structure (population, piece of land, nuclear power). Although the SCO, which was led by Russia and PRC, against the monopolies of the unipolar world, may have reached the level of institutionalization, the competition between the member states, the problem of trust, disagreement on the use of authority and authority, the frozen border problems and the deprivations in the production of common politics, attempts to form a NATO-like formation are not available. The thought of being in such an expectation at this stage seems utopian.

It is possible to observe that NATO is expanding faster than SCO, when both NATO's and SCO's enlargement policy are taken into consideration. While NATO has already reached the twenty-ninth member state with Montenegro, the SCO has made its first expansion in June 2017 with Pakistan and India, increasing the number of its members to 8. Despite all the handicaps, there are some points in which SCO is superior to NATO. First of all, there must be a threat for NATO to continue its existence. While the biggest threat in the Cold War was the Warsaw Pact, the present perception of the SCO emerged as a reason for the existence of NATO, although the perception of security has shifted to different concepts. In contrast, the SCO was not designed by Russia and the PRC to perceive the external threat, but to solve the existing problems, especially border conflicts, fundamentalism, terrorism and separatism. On the other hand, a distinctive feature of SCO is its inclusive nature. It is now a multicultural international regional organization with different values, religions and civilizations that reflect the reality of the real world. In spite of all these features that generate added value for the SCO, time will show whether the SCO will reach a level of institutionalization similar to NATO.

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