

Security Organisations of East Asia: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of two organisations that can be considered security organisations relevant to the international relations of East Asia. The region is home to some of the world's largest economies, including China, Japan and South Korea, which have contributed to its growing global relevance. However, ongoing dynamics have also brought about a shift in the balance of power, an arms race and territorial disputes, which pose potential points of escalation.

The South China Sea, Taiwan and the East China Sea are some of the main conflict zones where tensions have been rising due to territorial disputes and other clashes of interests. Despite this, the region lacks multilateral regional institutions with binding legal frameworks or a multilateral alliance system like NATO. This makes the geopolitical developments in the region more volatile and uncertain.

However, stability in the region has been built on deterrence, constant dialogue, and slow but steady regional integration. Most countries in the region have been investing in their military capabilities to deter – mainly Chinese – adventurism and maintain peace. Diplomatic dialogues have also been ongoing to address and manage the territorial disputes and other security concerns. Additionally, efforts towards regional integration through trade agreements and other initiatives have also contributed to stability in the region.

East Asia's international relations have undergone significant changes in recent years due to its increasing global relevance and growing economic and military capabilities. The region is poised to play an increasingly important role in the global arena in the coming years. As such, it is vital to understand the two organisations that have some degree of security aspects regarding East Asia and the wider region of Eastern Eurasia.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN

ASEAN was established on 8 August 1967 as a community of five states with very different characteristics and political arrangements: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines. Their motivation was both to act as a collective check on the rise of domestic communist aspirations and to counter Vietnam, which was becoming a dominant force in the region. But beyond the need for a balance of regional power

and for collective action for domestic political stability, as early as 1967, the leaders of the founding states had already articulated their vision that, entering a new era in the history of Southeast Asia, the region would finally be able to shape its regional internal relations through the means of genuine independence, equality and peaceful cooperation (ACHARYA 2009).

The signing of the organisation's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976 was the cornerstone of the ASEAN community. In it, the parties agreed on the following basic principles of common relations:

- a. mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations,*
- b. the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion,*
- c. non-interference in the internal affairs of one another,*
- d. settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means,*
- e. renunciation of the threat or use of force, and*
- f. effective co-operation among themselves (ASEAN 1976).*

The signing of the TAC in all cases of membership enlargement has preceded the admission to ASEAN of countries that had joined the organisation.

The first expansion took place in 1984, when Brunei was admitted to ASEAN membership just a week after it had gained independence. The next major milestone was the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA), first announced in 1992, with a 15-year horizon. However, due to long, consensual negotiations among ASEAN countries and the organisation's highly informal methods of negotiation, these progressed slowly, with conflicts of interest being resolved behind closed doors and through informal channels. Therefore, the AFTA was implemented gradually, with tariffs on certain product groups being reduced and then items expanded, with the gradual involvement of member countries and members joining in the course of enlargements, but eventually by 2010 most member countries had successfully reduced import tariffs on most products to 0–5% (ASEAN 2002).

The next stage in ASEAN's expansion was Vietnam's accession to the organisation in 1995. The development of the organisation and the region is illustrated by the fact that the community, initially united in fear of the rise of communism and seeking to counterbalance Vietnam's strength, unanimously accepted the still communist country as a member.

Laos and Myanmar (Burma) joined in 1997, but the latter's admission has cast the organisation in a somewhat problematic light. While the enlargement of the organisation could previously be understood within the framework of a "democratic security organisation" (although this approach was already somewhat more nuanced with the accession of Vietnam), in the 1990s Myanmar, led by a military dictatorship, emerged as a pariah on the international stage. The repressive nature of the regime and its human rights abuses were heavily criticised by both the EU and the U.S., yet neighbouring countries were increasingly inclined towards Myanmar's integration. The ASEAN countries have come to the conclusion that by accepting Myanmar as a full member, they can support

the building of elements of a market economy and democratic institutions through slow but clear rapprochement and contribute to a political opening, with positive feedback communication in the future. This approach has been called constructive engagement.

This constructive tone also corresponded to the inclusion of Laos in the Community. The country, which had fallen into serious economic turmoil after the Vietnam War, partly due to dwindling U.S. aid, had shown an increasing willingness to move towards market economy reforms since the 1990s. Yet these had not led to major changes, thus it needed regional support to carry out the necessary reforms.

ASEAN countries agreed in 1995 to declare Southeast Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone. The agreement was enshrined in the Bangkok Treaty, which entered into force in 1997. It banned the development and acquisition of nuclear weapons by member states (ASEAN s. a.).

The ASEAN+3 initiative in 1997 promoted the deepening of East Asia's overall regional integration relations. This consists of regular meetings and conferences to improve relations between ASEAN, the People's Republic of China, South Korea and Japan.

The final element in the enlargement process of the organisation so far was the accession of Cambodia in 1999. ASEAN's development since the 2000s has shown signs of ever closer integration of the current ten member states. In 2008, ASEAN adopted the ASEAN Charter, which sets out the organisation's goal of becoming an EU-like community. The Charter complements the TAC's earlier principles by seeking to promote the rule of law, good governance, democracy, constitutionalism, human rights and social justice.

At its ninth summit in 2003, ASEAN agreed to build a three-pillar community of endeavour on the new direction of integration processes. These are the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The ASC aims to develop a comprehensive security community, build normative frameworks, conflict prevention and resolution processes and other peace-building mechanisms. The ASC was complemented by a political dimension (ASPC). The starting point for the integration process was set in 2015 in the ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint, which had been drawn up in 2009. In the spirit of the ASPC, in addition to the normative framework of cooperative security efforts laid down earlier, cooperation has been complemented by meetings to coordinate joint action against drug trafficking: the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings on Drug Matters (ADMM) and the increasingly regular ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime Plus China (AMMTC + China). The ASPC's role in security beyond ASEAN is based on the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASPC's programme relies heavily on strengthening the ARF, in particular the development of its preventive diplomacy role (ACHARYA 2009).

One of ASEAN's greatest achievements since its inception is that, although the region has experienced armed conflicts between the countries that have become members since the organisation was founded in 1967 (the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, 1978–1989; the border conflict between Thailand and Laos in 1986; and border disputes between Vietnam and Thailand in 1978–1989), no armed conflicts have broken out between ASEAN countries since joining the organisation. Other notable achievements in the security

dimension of the organisation include the nuclear-weapon-free region and the TAC and its extension to parties beyond its member countries (ASEAN 2019).

The central platform of the organisation is the annual ASEAN Summit of Heads of State and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), which is responsible for setting common orientations for Community efforts and coordinating ASEAN activities. In addition to the Foreign Ministers' Summits, ASEAN countries also hold sectoral ministerial meetings. The central figure in the institutional framework of the organisation is the ASEAN Secretary General, who is appointed by the ASEAN Leaders' Community at the ASEAN Summit on the recommendation of the AMM. The Secretary General is also the head of the ASEAN Standing Committee (ASC), based in Jakarta. This body is responsible for coordinating ASEAN's common affairs between AMM meetings, reviewing various policy activities and implementing the directives adopted by the AMM in the area of policy contributions. The Secretary General of the ASC is always the Foreign Minister of the host country of the forthcoming AMM meeting, but the Committee is chaired by the ASEAN Secretary General except for the first and last Committee meeting of his/her chairmanship. The Standing Committee is directly accountable to the AMM (ASEAN 2008a).

The basis for the integration of economic relations within ASEAN has been strengthened by the progressive development of free trade agreements (FTAs), which have made the Economic Community efforts largely successful. ASEAN has also successfully concluded FTAs with several important partners outside the organisation, including Japan in 2008 and the People's Republic of China, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand in 2010 (ASEAN 2008b).

The ASEAN Regional Forum – ARF

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is organised around a regular annual meeting of the participating countries to provide a forum for dialogue on security issues. Its creation is one of the most important advances in ASEAN's regional policy and is also an implementation of the objectives of the Singapore Declaration issued after the 1992 ASEAN Summit. In it, ASEAN leaders set out, as a next step in political and security cooperation, inter alia, to broaden ASEAN's relations with external partners, building on the positive experience of the organisation in the past.

The first meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum was held in Bangkok on 25 July 1994, chaired by ASEAN countries. The purpose of the meeting and the resulting security organisation was to develop a consultative community with the world's major players (including China, Japan, Russia, the United States and the European Union) to develop a regional security system with cooperative security cooperation at its core. The ARF is not intended to replace the balance of power in the region, but to complement it by creating a dialogue within an institutional framework. As the Australian Foreign Minister who attended the first meeting put it, "building security with others, not against others". The first meeting of the ARF was attended by 18 founding members: the ASEAN

countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei), the United States, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, China, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, Laos and the European Union.

The ARF thus held its first meeting in 1994, practically as an extension of the tradition of conferences that had followed ASEAN ministerial meetings, but over time the organisation has grown to become the largest security dialogue forum, now involving 27 countries and the European Union. At the first inaugural meeting, the participants were the ASEAN member countries (in 1994: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea (South Korea), the United States, China, Russia, Laos, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea and the United States. The aim of the ARF is not to resolve individual problematic issues, such as the island disputes in the South China Sea, but rather to develop a more careful confidence building process, not least to help maintain ASEAN's relevance as a regional security actor.

The ARF's organisation culminates in the annual meeting of Foreign Ministers, which is always hosted by an ASEAN member. This is not only strongly linked to the ASEAN model of similar summits in terms of its organisational logic, but also seeks to create an atmosphere of regular political-security dialogue in which participants can ensure adherence to the normative framework, the so-called ASEAN Way, in order to maintain stability in the region. Following the establishment of the ARF, the consensus among the participating parties did not involve the joint adoption of a ready-made framework based on a set of principles, but rather the intended evolution and development of the normative integration of the organisation. However, in addition to the development of the normative framework, a more tangible element of ARF's integration policy is that it has been guided by the principles of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (ASEAN TAC) from its inception. Although the issue of accession to the treaty initially divided the participating parties, the ARF has resulted in the ARF participating parties all having signed the ASEAN TAC treaty.

The rationale behind the development of the ARF has been seen by some as a necessary consequence of the lack of a region-wide security structure and ASEAN's response to this. Indeed, since the 1990s, increasing attention has been paid to the strengthening of great power regional interests and the lack of a platform for security-related dialogue. ASEAN countries feared that the region would once again become exclusively dominated by the interests of the great powers. They saw the need to take the initiative on security issues. In fact, the ARF supported the aspiration to have ASEAN countries play a central role in the dialogue on security policy processes in the region.

The supporting framework behind the annual summit can be seen as the institutional backbone of the ARF. The organisation's annual Foreign Ministers' Meeting is preceded by the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) and is supported by the organisation to hold related expert conferences and professional interactions on issues such as international crime and drug prevention to promote confidence building. Beyond the summits, the ARF's work therefore also promotes regional, yet limited, professional exchange and cooperation on relevant issues across the security spectrum.

Since 2004, the ARF Unit, a permanent unit within ASEAN reporting to the ASEAN Secretary General, has been operational. The ARF Unit is tasked with supporting the work of the ASEAN Standing Committee (ASC) Secretary General, who also serves as the ARF Secretary General during his term of office. The ARF Unit is also responsible for liaising with other regional and international organisations and supporting dialogue between defence sector officials, as well as being the repository of official ARF documents and the general institutional infrastructure support and administrative unit of the ARF.

In the context of the ARF's interpretation of security policy, there is an opportunity both to present the merits of the organisation and to identify the criticisms and limitations of the ARF. On the one hand, by accepting the principles of the TAC, participants express their willingness, albeit to a limited extent, to settle conflicts of interest peacefully, in addition to ARF membership. However, neither participation in the organisation nor the ARF has any coercive mechanisms or institutionalised legal frameworks that could be seen as a primary pressure factor in any problematic case. The consensus-oriented tone of the dialogues and the importance of the role of informal frameworks tend to make ARF more a space for efforts to maintain high level channels of communication in spite of any problems that may exist, rather than a space for resolving problematic issues. An example of both phenomena is the issue of the PRC and Taiwan, which tested the regional integration efforts within a year of the organisation's creation.

The adoption of the 'One China Policy' – only maintaining formal diplomatic relations with China and not Taiwan – was a major precondition for the PRC's participation in the ARF before its creation. This was the reason why Taiwan was not given the opportunity by ASEAN to participate in the ARF. Furthermore, the China–Taiwan conflict, which is formally regarded as a domestic issue with the adoption of the 'One China Policy', is not even on the ARF agenda, despite being one of the most serious sources of tension in the region. Leaving aside these, it is precisely the Taiwan question that has shown that the ARF is a useful forum for the dialogue needed to defuse tensions. In 1995–1996, tensions over the Taiwan Strait entered a particularly heated phase, following the visit of Taiwanese President Lee Teng Hui to the United States in 1995 to speak at Cornell University, and the 1996 elections in the island nation, which led to symbolic missile tests by the People's Republic of China to exert pressure, with missiles passing over Taiwan Island. The events had a serious impact on U.S.–China relations, and the U.S. also sought to strengthen its alliance with Japan. However, in a period of tension, the ARF and the pre-meeting meetings provided a useful channel of communication between the parties, and some believe that the ARF's interface helped to ease tensions.

The ASEAN Regional Forum can therefore be seen as both a relevant security organisation in the region and an underdeveloped initiative that is not yet a structural integration force that could, by itself, make a significant contribution to regional stability through its institutional framework. However, the ARF has the potential to do so. The ARF, like ASEAN itself, has a declared commitment to slow but steady normative development and has not been disingenuous in its efforts in recent years. Today, with 18 participants present at the inaugural meeting, the organisation has grown significantly to become one of the largest security cooperation communities in the world.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a Eurasian intergovernmental organisation founded in Shanghai on 15 June 2001. Following its latest membership expansion (Iran) in September 2022 now accounts for about 42% of the world's population and 20% of world GDP, and is one of the most important multilateral organisations on the Eurasian continent. The SCO, which is also the successor to the Shanghai Five, established in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan primarily for security purposes, has undergone major changes in its objectives and institutions since its creation. Initially focused on the Central Asian region in the narrow sense, the SCO has now become an organisation with a broad political, economic and cultural profile, covering most of the Eurasian continent. The SCO currently comprises nine Member States (China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), three Observer States interested in acceding to full membership (Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia) and thirteen "Dialogue Partners" (SCO 2023).

Historical overview

In the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the successor states in the Central Asian region faced a number of internal (social, political, economic) and external (border disputes) challenges. Border disputes, minority conflicts, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist and separatist groups, illegal trafficking of arms, drugs and human beings were the most pressing problems that prompted China and Russia to join forces regionally, together with three newly independent Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In 1996, in order to calm the situation and build confidence, the so-called Shanghai Five were formed and an Agreement on Military Confidence Building in the Border Area was signed in Shanghai (UN 1996). This was followed in 1997 by a new treaty to reduce military forces in border areas. The aim was to build confidence between China and the former Soviet states (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) bordering or close to it, and to demilitarise the common border areas (ODGAARD 2009: 181–182).

In 2001, with the accession of Uzbekistan, the Shanghai Five was restructured, creating the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a permanent intergovernmental consultative forum. A year later, in St Petersburg, the members signed the organisation's Charter (the SCO officially became an international organisation), which entered into force in 2003. The Charter set out the guidelines and objectives of the organisation. These objectives included developing more effective cooperation in the fields of neighbourhood policy, confidence building, politics, trade, economy, research, energy, transport, tourism and the environment, as well as maintaining peace, stability and prosperity in the region and moving towards a democratic, fair and peaceful international order (SCO Charter 2002). In terms of foreign policy, it was specified that they do not wish to become a military alliance, that their cooperation is not directed against third countries. The organisation's objective

was also defined as fighting the “three evils” of terrorism, extremism and separatism (ARIS 2009: 463). In order to give a formal framework to this endeavour, another permanent organisation, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), was created alongside the SCO Secretariat (ARIS 2013: 5).

Initially focused on the Central Asian region in the narrow sense, the SCO has now become an organisation with a broad political, economic and cultural profile. The number of members and cooperating countries has expanded considerably, so that the SCO covers most of the territory of the Asian continent.

Permanent Members	Observer States	Dialogue Partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China (1996) • Russia (1996) • Kazakhstan (1996) • Kyrgyzstan (1996) • Tajikistan (1996) • Uzbekistan (2001) • India (2017) • Pakistan (2017) • Iran (2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mongolia (2004) • Belarus (2009) • Afghanistan (2012) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2009: Sri Lanka • 2012: Turkey • 2015: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal • 2021: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar • 2022: Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Myanmar

Figure 1: Member states, observer states and dialogue partners of the SCO in 2023

Source: SCO 2023

Collective security as a basis of the SCO

The SCO was set up primarily to address the main security challenges identified as common to the Member States. Its Statute sets out as its main objectives to maintain peace and strengthen security and confidence in the region, and to achieve international cooperation in traditional security areas such as the coordination of disarmament and disarmament efforts. At the same time, Member States’ main security concerns are increasingly linked to non-traditional security problems such as terrorism, separatism, drug trafficking and organised crime. This is because security problems in Central Asia are generally trans-national rather than internal (ARIS 2009: 465).

Although the cooperation between the Shanghai Five was clearly based on military issues, its aim was to strengthen trust between them, not to defend against an external power. The main promoter of the SCO’s creation was China, which for the first time undertook to set up an international organisation, signalling its more active involvement in world politics, and the organisation became an important prestige institution for Beijing. In addition to the confidence building mentioned above, it was also important for China to increase its political and economic leverage in Central Asia – to which it

wanted to draw on Russia's influence there – and to discourage Muslim states in the region from supporting Muslim Uighur separatist groups operating in China's Xinjiang province (KERR–SWINTON 2008: 89–112).

This is reflected in the adoption of the three evil terms, which were originally used in Chinese political terminology. All this also shows that the purpose of forming the organisation was not to protect its members from something, but rather to prevent them from harming each other.

The SCO clearly represents the concept of *collective security*, as its members seek to maintain peace among themselves and in the region, primarily through dialogue, for which the organisation provides a forum. The SCO is not a military alliance – even if in the mid-2000s some members used to call it 'Asian NATO' – but can be defined as a "partnership rather than alliance" (LANTEIGNE 2010: 166–167). If we look at the objectives, we can see that the SCO is primarily focused on solving internal problems, and its members even state that they do not intend to become part of a military alliance or to target any other country (SCO Charter 2002). Of course, the picture is much more nuanced than that, but it is clear that the SCO has no collective defence character at all, and this is unlikely to change in the future.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is an important regional forum for member countries, observers and dialogue partners. It includes the three most powerful powers in Asia (China, Russia and India) and is an important forum for Asian issues. The organisation was originally created as a Russian–Chinese forum, with Central Asian countries joining as extras. The dominance of China and Russia over the organisation is reflected in the fact that Chinese and Russian are the official languages. However, Central Asian states benefit from being members because they do not have to negotiate separately with Russia or China. Instead, they can develop a common position and more effectively represent their interests by exploiting the differences of interest between the two major powers (ARIS 2013: 8–9).

For the above reasons, a military alliance of the SCO is out of the question, because if we look at it, there are several participating states that would not defend each other, as it would be the case in a military alliance. While China and Russia agree on many issues, under the surface the relationship is not nearly as cordial as it first appears to be. Beijing and Moscow have a major common interest in reducing the global power and influence of the United States, but they are already rivals in the Central Asian region. Other members of the organisation, such as India and Pakistan, have several problems with each other. Iran's accession has further complicated this complex set of relations, which, with the potential accession of Arab states, is likely to increase internal disagreements on a number of issues. Therefore, the cooperative nature of this cooperation, confidence building and dialogue are crucial.

Organisation and decision-making

The SCO's highest decision-making body is the Council of Heads of State, which meets annually to take decisions and set the guidelines for the organisation's operation and activities. Below this is the Council of Heads of Government, which also meets annually to discuss cooperation strategies, set priorities and discuss emerging issues, particularly economic ones, and adopt the organisation's annual budget. Meetings are also held at ministerial level and at the level of the heads of the specialised agencies, covering practically all relevant areas. The Foreign Affairs Council is normally convened one month before the Heads of State meetings, but an extraordinary meeting can be convened at the request of at least two Member States with the consensus of all Member States. The SCO also has two non-governmental organisations, the SCO Business Council and the SCO Inter-Bank Consortium (SCO 2023).

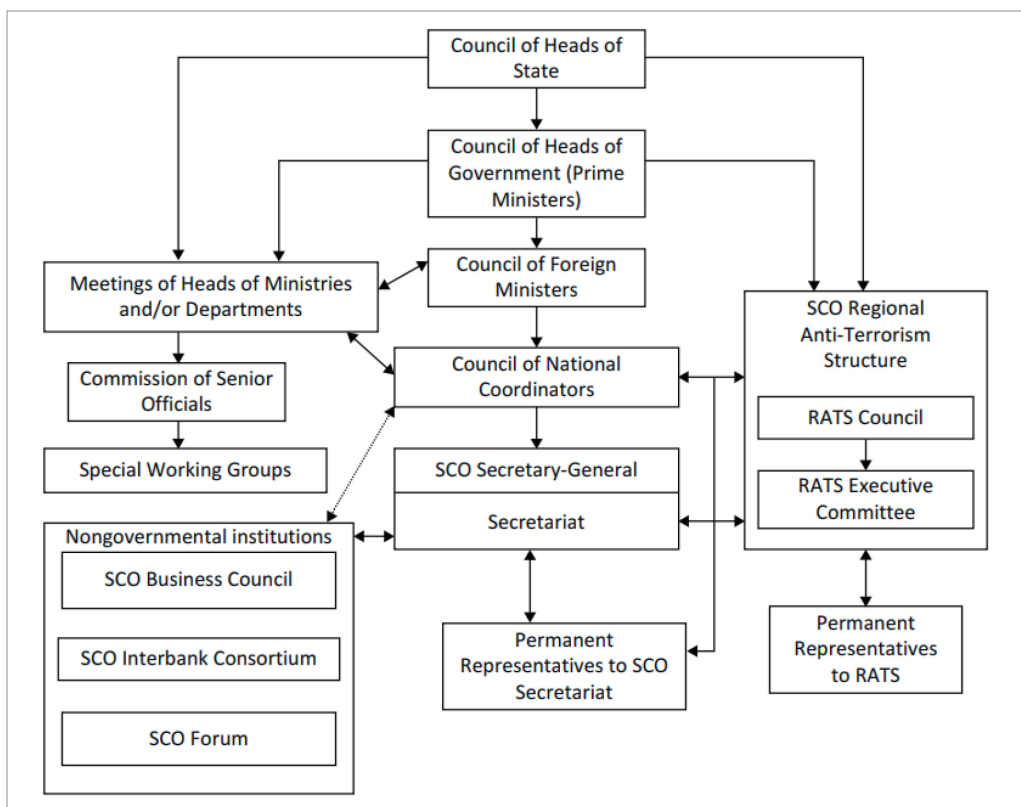


Figure 2: The Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Source: PRADT 2020: 60

As mentioned above, the SCO has two permanent bodies: the Secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. The Secretariat, based in Beijing, is the main permanent executive body, headed by the Secretary General, who is nominated by the Council of Foreign

Ministers and approved by the Council of Heads of State. Its mandate is for a three-year, one-time term, rotating among member states according to the Russian alphabet. His deputy is elected by the Foreign Affairs Council, while the members of the Secretariat are drawn from the Member States' experts on a quota basis. The Secretariat is responsible for coordinating the SCO's activities and providing information, analytical, legal and technical support. The Secretariat coordinates cooperation with partner countries and NGOs. They oversee election observation operations, manage external relations, and produce publications, analysis, preliminary legal and financial assessments (SCO 2023).

Established in 2004, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is based in Tashkent (formerly in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan) and is tasked with promoting cooperation in the fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism. To this end, they carry out analyses and produce materials and studies to support decision-making processes. Its head is elected for a three-year term by the Council of Heads of State, and all SCO member states are represented in the organisation (SCO 2023). The RATS Council is composed of the heads of the national security services of the Member States. In addition, RATS has an Executive Committee, which coordinates data exchange and operations (OHCHR 2023). The working language of the organisation is Russian. RATS creates databases of known terrorist organisations and individuals, although mainly Western rights organisations criticise what they see as a broad definition of terrorism (GRIEGER 2015: 7).

Decision-making in the SCO is by consensus, and Member States must incorporate the outcome of the agreements into their own systems, according to their national specificities. Other decisions fall under organisational competence and are also applied there. Any Member State may formulate a dissenting opinion, which will be recorded, but it must not hinder the decision-making process. However, States have the right to opt out of certain cooperative arrangements, but they cannot prevent them from being established between other States, nor do they lose the right to join them at a later stage. The only time a state may not participate (vote) in the decision is if its membership has been suspended or was excluded from the organisation (SCO 2023).

Strengthening peace, security and stability in the region

Although the SCO is a collective security organisation that was initially based on military issues, its character as a general regional forum has now become more pronounced. Military cooperation among SCO members has recently increased, particularly in the fight against terrorism, accompanied by an intensified exchange of information between intelligence services (ALBERT 2015). It is questionable how far it can maintain this trend with its expanding membership and partner states.

Strengthening peace and security

Countering terrorism, extremism and separatism

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was established in 2002 as a permanent body to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism. It has become an important coordinating centre for the SCO and has made contributions to regional and global security. The organisation has focused on establishing an organisational and legal framework, ensuring the proper functioning of its working bodies, and improving its regulatory framework to implement joint measures by the competent authorities of the member states. This work includes the introduction of provisions of relevant international law and legal acts of the SCO into national legislations. With the help of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, hundreds of people have already been trained to fight terrorists in the Member States, several attacks have been prevented through information sharing and numerous arrests have been made (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2023).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has always been sensitive to security risks emanating from Afghanistan, as it has been a hotbed of terrorism, drug production and trafficking, and organised crime for decades (OMELICHEVA 2021). To counter these effects an SCO–Afghanistan contact group was established in 2005, revitalised in 2015, and served as a springboard for the deepened counterterrorism cooperation due to shared goals and existing frameworks and structures for coordinating counterterrorism activities among its members (GRIEGER 2015: 11). Since the Taliban returned to power in Kabul, the region is worried about the spillover of terrorism and conflict again. Although the Taliban have sought to assure their neighbours that civil strife and terrorism inside Afghanistan will be contained, recent years have shown that they are unable (ISKP) and/or unwilling (al-Qaeda) to prevent terrorist organisations from being active in the country.

In addition to countering terrorism and transnational crime, RATS has developed protocols for state control of cyberspace, which also aims to prevent the spread of extremist and separatist propaganda (GRIEGER 2015: 12). In 2009, the SCO signed an agreement on cooperation in international information security, and in 2011 and 2015 submitted drafts of an International Code of Conduct for Information Security to the UN General Assembly. The concept of international information security is controversial, as SCO members advocate for content regulation to mitigate potential security threats, while the Western consensus views this as a threat to human rights. In 2018, the secretaries of the SCO's National Security Council stressed that ICT is often used to promote terrorism, separatism and extremism, and called for practical cooperation and universal regulation under the auspices of the UN (NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence 2023).

Military cooperation

The Dushanbe Declaration in 2021 stated that the member states will continue the expansion of defence cooperation in a wide range of areas, from capacity building, training

of military personnel, or confidence building measures to maintain regional peace and security (SCO 2021). SCO members usually carry out counterterrorism exercises as joint military exercises, as this is one of the main challenges that all members of the organisation face. These exercises serve multiple purposes, including improving the skills of member states' security forces, demonstrating their new capabilities, and increasing their interoperability. They also provide an opportunity to foster bilateral relations with other SCO members and, last but not least, they have a force demonstration effect (WEITZ 2011). The first exercise was held in 2002 with Sino–Kyrgyz participation, on bilateral basis but within the SCO framework. The most prominent exercises were the so-called “Peace Mission” exercises. The first Peace Mission was held in 2005 which was a primarily Chinese–Russian exercise with SCO observers. In 2007, after the first real SCO military exercise – where all the 6 members participated – they agreed on similar joint exercises on a regular basis. Uzbekistan tends to stay away from these, as it refrains from joint military participation (ARIS 2013: 5). The largest exercise to date was held in 2014 in Inner Mongolia (China), with 7,000 troops from Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. It simulated an insurgency in one country, which called for the help of the SCO to restore order (SMITYUK 2014). The SCO's last multinational military exercise was held in Russia in 2021, and at the end of 2022, the members decided to prepare for the next counterterrorism exercise to be held in August 2023 (Reuters 2022). Although it can be argued that the level of military cooperation in the SCO has increased, no joint forces, no joint command and no joint planning group have been established (ODGAARD 2009: 191–193).

The SCO does not provide collective security guarantees for its members, nor does it have a mandate for peacekeeping. However, in 2012 members approved a new non-military collective response mechanism for “responding to situations that put peace, security and stability in the region at risk”. This means that SCO members can, in theory, intervene politically and diplomatically in the event of internal conflicts with other SCO members. This new mechanism has not yet been tested (GRIEGER 2015: 9). In 2007, a joint declaration was issued on the need to develop options for joint action in the event of threats to the peace, security and stability of member states. Russia and China can deal with problems potentially requiring peacekeeping operations on their own territory with their own law enforcement agencies, the relevance of which would be with the Central Asian states. However, if we look at what has happened in such situations over the past decades, we see that the SCO has stayed away from such actions. The SCO could have intervened in 2010 in cases of unrest during the revolution in Kyrgyzstan and violence against the Uzbek minority, and most recently in the 2022 protests in Kazakhstan, but in neither case was it the SCO that intervened. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, humanitarian aid was delivered bilaterally, while in the case of Kazakhstan, CSTO peacekeepers intervened (KHALIQ 2022). This was not a surprising turn of events, since the Dushanbe Declaration stated clearly that the SCO will not launch independent peacekeeping missions, even though it assured the UN that the Member States support cooperation with the UN in the field of peacekeeping (SCO 2021).

Strengthening stability in the region

Expanding membership – Advantage or disadvantage?

Although the SCO officially identifies terrorism, extremism and separatism as the most important common threats, the legitimacy of which would be hard to deny, the divisions among its members, the interests of great powers, geopolitics and geostrategy, the balance of power and historical grievances pose a serious threat to the cohesion of the organisation. The two main founders are also at odds with each other in Central Asia, as the region is rich in resources, which until the 2000s were exploited by Russia alone, but recently China has also increasingly extended its power westwards. In China's new Silk Road plans, the region is again being given a prominent role, which further harms Russian interests. In addition, China has now significantly outgrown Russia economically, so what might have seemed an equal relationship in the early 2000s has now become a Chinese-dominated relationship. Moscow has, moreover, repeatedly blocked Chinese proposals within the SCO that would have brought significant benefits to the PRC, such as the adoption of a regional trade agreement and the creation of a bank to this end (GROSSMAN 2017).

Furthermore, the Central Asian states are not necessarily on the same platform either, given that they have their own counter-interests, which are driven by economic interests and disputes over minorities and natural resources. The situation has been further complicated by the inclusion of India and Pakistan, as India–Russia and China–Pakistan relations have traditionally been very cordial, while India–China relations are contentious and Russia–Pakistan relations are not very significant. The inclusion of Iran could create additional ethnic, religious and economic tensions with other member states (and even with dialogue partners).

For these reasons, it is unlikely that the SCO can move further towards closer cooperation. Instead, it is more likely to remain a forum to discuss regional and global issues and to give the three major powers more space of their own. The expansion of the SCO is underway, and it seems likely that it will broaden its ties both with the Middle Eastern and the Southeast Asian countries. Expansion is therefore very much dependent on interest and on the above-mentioned great power games, which aim to counterbalance each other's influence in the organisation.

Cooperation with other international and regional organisations

Throughout its history, the SCO has sought to develop cooperation with international and regional organisations in various fields. Since 2005, the organisation has strengthened its links with the following organisations:

- Commonwealth of Independent States (2005)
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2005)
- Collective Security Treaty Organisation (2007)
- Economic Cooperation Organisation (2007)

- United Nations Organisation (2010)
- UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2011)
- Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (2014)
- UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2015)
- International Committee of the Red Cross (2017)

With four of the above-mentioned organisations (CIS, CSTO, ASEAN, CICA) the SCO shares a common area of interest, which is definitely security. Memorandum of understandings were signed between the SCO and the four regional organisations which clearly defined the areas open for cooperation. The majority of these are concerned with the threat of terrorism, extremism, transnational crime, and illicit drug and arms trafficking. Besides the security related issues, the SCO showed willingness to cooperate on further fields, such as economy, finance, and other ‘soft’ areas like culture, education, healthcare or social development (SCO 2017).

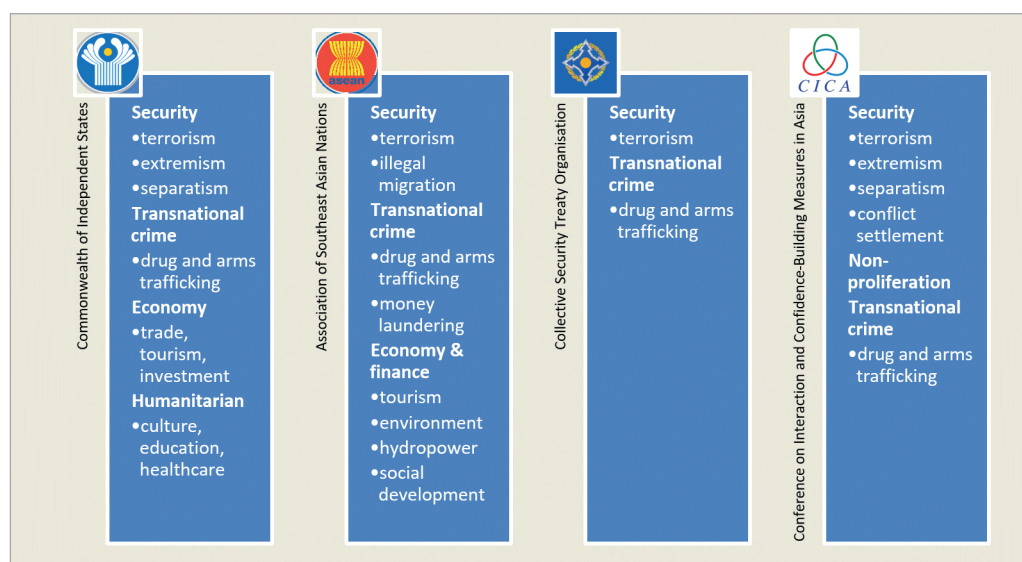


Figure 3: SCO's cooperation areas with regional organisations

Source: SCO 2017

Cultural and political cooperation

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) prioritises political rather than cultural cooperation, with a common interest among members to maintain stability in their authoritarian regimes and prevent Western-style democratic uprisings. The SCO Charter emphasises non-interference in internal affairs as a means of countering Western exports of democracy, with democracy and human rights only mentioned as goals in international relations. The SCO has created an alternative cadre of election observers

and holds cultural events annually, including a fashion show, children's art exhibit, and tennis tournament (ODGAARD 2009: 194–195).

Recently, the organisation has also focused on developing other areas of cooperation, including a common cultural space, through initiatives and projects that aim to establish greater connections between member state populations. These programs include creating common education standards, a joint SCO university, and providing scholarships for students to study in China. The organisation has also sponsored exhibitions and art projects to promote greater understanding and trust among its member states (ARIS 2013: 8).

The SCO is a Eurasian regional political, security, economic organisation. It clearly represents the concept of *collective security*, as its members seek to maintain peace among themselves and in the region primarily through dialogue, for which the organisation provides a forum. Even though in the previous decades the SCO started closer cooperation in the military area, the members still not intend to become a military alliance. They perceive the 'three evils' (terrorism, extremism and separatism) as the major threat to both internal and regional security, therefore, the SCO offers mechanisms to tackle these challenges.

The SCO strengthens cooperation in new areas from time to time (political, security, economic, cultural and humanitarian projects), although most of them do not function effectively. Furthermore, no deepening of the organisation is expected, mainly due to the growing number of member states.

Summary

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are both regional intergovernmental organisations, but they differ in their membership, geographical coverage and areas of focus. The geographical coverage of the SCO extends beyond Southeast Asia to include Central Asia, South Asia, and parts of the Middle East, while ASEAN is limited to Southeast Asia. Additionally, the SCO is seen as being more dominated by China and Russia, while ASEAN operates on the principle of consensus among its members.

Both organisations aim to promote regional cooperation and integration. Although the SCO primarily focuses on security cooperation, both organisations emphasise economic cooperation and development as important areas of collaboration. They also aim to promote regional stability and peace by fostering dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding among their members. Both the SCO and ASEAN share the principle of non-interference, which means that they respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the member states.

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