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 Research Article

UZBEKISTAN'S STRATEGIC APPROACHES OF TO THE SHANGHAIS COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES FOR "MIDDLE POWER" DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

The article studies the key factors (security, geopolitics, economy) that directly impact the strategy of the Republic of Uzbekistan towards the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It is revealed that this strategy always has been based on following priorities: (1) ensuring national and regional security in Central Asia (2) preserving independence in foreign policy (3) balancing the interests of major powers in Central Asia (4) preventing hegemony of a single state or a group of states within the SCO (5) using the SCO to implement Uzbekistan's priorities in trade, economy and transport interconnectivity.

Due to the current transformation of the SCO and intensification of geopolitical competition among its major members the necessity of applying middle-power diplomacy within the Organization has been identified. Uzbekistan's potential to conduct «middle power diplomacy" in the SCO has been justified.

KEYWORDS

Security, geopolitics, economy.

INTRODUCTION

The SCO emerged from the dialogue platform “Shanghai Five” formed in the late 1990s mainly on China's initiative to resolve border issues with the former USSR countries - Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Its formation took place under the influence of significant changes in international relations at the end of the 20th century, including the end of the Cold War and the shift in the balance of power in the world, the emergence of a new geopolitical situation in Eurasia, and the formation of new regional centers of power, and the emergence of new security threats and challenges - terrorism, extremism, and separatist movements.

The SCO has developed fairly quickly as a relatively prominent regional player, primarily due to the consistent political and financial sponsorship of Beijing, as Chinese scholars argue the SCO was a “brainchild” of Chinese New Diplomacy (Guang, 2008).

But from geopolitical point of view, the SCO was primarily it's kind of a balancing act of concurrent and conflicting strategic interests of China and Russia as these two were seen as the engines pulling the young organization (Alyson, Bailes, Dunay, Guang, Troitskiy, 2007).

In this regard, it has achieved its primary mission as a tool for soft balancing against external hegemony (i.e. against the USA and the West in general) and the creator of its kind of new regionalism in Central Asia (Anadi, 2008).

The SCO's role in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia is assessed differently by researchers. While some call it the “guarantee of stability in Central Asia” (Zhao, 2006) others believe that it has failed to become an effective regional security organization and has therefore failed to demonstrate itself in crisis situations in the region (Saksena, 2014)

Another group of researchers argue that the SCO has contributed to failure of regionalism in Central Asia (i.e. without the participation of the external actors). Within so called “Second Great Game” in Central Asia, regional organizations dominated by China (i.e. the SCO) and Russia (i.e. EurAsEC and later the EAEU) have become strategic instruments of power projection, and they have prevented the successful development of a genuine Central Asian regionalism in Central Asia. (Krapohl, Vasileva-Dienes 2020)

Despite polar discussions, in Central Asia itself, there is a general believe that the SCO has

contributed to ensure regional stability and promoting broader regional cooperation (Nurimbetov, 2021).

Core Principles of Uzbekistan's Strategy towards the SCO

The reshaping of the SCO's agenda is an unequivocal and objective process in light of its expansion and the new geopolitical dynamics in Eurasia. This inevitably impacts the strategic approaches of the member states of the Organization, especially those that were at the origins of its foundation.

One such country is Uzbekistan, whose positioning in the SCO has always been distinguished from the approaches of other Central Asian participants.

Uzbekistan's approaches to multilateral cooperation institutions, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, were characterized by a distinct positioning. During that period, the leadership of Uzbekistan was very cautious about joining any international organization, fearing it might affect the sovereignty of the state. Tashkent consistently kept its distance from organizations seeking integration, particularly in the security

sphere (Laruelle, 2012). This adherence to the strategy has largely remained intact to this day. For instance, Uzbekistan is currently not a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and participates in the activities of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) only as an observer.

Returning to the security situation in Central Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the picture was not very favorable. After the collapse of the former USSR, disintegration processes in the region intensified, and the Central Asian countries were still very weak, engaged in strengthening their statehood, fighting for the preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Their ability to ensure stability and security in the region by military means was limited.

In such conditions, Uzbekistan had very few strategic options (unlike other founding countries of the SCO, Uzbekistan did not participate in the "Shanghai Five" due to the fact that it does not share a common border with China). Against the backdrop of the emerging danger in Afghanistan in the late 1990s with the rise to power of the radical Taliban movement, it became clear that the CSTO did not have the full potential to ensure



security in Central Asia (In it's more than 30 years history the CSTO conducted only one weeklong operation in Kazakhstan (2022) with a small number of troops during the same period, (Stratievski, 2023). Moreover, as previously mentioned, Uzbekistan's leadership considered avoiding foreign influence in security matters a top priority. However, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO was not an organization controlled by a single major state like the CSTO. In Tashkent's view, China and Russia were major powers that balanced each other within the SCO (Huasheng, 2004) On the one hand, the intention to pursue an independent foreign policy while avoiding the influence of major countries and, on the other hand, the desire to maintain a geopolitical balance in Central Asia were strategic goal of Uzbekistan's foreign policy at that time. It is highly likely that Tashkent perceived the SCO primarily in this context. In this regard, ensuring national and regional security and independence in foreign policy activities formed the main principle of Uzbekistan's strategy towards the SCO.

In our view, the second important conceptual basis for Tashkent was the desire to maintain a strategic balance of competing interests of the

leading centers of power in Central Asia through the SCO, and to prevent any major country from establishing complete control over the region. This positioning is often characterized as the pursuit of a multi-vector or equidistant foreign policy.

International observers note that this approach of Uzbekistan manifested itself in its tactical actions within the SCO from the early years. In some cases, they seemed contradictory. For example, the start of the peacekeeping operation by coalition forces led by the United States in Afghanistan in December 2001 seriously changed the geopolitical situation in the region. This led to the formation of a strategic partnership between Tashkent and Washington, although for a short period. Some experts viewed this as an attempt by Uzbekistan to strengthen its strategic partnership with the United States and balance the influence of Russia and China in the region, thereby enhancing its own role in the region (Fumagalli, 2007).

The principle of ensuring a balance between major centers of power in Tashkent's strategy towards the SCO was once again confirmed during the "short cooling" of relations with the West after the Andijan events of 2005 (Aris,

2006). In the same year, at the SCO summit in Astana (Kazakhstan), Uzbekistan included in the agenda the issue of setting deadlines for the withdrawal of US military bases from Central Asia. This proposal was supported by all members of the organization. Thus, it can be emphasized that the SCO, with its large powers like Russia and China, allowed the medium and small members of the organization from Central Asia to balance the influence between competing geopolitical poles.

The Andijan events themselves was classified by some Western scholars as a “turning point” in the SCO dynamics as the Astana Summit supported the principle of state sovereignty, underlying the Western models of the governance (Aris, 2006).

In our view, the third important principle of Uzbekistan in relation to the SCO was to prevent any member state from becoming hegemonic in the organization.

Uzbekistan, as one of the founding states of the SCO, has always advocated for strict adherence to the principles of the “Shanghai Spirit” (mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, and pursuit of common development) by all Parties, which

define the conceptual foundations of the Organization, as well as for decision-making based on consensus. According to available information, the inclusion of politically important principles such as openness, non-alignment, and non-targeting against third countries and international organizations in the SCO Charter was initiated by Uzbekistan.

It should be noted that this principle continues to maintain its continuity for Uzbek diplomacy to this day. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has held office since 2017, consistently states that the further strengthening of the role and prestige of the SCO will still directly depend on the commitment of all member states to the aforementioned principles of the “Shanghai Spirit”. The leader of Uzbekistan clearly demonstrated this position during the country's chairmanship in the SCO in 2021-2022. Firstly, in an article by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, published in about 30 leading foreign publications on September 12, 2022, titled “The Samarkand Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Dialogue and Cooperation in an Interdependent World”, the following is noted: “The key to the SCO's international legal appeal is its non-aligned status, openness, non-targeting

against third countries or international organizations, equality, and respect for the sovereignty of all participants, non-interference in internal affairs, prevention of political confrontation and competitive rivalry" (CGTN, 2022).

A few days later, in his speech at the Samarkand summit on September 16, 2022, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, continuing this position, once again highlighted that maintaining the non-aligned status of the Organization and its openness is foremost important.

Strict adherence to the principles of the "Shanghai Spirit" and decision-making based on consensus, in turn, serves as an important prerequisite for Uzbekistan's efforts to prevent the transformation of the organization into a military or military-political bloc. In our opinion, this is the fourth principle of Uzbekistan's strategy towards the SCO.

Many researchers believe that Russia seeks to transform the SCO into a military-political alliance and, on this basis, further strengthen its influence in Central Asia and use the organization in its confrontation with the West (Aydıntaşbaş, Dumoulin , Geranmayeh, Oertel, 2024).

Uzbekistan, along with other countries in the region, always advocates for maintaining the non-aligned status of the SCO (Schmitz, 2022). India and Central Asian countries hold the same position. China has never openly expressed a clear opinion on the possibility of transforming the SCO into a military bloc. For Beijing, it is more strategically important to have the role of the organization as a conductor of its concepts for building a new type of international relations rather than using it as a tool for military-political confrontation with the United States (Huasheng, 2022).

The above principles continue to shape the basis of Uzbekistan's cooperation with the SCO. Their practical implementation is aimed not only at realizing the national interests of the country and the priority goals and objectives of foreign policy strategy. They also serve to maintain balance within the SCO, prevent deviations from the fundamental principles enshrined in the Charter, including attempts to turn it into a political or military bloc.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Changing Regional Context

Today, the SCO unites countries with a territory comprising more than 65% of the Eurasian continent and a population of over 3.5 billion people, which produce more than a quarter of the world's GDP (Alimov, 2024)

These growing quantities of the SCO and shifting power balance in Eurasia has been generating more attention to the Organization as a potential powerbroker in the continent. Despite some classifications of the SCO as one of the most successful regional organizations capable of becoming one of the pillars of the future multipolar world, it also faces a number of serious challenges.

The SCO is undergoing a serious transformation that began in 2017. India, Pakistan and Iran are relatively new members, so will be soon Belarus as mentioned earlier in this article. Such a heterogeneous composition changes the SCO's regional context. Recently it has been talked about not as a "Central Asian" organization as usual but as a new type of Eurasian transregional structure (Wang, 2023).

Currently the Organization includes nine member states: China, Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and

Uzbekistan. Its' current structure is "3 + 6" (three big countries plus six small and medium-sized countries). Republic of Belarus will become the tenth member very soon (Zhang Ming, 2024) during the Astana summit scheduled for on July 3 2024. But the Belarus membership would not lead to significant changes in the internal balance of the Organization since it is expected that it will follow close partnership with Russia in the SCO too. The SCO member states are countries with different civilizations, social systems, development models, as well as geopolitical and foreign policy patterns. It is impossible to classify them all as "allies" or "close partners"; on the contrary, some member states are strategic competitors in their subregions (e.g., India and Pakistan). Moreover, in recent times, rivalry between China and India for influence in Southeast Asia and leadership in the "Global South" has been growing (Miller, 2024).

This creates new risks and challenges for the SCO, including those related to maintaining internal unity and preventing further intensification of leadership struggles and great power game in the region among three major members of the organization, which has also weakened the SCO's

sense of community to some extent (Xue, Makengo, 2021)

Such kind of trend, in turn, necessitates an increased need for the stabilizing role of “middle powers” in the SCO. Experience from other regions and organizations shows that “middle powers” can play an important role in strengthening the status quo and regional order (D. Hundt, 2012).

This article attempts to explore the prerequisites for the implementing of middle power diplomacy within the SCO, using Uzbekistan as an example, which has recently been conducting a proactive foreign policy.

The SCO under transformation: The Need for “Middle Power” Diplomacy

In scientific and analytical community, the Central Asian members of the SCO were classified as either “medium” or “small” states within its composition, although all member states, according to the founding documents of the Organization, enjoy equal rights and obligations.

For example, in the early 2000-s Russian analytical circles were attempting to rethink the internal structuring and functional specialization

of SCO members, based on the conventional 2+2+2 model, with China and Russia at the top level; Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan at the middle, regional level; and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at the bottom, subregional level. For the purposes of functional improvements, they would not exclude the possibility of classifying Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as leading SCO subjects, responsible for stability and development in the region in the context of the Central Asian “Four,” while Russia and China would assume the SCO’s general strategic path, as well as its relations with the rest of the world (Laumulin, 2006).

In the new feature the SCO will face more changes under the influence of both internal and external factors. It is currently entering a new stage - the stage of transformation. The collective response of the member states to this was the decision adopted at the Samarkand summit in 2022, which provides for the improvement of the SCO's activities. Draft paper of reform agenda of the Organization should have been prepared under the current Kazakhstan Chairmanship in the SCO (Bellaby, 2023).

How the SCO will develop in the future? Will Central Asia remain its “geographic core” or the previous importance of the region for the SCO will

decrease? What are the approaches of Central Asian countries and Uzbekistan in particular to the global and regional role of the SCO? Will the organization become a victim of the “great power game and competition”, or will it still be able to turn into a strong multilateral institution capable of participating in the formation of a multipolar world as some member states hope?

The answers to these serious questions remain open. The ongoing expansion of the SCO may further increase uncertainty.

Furthermore, the SCO's agenda is expanding with initiatives and proposals from member states in various fields. This raises questions about the productivity and efficiency of the Organization. With its current institutional capabilities, the SCO does not have the capacity to conceptually consolidate all these proposals and ensure their practical implementation. The structure lacks the financial resources to implement such interdisciplinary programs and projects. As a result, many of the proposed initiatives remain unimplemented.

The scenario of turning the SCO into an ineffective forum for diplomatic dialogue, which some experts talk about (Kaleji, 2023), does not

correspond to the national interests of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries. For the countries of the region located in the heart of Eurasia, the “Greater SCO” can generate new opportunities for geoeconomic transport interaction and active interregional cooperation.

Uzbekistan stands out with its geopolitical potential in Central Asia, located in the heart of the region where the geostrategic interests of major powers intersect, with its ancient historical, cultural, and civilizational heritage, the largest population, and promising potential to become a transport and transit hub of Eurasia, etc. In our opinion, these indicators can form a good basis for Uzbekistan to conduct proactive diplomacy as a “middle power”, particularly within the SCO.

Conceptual ideas about “middle powers” appeared in the mid-20th century and were first used by the delegations of Canada and Australia to express these countries’ right to participate in shaping the world order after World War II in the process of negotiating the creation of the UN (Fox, 1980).

Since the mid-1990s, interest in the concept of “middle powers” has risen to a new level

(Robertson, Carr, 2023) which was, of course, directly related to the processes of forming a new world order. Countries that previously had little influence but possessed significant economic, military, and geopolitical potential in their regions began to play a more active role in international relations. However, due to their behavior on the international stage and significant differences in foreign policy activities, various theories and approaches to the concept of “middle powers” began to form in scientific circles. Korean scholars, in particular, have made significant contributions to the development and popularization of these theories (Robertson, 2023).

Summarizing them, three main theoretical directions can be identified. The first group consists of countries that have self-designated as “middle powers,” such as Canada and Australia. The second group includes South Korea, Japan, Brazil, Vietnam, Germany, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Mexico, Thailand, Turkey, and South Africa. The third group examines the role of “middle powers” in international relations from the perspective of their ability to form “interest groups and alliances” (Verishinina, 2020).

In recent studies, in light of the growing trends of the shift of the world economy and politics from “West to East” or from “North to South”, leading countries of the “Global South” began to be perceived as “middle powers”. The main argument in favor of these views is that the role of these countries is becoming increasingly important in the modern era when the struggle of Russia and China to change the world order under the leadership of the United States has intensified as never before. In particular, a leading German analytical center “Science and Politics Foundation” in a special analytical material for 2024 defines modern “middle powers” as: “they are capable of playing an important (potentially important) role in the region and at the international level, and their international (foreign policy) activities differ from those of other states. Such countries are distinguished by a combination of geographical location, demography, economic potential, raw material resources, military potential, and political charisma. Although they are not Great Powers themselves, their influence can be quite significant depending on the circumstances. Strategically, they are very important, and third countries (including “great powers”) have to reckon with them (SWP, 2024).

Multilateral institutions are the most suitable platform for “middle power” diplomacy. In scientific literature, it is emphasized that “middle powers” manifest their essence and significance through the following functional characteristics in formats of multilateral cooperation:

- balancing, i.e., on the one hand, reconciling competing “great powers”, and on the other - balancing the interests of “big” and “small” states;
- stabilization of the existing order and its legitimization;
- preventing hegemony (i.e., the rule of a “great” state or a group of states) in the organization;
- strengthening multilateralism;
- dispute and conflict resolution.

The successful implementation of these main functions requires skillful diplomacy from “middle powers”. In this sense, they are “initiators” (uniting other countries to solve a specific issue), “promoters” (creating “alliances” and “coalitions” to develop certain policy documents), and “coordinators” (coordinating work with other partner countries, introducing new institutions, rules and regulations, as well as

measures aimed at strengthening mutual trust and resolving conflicts). (Cooper, Higgott, Nossal, 1993).

In our view, Uzbekistan is a very suitable country for effective “middle power” diplomacy within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

First, it is the leading country in Central Asia, which is still perceived as the “geographic core” of the SCO, with its historical, cultural, political, military, and economic potential, and active foreign policy activities.

Second, in recent years, thanks to the proactive policy of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has achieved radical changes in Central Asia. The country has managed to fully resolve serious problems with all its neighbors, including border disputes (Tanbaev, 2023).

This strengthens its leadership image and diplomatic assets.

Third, Uzbekistan maintains very constructive and close relations with all SCO members, observer states, and dialogue partners, including the “big members” - Russia, China, and India.



Fourth, in recent years, the country has shown itself as one of the most active supporters of the development of multilateral cooperation in the organization through its initiatives and active foreign policy.

Fifth, Uzbekistan is a firm supporter of maintaining the SCO's status as a non-aligned and open organization, thereby strengthening its legitimacy.

As mentioned earlier, the SCO is currently facing strategic uncertainty. On the one hand, it continues to expand, and the increase in the number of countries with different development models and foreign policy orientations weakens the organization from within. In particular, the full membership of India, Pakistan, and Iran has significantly changed the geopolitical balance in the SCO, and there is an atmosphere of competition rather than cooperation. On the other hand, fundamental changes in contemporary international relations require the SCO to develop a firm stance on global issues and challenges (Nurimbetov, Vasa, 2021).

Under the influence of these processes, the SCO faces at least three challenges. These are the intensification of the great power game in the

region, the weakness of the sense of community among its member states, and the transformation of cooperation models after expansion (Yamei Xue, Benjamin Mwadi Makengo, 2021).

For this reason, the SCO needs the stabilizing contribution of “middle powers” like Uzbekistan. Through “middle power” diplomacy, Uzbekistan can perform the following functions in the organization: (1) balancing (reconciling competing “big countries” as well as balancing the interests of “big” and “small” members; (2) stabilizing the existing order and legitimizing it (ensuring adherence to the principles of the “Shanghai Spirit”); (3) preventing hegemony (dominance of one “great” state or a group of states); (4) strengthening multilateralism (by applying the principle of consensus); and (5) resolving disputes and conflicts (between competing states).

CONCLUSION

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's transformation remains unclear. However, most member states are interested in developing the SCO as a multifaceted institution that promotes open and mutually beneficial cooperation in

Eurasia. In particular, this fully aligns with the strategic interests of Uzbekistan and Central Asian countries.

The increase in the number of "big countries" (due to India's membership since 2017) in the SCO, as well as the inclusion of states with strong geopolitical positions (Pakistan and Iran), changes the trajectories of its activities. The intensification of geopolitical competition in the broader SCO space may increase the risk of reinforcing a mentality of rivalry instead of cooperation. Under such conditions, it is evident that the ability of major and ambitious countries to compromise with each other diminishes. This may undermine the new essence of the SCO – the idea of promoting open and positive multilateral cooperation in Central Eurasia.

This situation creates certain opportunities for Uzbekistan, which is considered one of the central country of Central Asia. It can implement skillful middle power diplomacy aimed at strengthening multilateral cooperation and legitimacy within the SCO, preventing and resolving conflicts, and ensuring geopolitical balance.

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