

# The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Implications for Central Asia

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## 1. Central Asia after 9.11

The tragic events of September 11 in New York and America's retaliatory actions seriously affected the countries neighboring Afghanistan and Central Asia in particular.

**The most significant consequence is that Central Asia ceased to be a unified region.** Before the events of 9.11, Central Asia was regarded as a unified area in both geographical and geopolitical terms. The development of the region was mostly determined by the dynamics of five states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and also by their interactions and mutual influence.

As for today, from a geopolitical point of view, the region of Central Asia apart from the five former Soviet republics, includes Afghanistan, Xinjiang and parts of Mongolia. Therefore, the fact that after 9.11 many Western experts started using the term Central Eurasia is not accidental. However, from the geopolitical point of view this once unified region has become splintered. The states of the region found themselves in different political camps.

At the same time, besides possibly shattering the weak integration process in Central Asia, the fragmentation of Central Asian states into different political camps could provoke interstate conflicts within Central Asia itself. Due to differences and the incompatibility of economic, political, military and strategic activities and interests, the pace and methods of transition to democracy and market economy, the existence of disputed territories, and so on, there have been conflicts and arguments between Central Asian states in the past, the most serious being the dispute between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan concerning the border line

between them. However, the states of the region, not being confident about their resources and own potential, tried to avoid any serious conflicts. Yet today, relying on their geopolitical patrons they can take uncompromising positions regarding controversial issues, such as border disputes. For instance, Tashkent's decision to give American experts access to Vozrozhdeniya Island in the Sea of Aral provoked a negative reaction from Astana, since that territory has long been a subject of dispute between these countries. At the same time, regardless of all these problems, there have not yet been any serious conflicts that would lead to military confrontation or the breaking-off of relations between the countries of Central Asia. Moreover, recently their relations have been improving significantly. An important role in that process belongs to the factor of the threat to regional security induced by the growth of terrorism, Islamic extremism, and the necessity of counteraction by means of cooperation. Yet, it is possible that as that threat becomes weaker, all the existing problems of the Central Asian region would emerge again.

**Another consequence is the fact that the activity of all geopolitical processes in the region has sharply increased.** Before 9.11, events in the region were developing at a slow pace. However, the war in Afghanistan provoked a sharp increase in the dynamics of geopolitical processes in Central Asia. This led to a break in the balance of geostrategical interests in the region, since some of the players appeared to be unprepared for such a course of events. This mostly concerns China, which until recently adhered to cautious tactics in its contacts with the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, created not long before 9.11, did not react to the events in Afghanistan even though the Afghan crisis was on its agenda.

**The third important point is that before 9.11 foreign policy and domestic policy in the region were developing separately.** However, today foreign and domestic events have merged, sometimes making it impossible to discern what the origin of some of the events was. For instance, Kazkh experts were not

very sure about the reasons for the appearance of the opposition movement “Democratic choice of Kazakhstan” (DCK), in which many representatives of the political and business elite participated. Some experts believed that the appearance of the DCK was the result of contradictions within the elite. Others considered it to be an answer to the US political buildup in the region since the appearance of the DCK corresponded time-wise with the American operation in Afghanistan.

Anyway, the events that followed 9.11 have significantly influenced the dynamics of domestic policies in the region. In some places things will slow down, which might result in the strengthening of authoritarian regimes (Uzbekistan, for instance); in contrast, in other places things will speed up, like in Kazakhstan. The acquisition of “third neighbor” status by the United States (not only from a geographical point of view) may signal the start of a new stage of political struggle publicly or inside governmental circles. In other words, the latest events on the geopolitical front will definitely influence domestic politics.

Directly or indirectly the events that followed 9.11 boosted domestic and foreign processes going on in the region. These events also boosted the entry of countries in the region into a new phase of self-development, which at first is characterized by new qualitative changes in political systems and, consequently, in their foreign and domestic policies. Trying to balance out the growing pressure of foreign and domestic factors, Central Asian countries have become more active in their search for a model of regional security and stability. Even though the regional cooperation attempts have become more active, they have not become more consistent. Central Asian republics are still hesitating in their choice of the most efficient security system and, as a result, there are several mutually contradictory security mechanisms in the region.

## 2. Has the SCO's Significance to Central Asia Changed Since 9.11?

Today among all the regional organizations that include Central Asian states, the SCO is one of the most promising and efficient. One popular opinion is that Central Asian republics' participation in the SCO gives them the opportunity to attract Russian and Chinese military and political resources to fight religious extremism and terrorism. It is worth mentioning, however, that in this field there exists a certain over-lapping of the SCO's activities with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Although the CSTO's activities were more advanced, the Central Asian republics' military and political cooperation within the SCO seems to be more promising. That is conditioned by the fact that there are still many factors that create obstacles to the CSTO's development and a slow down in the functioning of the collective security system. These conditions are listed below:

**First**, members of the CSTO have different foreign policy goals and interests, including those providing security. In that sense Armenia and Belarus' are quite distant from the problems of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia. Therefore, these countries have refrained from creating Collective Rapid Response Forces. In the same manner, the Central Asian republics have distanced themselves from the conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The urging of some members to form a closer relationship with the US is also an important factor.

**Second**, the CSTO member states have yet to put their legislation in accordance with CSTO provisions. For example, Belarusian legislation prohibits the deployment of its army abroad.

**Third**, unresolved issues include the joint financing of collective operations conducted within the CST (Collective Security Treaty), the maintenance of Collective Forces and the newly created structures of the CSTO.

**Finally**, the level of defense and military construction varies greatly from country to country. For instance, Tajikistan has the lowest defensive potential. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also have serious problems with personnel training and military equipment. Although in a military sense Russia surpasses all of its partners, still it cannot fully compensate for its military and technological weaknesses.

It is necessary to note that some CSTO member states often criticized Russia concerning the latter matter. The director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Maulen Ashimbaev, and Murat Laumulin of the same institute published an article entitled “A difficult path to regional security” (*Continent*, 10, 2002) which can be called characteristic. In particular, they wrote that major problems between CSTO members concerned military and technical modernization, which completely depend upon the political will and economic and technical abilities of its central member – Russia. However, in their view, Russia could not always, and sometimes would not, provide the necessary level of military supplies to its allies. That drove them to seek new sources of military and technical power, first of all from NATO member countries.

Certain problems between Russia and its CST partners exist on a higher level. For instance, the Tajikistan government claimed rent was owed for the presence of Russian troops on Tajik territory. Later this issue was removed from the agenda.

Some member states expressed the intention to, and some even tried to take part in different international military coalitions, including those under the aegis of NATO and the US. In particular, Kazakhstan created a special battalion called “Kazbat” for participation in the peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan. Although both countries could put more energy into the strengthening of their Collective Forces, the Defense Ministry of Kyrgyzstan expressed its intention to create a special platoon for participation in UN peacekeeping operations.

Therefore, it is possible that the development of the CST as a collective organ and in the context of relations between its mem-

bers on bilateral and multilateral levels is still controversial. In many ways this is due to the organization still being quite new. Obviously, more time is needed to find new and more effective ways for member states to cooperate. Most probably, military and technological cooperation will be broadened, allowing more energy to be put into the development of the Collective Forces.

It must be said that the war between the US and Iraq actually contributes to the rise of Russia's authority and influence within the CIS. Thanks to Russia's influence, the CST is already undergoing reorganization and its positions are becoming more pronounced. The agreement between the presidents of Russia and Kyrgyzstan concerning Kyrgyzstan's granting Russia an airfield in the city of Kant for the disposition of air forces that will later constitute a part of Collective Forces, proves the rise of Russia's influence in the region. We can say that Russia has acquired a second base, after Tajikistan, in Central Asia.

*The fact that the development of the CSTO contributed to Russia strengthening its position both inside the organization and in the region as a whole makes it more beneficial for Central Asian republics to participate in SCO's activities, since both Russia and China, two countries longing for domination in the region, are actively taking part in it.* Rustam Burnashev of the Uzbek Institute for Strategic Studies notes that the rivalry between the two helps avoid the risk of the organization upholding the interests of extra-regional centers of power. (*Central Asia: Politics and Economics*, 5(6), May, 2001). This is the main reason for the Central Asian states participation in the SCO. For Central Asian states it is better to reassign security issues to two players at the same moment, not one.

*Secondly, unlike the CSTO, the SCO does not express in its activities (at least openly) nor does it long for an anti-western (anti-American) trend. Moreover, the SCO is trying to escape from its military framework, constantly broadening the fields of cooperation between member states.* At the same time, the CSTO has become a full-scale military organization like NATO

or the former Warsaw Pact. Obviously it will have constant operating organs. Also a different approach to military cooperation is expected in the case of aggression against one of its member states. The CST provided only for consultations, whereas the CSTO provides for military aid. The CSTO's anti-American trend is explained by Russia's dominant position within it. However, the situation with the SCO is different. Although Russia would prefer to form an anti-western alliance with China, Beijing would never do that due to the great importance it places on its relations with the US. Rapprochement with Russia as political maneuvering and getting additional dividends from the US is the most desirable scenario for China. Furthermore, it is clear that China does not want and would not provoke world and regional centers of power, and also neighboring countries, to create an anti-Chinese coalition. Such a situation would satisfy Central Asian republics. After 9.11, Washington significantly stirred up its policy toward Central Asia and Transcaucasia. Therefore, some states began to express pro-American positions in their foreign policies or simply made their relations with Washington more active.

There are several explanations:

- The US is actively increasing its military and political presence in the region in connection with the events in Afghanistan and Iraq. The US has almost become the "third neighbor" in Central Asia.
- Such presence is a certain guarantee of security and stability of the Central Asian republics.
- By supporting the US in its military operations in Afghanistan, Central Asian states could count on a certain amount of economic aid. It is well known that quartering American armed forces is another way to replenish their treasuries.
- Declaring their support of the US, the governments of the Central Asian states could count on the weakening of American criticism concerning human rights issues and

democracy. The principle of “oil for democracy” has changed into “security for democracy”.

Although it is too early to say that the US is becoming the main dominant power in Central Asia, the states of the region would not like to compromise themselves by taking part exclusively in anti-American organizations. Only this could explain Uzbekistan’s participation in the SCO; otherwise it would have left the organization, given its inclination for cooperation with the US.

***The third factor that attracts countries to the SCO is that it unites only those countries that are most seriously concerned with putting an end to terrorism, extremism and other attendant threats to regional security and stability*** (According to the experts of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies). At the same time, CSTO countries involved in anti-terrorism policies have little experience in facing these threats and, therefore, have little interest in effective cooperation. Moreover, priority is given to cooperation in the field of air defense, strategic control, military control and planning. The concept of the CSTO is aimed more at repulsing a military attack, whereas the SCO is oriented to preventing new threats to security. As Uzbek analysts note, there is a redistribution of power from governments to non-governmental players in the region. Today the situation in Central Asia is that even the smallest extremist groups have a chance of influencing political decisions (“Shanghai Five: concerning the regional policy of Uzbekistan,” *Central Asia: Politics and Economics*, 5(6), 13).

***Finally, compared to CSTO, in the framework of the SCO the Central Asian states have greater opportunities to localize their own political course and direct their energies inside the region and, therefore, to overcome the dissociation in the region.*** For the three Central Asian republics, participation in the SCO’s activities is necessary to balance out Uzbekistan’s military potential and regional ambitions. Even before 9.11, Tashkent tried to



secure for itself the right to be the strategic partner and ally of the developed countries, first and foremost the US. This would let Tashkent increase its foreign investments, acquire military and financial guarantees, and so on. Possibly, Uzbekistan would take into consideration the fact of its necessity to the US and Russia as a sort of base in Central Asia. After 9.11 Uzbekistan acquired the key role in maintaining stability in Central Asia. Afraid that Uzbekistan would become a new center of power, other states in the region took part in the SCO to boost their own regional policies and indirectly control and influence Uzbekistan's policy in the region. Therefore, the factor of inner regional rivalry only increases the importance of existing regional organizations including the SCO.

The above does not mean that the SCO has any advantages compared to other mechanisms for regional security. Central Asian states do not have any worked-out strategy concerning the SCO or other regional organizations. These states are more concerned with considerations of the moment rather than long-term interests. There is no doubt that the importance of the SCO in Central Asia has grown since 9.11. However, this does not mean that countries in the region have become disillusioned with other security mechanisms. The importance of the SCO has been growing and since the American military penetration in the region, there appeared an opportunity for an institutionalization of interests among those players who are constantly present in the region and poses instruments to influence the situation. The SCO, CSTO and NATO are necessary to Central Asia not as effective security systems that can be interchanged, but as new sources of resources.

### 3. Alternatives for Central Asia

The events that followed 9.11 have become a sort of political test for the ruling elite of Central Asian republics. In fact, post-Soviet republics faced a serious identification crisis because of the problem of a choice of geopolitical partners. Especially Ka-

zakhstan, a country that has always adhered to its multidirectional foreign policy, has found itself in a difficult situation. Unlike its neighbors, for a long time Astana could not decide whether or not to provide its territory to coalition forces. Only a year after the beginning of anti-terror operations in Afghanistan did it allow the Allies to use its airfields, but only in the case of an emergency. The fact that many Central Asian republics provide their airfields to American forces and at the same time take part in clearly anti-American military blocs, such as the CSTO, is a consequence of the vagueness of their national interests. Tashkent's position can be used as another example of instability. In 2002, Tashkent declared that it would suspend its participation in GUUAM, even though it actively participated in its creation. Officially Tashkent has been criticized many times for its passive participation in the SCO, in which it was accepted in June 2001.

In the opinion of Russian experts, the "uncertainty of national interests of the Central Asian participants of the SCO is one of the main reasons for the unexpected changes in the integration process in Central Asia. It is impossible to expect a long-term strategy from these countries because they are not able to work out a long term strategy line of international policy." It seems their accomplishable task would not be to eliminate their deviation but to lessen its amplitude. Although foreign policy concepts of the Central Asian states differ in content, it is possible to see a common aspect: they all create a field for maneuvering in the international community. However, momentary interests are often put above long-term interests (*Tsentral'naia Aziia: politika i ekonomika*, 1, 2003). It is also necessary to consider that the foreign policy of the Central Asian states is determined subjectively and depends mostly on the will of a single person (or a limited number of people).

It is clear that the reason for the inconsistency of national interests among Central Asian states, which became clear after the events of 9.11, is the instability of power in these countries, or the crisis of political legitimacy of the ruling groups. In the situation where the relations between the government and its opposition are aggravated, foreign policy becomes a tool to justify the legality of

the ruling groups and their political power. As a result, foreign policy has become unpredictable. After 9.11 the Central Asian states made their contacts with the US more active to minimize criticism concerning human rights and standards of democracy. It is worth noting that they made good use of the situation. More attention was paid to the problem of terrorism in the region, which moved other important issues aside: for example, issues concerning democracy and human rights, and fighting poverty and unemployment. Therefore, it is not an accident that with the states' joining the anti-terrorism coalition there was a considerable setback to the development and growth of democracy in the region. The fact is that the struggle against terrorism can not only violate the balance between security and human rights, but can also become an excuse for the constant violation of human rights. Under the slogans of the necessity to provide security and stability, the ruling groups are trying to impose total control over most spheres of social life. Unfortunately, security is still the most convenient problem for political manipulation.

However, with time the US has again raised the question of adhering to democratic principles in conducting domestic policies. As soon as the countries in the region understood that the US would not change its position, they immediately boosted their contacts with countries that have traditionally been US rivals in the region, in particular Russia and China. Here is what Asylbek Bisenbaev, President Nazarbaev's former Press Secretary and current Deputy Head of the Security Council Secretariat, thinks: "The West can play a stimulating role in the development of Central Asia. But that does not mean that the countries of the region have no alternatives and therefore, will follow US desires. There is a choice. Moreover, the region has a far longer history than the US, therefore the stereotypes and traditions that push toward alternative ways are much older as well. ...The leaders of the US should understand that the Central Asian states are facing various alternatives." (Bisenbaev, A., " Zapad i al'ternativy Tsentral'noi Azii," *Politika SShA v Tsentral'noi Azii*. Almaty, 2002, 102).

In this case the reason (impetus) for change in foreign policies is not their anti-American orientation, but the fact that Russia and China do put issues of democracy above issues of security. That is exactly why Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan began integrating themselves into military and political organizations where Russia and China have leading positions. Given these factors we can suppose that in the near future the states of Central Asia will tend to participate in the CSTO and SCO. However, there is a possibility that being afraid of American pressure and US interference in their political life, local governments could initiate discussions to involve the US in the security system of the region, even involving their NATO membership, no matter how ridiculous that idea might seem.

(Translated from Russian by D. Krivtsov, SRC,  
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