
The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as "Geopolitical Bluff?" A View from Astana



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Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been an important factor in, and exerts significant influence on both Kazakhstan's international situation and geopolitical processes in Central Asia. Various aspects of Kazakhstan's interests are included in the SCO, among them geopolitics, security, the economy and regional politics. The topics addressed by the SCO can be divided into wide-ranging and often unconnected problems, which are more often than not solved outside the framework of the SCO. In the end, the SCO is only a great "geopolitical bluff." And while the USA seems to be almost an "unofficial partner" because it so influences Central Asia as a whole, the European Union has almost entirely withdrawn from that geopolitical scene. As yet, the SCO poses more challenges and risks for Kazakhstan than it offers advantages.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become a key player for Kazakhstan's international standing and the geopolitical processes in Central Asia (CA) more generally.

At the present time, the SCO counts six member states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. A group of states, originally known as the "Shanghai Five," has existed since 1996. Members of the Shanghai Five were united in their search for solutions to the problems relating to questions of frontiers and settling of territorial issues along the borders between the former Soviet Union and China. Later, in 2000, a decision was taken to transform the Shanghai Five into a regional structure for multilateral cooperation in various fields. In 2001, the SCO was created in Shanghai as a new international organization. It was implemented legally at the June 2002 summit in St. Petersburg, where the SCO Charter, the Agreement on the Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RATS) and the Joint Declaration of the Heads of State were also signed. Uzbekistan joined the SCO in the same year.

What initially stands out about this organization is the disproportion between its members: it includes giants such as China and Russia on the one hand, and considerably smaller Central Asian states on the other—in terms of their political weight, the scale of their economies, their demography and the size of their territories. Considering this uneven playing field, it is worth pondering what exactly Kazakhstan may get out of the SCO.

Kazakhstan's participation and interests in the SCO are influenced by several factors:

The first one is geopolitical, stemming from the participation in the organization of two major powers, Russia and China. These two powers automatically cast a shadow over the remaining members of the SCO. Indeed, Russia and China have their own, specific geopolitical interests which extend far beyond the boundaries of the region: China's concerns lie predominantly in Asia (the Northeast, Southeast and Asia-Pacific region); those of Russia are in Europe and the Euro-Atlantic area (relations with the EU and NATO); while both countries share complex relations with the USA. In addition to this, Russia has its own interests in the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia, where China is increasingly influential. Geopolitical relations between Russia and China (as the leading members of the SCO) as well as their relation with the outside world are of great

Translated from Russian by Jennifer Northup.

concern.¹ It is important to understand, therefore, the extent to which this bilateral relation in turn forms the strategic background of Kazakhstan's own international affairs.

The second aspect, closely linked to the first, relates to security issues. In 2002, the Agreement on the Regional Antiterrorist Structure was signed within the framework of the SCO, and implemented by the creation of the SCO regional antiterrorist structure in 2004. Kazakhstan's interests depend on the SCO's capacity to protect Kazakhstan (as well as other Central Asian countries) from the threat of radical Islamism. As this concerns the fundamental question of security, it is important to remember that the SCO was originally set up to guarantee the inviolability and security of its member states' borders: the Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in Border Areas was signed on 24 April 1997, and the Agreement on Strengthening Mutual Trust in Military Fields in Border Areas on 26 April 1996 (which came into force on 7 May 1998).

The third aspect is an economic one. Since 2000, when the decision to transform the "Shanghai Five" into a regional structure was taken, repeated announcements and efforts have been made to encourage economic integration within the SCO. Yet the SCO needs to contribute to Kazakhstan's economic development and well-being if it is to serve the country's interests.

The fourth aspect, lastly, concerns regional integration, namely, the extent to which all the constituent elements of the SCO (geopolitical, economic, multilateral and bilateral relations) influence regional politics and the relations between the republics of Central Asia, as well as how this in turn affects Astana's interests.

¹ See Bobo Lo, "A Fine Balance: The strange case of Sino-Russian relations," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No 1, April 2005.

The SCO: a successful “Geopolitical Bluff?”

The wide range of questions raised by the SCO highlights the diversity of potential issues the organization faces. A number of these, however, are often solved outside the framework of the SCO. These include Russian-Chinese, Russian-American and Chinese-American relations; security problems with regard to the respective roles of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization²), NATO and the SCO; bilateral relations of the Central Asian countries—both among themselves and between them and the great powers. Consequently, there is no SCO policy *per se*. However, the very fact that the SCO exists and seems to be active in the area of foreign policy (or geopolitics) creates the perception (or at least the illusion) of there being a new and serious player on the regional and international stage. In this context and in regard to Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, it is worth pondering whether the SCO is little more than a *trompe l’oeil*.

The SCO’s activities in the field of security are, to a large extent, purely declarative, although the organization could play a significant role in certain areas—in Afghanistan, for example. Indeed, since the fall of the Taliban there has been little progress in that country. It is, for example, the source of a large flow of drugs, which the new administration cannot control. It is assumed that a substantial part of the income from this trade funds Islamic terrorist groups, which have not been eradicated by “Operation Enduring Freedom.”

This threat directly concerns the six member states of the SCO. China fears, and with good reason, that Uighur clandestine groups could form a common front with the Islamists. The concern is no longer an independent Uighur state in Xinjiang, but rather a “caliphate,” which would encompass Central Asia and neighboring regions. For Russia, the threat from the south is highly significant: it is essential to prevent militants and drugs from infiltrating Russian territory by maintaining the southern republics of Central Asia stable at all costs.

In the spring and summer of 2004, and then in 2005, the terrorist underworld once again issued Uzbekistan with a reminder of its presence

² Editor’s note: The Collective Security Treaty was signed in May 1992 by Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. In 2002, its member states signed the statutes of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Chisinau and, in December 2004, the organization gained the status of observer at the UN General Assembly. The purpose of the CSTO is to prevent and end military threats to territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as cross-border threats such as international terrorism.

there by carrying out a series of terrorist acts. In Tashkent, authorities are fully aware that the fuse of Islamic terrorism could light the powder keg that is the Fergana valley—considered so because of the acute social and demographic problems there. In Kyrgyzstan, many Islamists live almost openly in camps in the southern part of the republic: they are not active against local powers, but instead attack Chinese representatives and are spreading into Uzbekistan. Tajikistan has also seen the full spectrum of terrorist threats. Over the course of many years, even after the civil war ended, the territory of this republic has been permeated with both Afghan militants and Tajik Islamists trained on Afghan soil. At first glance, Kazakhstan appears to be the only state in a more advantageous position, but this is merely an illusion of security. The possibility of destabilization in southern Kazakhstan cannot be ruled out. Besides, Kazakhstan also has to take into account the Uighur factor in its relations with China.

As far as the SCO's place in Kazakhstan's foreign policy is concerned, the organization is currently of some importance, at least officially. In its capacity as chairman of the organization, Kazakhstan arranged a meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs at the end of February 2005 to discuss the question of maintaining stability in SCO territory, the organization's international activities, current problems of modernity, and the acceleration of efforts to implement the Tashkent initiative on creating a partnership network of multilateral partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region. The second meeting of Security Council secretaries from SCO member states was held in Astana in early June 2005, to discuss questions of security and stability in SCO territory and neighboring regions, as well as measures to strengthen cooperation between SCO member states to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism.

The tenth meeting of SCO heads of state, held on 5 July 2005 in Astana, was heralded as a major international event. It was then that Iran, India and Pakistan were conferred the status of observer. Among the seven documents signed at this summit was the framework for cooperation in the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism. The SCO member states agreed to carry out joint anti-terrorism instruction and personnel training, and to share their acquired experience. But the main outcome of this summit was the SCO's declaration on the duration of the stationing of US military bases in Central Asia. The majority of commentators considered this declaration to be an ultimatum directed against the United States. However, after a time, the attitudes of the different parties became more divided. Kyrgyzstan, for example, has essentially repudiated this "anti-American statement." During the visit of US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, to the region in July 2005 Bishkek stressed that Kyrgyzstan wished to maintain the American base on its territory at Manas.

After the events in Andizhan in May 2005,³ and in particular after the SCO summit in Astana, Uzbek-American relations reached a crisis point.

³ Editor's note: On 13 May 2005, an uprising took place in Andizhan (Fergana valley) and was brutally put down by government forces. The Uzbek government has continuously denied that the revolt was peaceful and instead claimed that the incident was an attempt to destabilize the government. They have turned down requests for independent international investigations. Several Western states have since distanced themselves from the country's government and the EU has imposed sanctions on it.

Tashkent did not limit itself to a verbal declaration as Bishkek did, but actually made the USA close its base in Khanabad. This request was granted at the end of November, 2005. For its part, Washington exerted pressure on Uzbekistan in connection with the events in Andizhan, human rights violations and the general situation in the country. Kazakhstan meanwhile, which has no American bases on its territory, was able to set an example of “brilliant political distancing,” having encouraged the anti-American *démarche* on the one hand, while doing nothing to significantly aggravate relations with the USA (or NATO) on the other.

At the end of October 2005, the regular session for the Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers) was held in Moscow. At this meeting, Beijing attempted to steer the development of the SCO toward strengthened economic cooperation. The Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, declared that China was prepared to put US\$ 900 million toward financing joint development projects. The Chinese were essentially proposing to heavily subsidize the economies of SCO countries, attempting to transform the political organization into an economic one: a proposal that was rejected by Kazakhstan and Russia. Had the Chinese solution been accepted, there would have been a danger of the SCO turning into a Chinese “economic protectorate.” This scheme threatened Russia and Kazakhstan in particular since the Chinese strategy had assigned them the role of rear energy bases, suppliers of hydrocarbons and raw materials.

The fact that Central Asia is becoming part of a new economic and geopolitical order taking shape in Eurasia and Asia has recently been touted by certain commentators. This process would be characterized by market expansion towards the countries of Southeast Asia, China, Korea, India, Turkey and Russia, and a slowdown (even stagnation) in Europe’s economic development—traditionally a guiding beacon for many countries of the CIS and Russia. Strengthening the “Asian” paradigm and consolidating Eurasian independence (should Russian and Central Asian integration projects be implemented) could have far-reaching strategic consequences.

Events of recent years have shown that the SCO has begun to follow the same path as other regional organizations, namely, it is becoming more institutionalized and bureaucratic. A Secretariat with headquarter function has been set up in Beijing; the activities of the Council of Heads of Government and Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs are organized; cooperation is underway between Security Council secretaries, and an executive committee for RATS has been established in Tashkent. The creation of a Development Fund and an SCO Business Council are telling of the member states’ will to reinforce the economic aspect of the SCO.

However, many observers are distrusting and skeptical of efforts by SCO founders to present their organization as an element of the multipolar world and a modern geopolitical power. According to these, the SCO is little more than a colossal act of geopolitical bluff. The fact is that the “two main wheels on the SCO cart”—in the words of the Uzbek president Islam Karimov⁴—Russia and China, have been trying to use the SCO in their relations with the USA and the West for their own advantage. They only

⁴ See *KontinenT* journal, No 12, 2004.

use the SCO to “fly their flag” in Central Asia, in face of a mounting American presence there.

Chinese and Russian Instrumentalization of the SCO

It is certainly the case that China is isolated within the SCO, confronted by a block of post-Soviet states that share a common past and confronted with the same problems, which facilitates understanding among them. Moreover, Russia has a specific, tried-and-tested approach to each of them.

A number of factors define China's interests in the SCO. Firstly, Beijing is attempting to restrain the separatist forces of "Eastern Turkestan";⁵ secondly, it is trying to preserve Central Asia as a stable and strategic base; and thirdly, it views certain countries in the region as both potential suppliers of energy resources and economic partners.

One of China's main goals is to prevent this region from becoming a base for separatist groups and a channel for their links with international terrorism. China is therefore proposing that the governments of CA republics ban these separatists from carrying out any activities on their soil and prevent any elements of this terrorist and extremist structures from entering Chinese territory. Beijing is working on the assumption that the security of CA states is interrelated with the security of the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region (XUAR): in other words, any instability in Central Asia will affect the security of northwest China.⁶

Beijing's success at ensuring that CA remains a stable and strategic base depends on three things. Firstly, it depends on the solving of the contentious border issues between China and other countries in the region, as well as establishing peace and security in border areas. Both of these problems are nearly solved: all that remains is to reach an agreement on certain unpopulated and insignificant bits of territory near the border. Secondly, it is contingent on the countries of Central Asia engaging in open foreign policies with regard to China which, in turn, must establish balanced bilateral relations with them. Thirdly, Central Asia must not be under the thumb of any superpower.

The Chinese strategy in Central Asia is not currently entirely autonomous, but determined rather by the Russian and American

⁵ Name given by Turkic nationalists to the territory of the modern Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region (XUAR), which is populated predominantly by Turco-Islam people related to the peoples of Central Asia.

⁶ Zhao Huasheng, "China, Russia, and the U.S.: their Interests, Postures, and Interrelations in Central Asia", *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Lulea, Sweden), 2004, No 5, p. 116-125; No 6, p. 86-94; Li Lifan, Ding Shiwu, "Geopolitical Interests of Russia, the U.S. and China in Central Asia", *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Lulea, Sweden), 2004, No 3, p. 139-146.

positions.⁷ As far as Beijing is concerned, further development of the region's situation will, to a large extent, depend on the duration of the US's military presence there. China is therefore planning to build its strategy in Central Asia around the SCO by strengthening its position and refining its decision-making mechanisms, and by limiting institutional inertia in order to make it a tool for transforming the region as a whole.

It has not escaped the Chinese political and military establishment that, over recent years, Russia has undertaken a "return" in Central Asia by asserting its military presence and political influence there. To them it is clear that Russia's deepened economic integration within the CIS is intended to increase its political influence. China is therefore trying to limit Russia's return to the region and to contain it via the SCO.

Considering Russia's diminishing economic clout, China sees its own growth as the main engine capable of providing a model for the whole region's development. Consequently, the SCO appears at present to be a transitional structure for China, while it attempts to establish itself as a global power center. It is also clear that China will do everything it can to prevent the erosion of the SCO as a tool for spreading its presence in the region and for balancing the relations between China and Russia. Beijing's main difficulty is to find a way of coordinating the SCO's antiterrorist action with the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which has the same vocation and includes all SCO countries but China and Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile, China has been trying to dispel the worries that the weaker Central Asian neighbors have in its regard, promoting counter-terrorist measures and furthering its image as a peaceful superpower. In so doing, China is attempting to establish some semblance of soft hegemony. Considering China's growing energy demand, it is assumed that Chinese state companies will vastly increase their investments in Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector, and strengthen their participation in Kyrgyzstan's hydraulic power sector (mainly with the aim of supplying electrical power to Xinjiang).

For Russia, the SCO is above all a framework for cooperation with China. The scale of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing reached unprecedented levels in 2005. Russia and China held a series of joint large-scale military exercises, made a joint declaration on world order in the 21st century, and have used the SCO to counter US military presence in Central Asia.

The Russian military community views the promotion of cooperation with China within the framework of the SCO as indispensable, but remain divided over the extent of such strategic military cooperation in light of possible rivalry between the two. The Russian General Staff does not consider China to be a reliable partner, and refuses to sell certain military equipment and technologies deemed too sensible. Russia is also unwilling to sell China any kind of license to manufacture complex arms systems.

⁷ See: B. Brouwer, "Borba za vliyanie v tsentralno-aziatskom regione" [The Struggle for Influence in the Central-Asian Region], *Internationale Politik* (Russian Edition), 2002, No p. 27-35; S. Okhotnikov, "Kitai i Centralnaya Aziya posle nachala antiteroristicheskoi operatsii v Afganistane" [China and Central Asia Since the Start of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Afghanistan], *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2002, No 5, p. 21-32.

Moscow is clearly becoming concerned about the growth of Chinese influence in Central Asia and the region's increasing dependence on China. As mentioned previously, Beijing's attempts to transform the SCO from a political organization into an economic one have not been reciprocated by Moscow.

Russian analytical circles are currently working on a formula for cooperation with China within the framework of the SCO. In particular, they are 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; Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan 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.

Russia clearly fears the threat of becoming China's junior partner. Consequently, Moscow is taking a series of steps: by restricting the sale of new technology, by limiting regional economic integration, and controlling immigration. It is also with this in mind that Moscow is reinforcing trilateral relations between Russia, India and China.

To a large extent, Russia seems to view the SCO as a temporary geopolitical instrument in the spirit of the Primakov doctrine,⁸ in order to maximize the convergence of points of view with China. The proximity of the two countries helps Russia and China to coordinate their positions in the international arena. Furthermore, Moscow believes that a stance coordinated with China cannot be ignored by the international community.

Russia today believes it has a unique opportunity to restore its geopolitical influence in Central Asia. Russia has managed to merge the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc)⁹ and, by so doing, it has effectively taken control over the integration processes in the region. In reality, this was an attempt to find an answer to Chinese economic expansion in the region.

Russia's strategy regarding Kazakhstan, at least in the short term, essentially overlooks the framework of the SCO. It aims rather to achieve a joint defense area, completing a Collective Rapid Deployment Force

⁸ In 1998-99, Y. Primakov, Russian Foreign Minister and Prime Minister and a veteran of the intelligence community, tried to redirect Russian foreign policy from West to East and give it a more anti-American and anti-Western character.

⁹ Editor's note: In February 2002 the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) supplanted the Central Asian Economic Community created in 1994 by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as economic cooperation between these countries gave way to broader forms of cooperation (notably in the field of fighting drugs, religious extremism, radicalism, etc). Russia joined the organization in 2004. The Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) was founded in 2001 by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan and replaced the customs union of 1995. After Uzbekistan applied for membership in the EAEC in October 2005, it was decided to merge the two organizations.

(CRDF) under its aegis, continuing the process of further integration with the economic and military structures of CTSO member states, and forming an integration core (on a Central Asia level) around Russia and Kazakhstan.

Retreat of the West

The USA clearly plays a role in the evolution of the SCO insofar as the two leading powers of the organization—Russia and China—have close strategic and economic (counter-) relations with Washington. The USA has a presence in Central Asia and influences, to varying degrees, the foreign policies in the region's countries, primarily in Kazakhstan.

Since 2005, American strategy in Central Asia has undergone radical change. The essence of this change is that Washington was forced to come to terms with the fact that its influence is on the wane there, and as a consequence, of its need to adopt a more realistic policy. In the case of Kazakhstan, this more realistic policy manifested itself for example in the non-intervention of the 2005 presidential elections. In the preceding months, there was a very real threat that the USA could have recourse to a “color revolution” in Kazakhstan. A number of factors contributed to offsetting this threat: Astana’s decisive reaction to events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, its concerted consultations with Moscow and Beijing, the change in the electoral calendar, as well as the joint *démarche* by SCO members in July 2005, when SCO participants raised the issue of the American military presence in the region. Consequently, it was the unequivocally frank position held by Moscow and Beijing that became the strongest limiting factor with which the USA was forced to contend.

It is assumed that a review of certain previous methods and instruments for implementing American policy in the region is currently underway, all of which will inevitably have repercussions on Kazakhstan’s security. The goals of the US strategy in Central Asia and their means of implementation are currently the subject of heated debate in the American establishment. In 2005, a new strategic approach to the region was developed in Washington—the “Great Central Asia” (GCA) project.¹⁰ The GCA project also had concrete political goals: to separate Central Asia from the Eurasian region, of which it appears to be a natural part, and in so doing isolate the countries of the region from Russia and the CIS as a whole; setup a “buffer zone” between the region and China; and creating a series of communications routes from the Caucasus to Pamir that avoid Russian and Chinese territories, etc. In short, the GCA plan can be perceived as a plan set up to counter the SCO.

From an institutional point of view, this project manifested itself in the redistribution of responsibilities within corresponding departments of the US State Department: in autumn 2005, Central Asia was transferred from

¹⁰ See Starr F.S.E. *A Greater Central Asia: Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors. The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program*, Washington, DC: Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, 2005, 38 p.

the European department's area of responsibility to the department in charge of the countries of the Middle East and South Asia.

The new American strategy (as voiced by the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her visit to the region in October 2005) simultaneously takes into account several geopolitical, military-strategic and regional factors. With regard to Russia and China, the US has decided to act in accordance with the interests of these powers in the region and is prepared (if only formally) to consider this as well as acknowledging the influence of the SCO. At the same time, the USA insists on its presence in Central Asia. Consequently, a departure (at least in words) from the previous unilateral approach of the USA is becoming clear.

The trend towards NATO—and more precisely, the rehabilitation of the armies of Central Asian states—is a new tool in the process of strengthening the influence of the USA and the West. In recent times, cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and NATO within the framework of the Partnership for Peace (PFP) has gained increased attention. Moreover, the idea that the best way of modernizing Central Asian armed forces is via this Partnership is gaining ground. This idea—which, objectively speaking, is very sensible—has nevertheless caused irritation and concern in Russia, as it indirectly threatens the functioning and credibility of the CSTO and the SCO.

NATO's strategic aims (in the context of US strategy) include maintaining stability across the huge expanse of Eurasia that lies east of Europe, as well as supporting geopolitical control of strategically significant regions in the Middle East, the Black Sea, Caucasus, Caspian Sea and Central Asia. Central Asia and Afghanistan have a special place in this lineup, being key regions for NATO to establish its geopolitical presence in the center of Eurasia, in terms of the impact they might have on Russia and China. NATO strategists, evaluating Kazakhstan's current foreign policy, believe that Astana is taking a conscious risk in its relations with Russia and China, aiming to strengthen its relations with NATO slowly but surely over the long term. On this basis, NATO is quick to underline Kazakhstan's dual obligations with the CSTO and SCO, as well as in its bilateral relations with Russia and China. It is therefore trying to enter the fray of Astana's balancing act.

The European Union is almost entirely absent from the geopolitical scene in Central Asia. This applies to both EU strategies concerning Central Asia as a whole and the level of political activity from individual member states. At the current time, Europe is able to influence Central Asia only indirectly, via the OSCE and NATO for example. This is largely due to the dramatic slowdown of EU integration after the failure of the constitutional project, but also to the EU's recent enlargement, the developments in Ukraine, the change of power in Germany, and the transformation of relations between the EU and Russia.

In regard to NATO, the question is how the US strategy will be coordinated with its European allies. It is clear that the EU strategy regarding Central Asia and Kazakhstan has been determined by prominent individual European powers (France, Germany, United Kingdom), but also by international organizations—namely NATO and the OSCE. The EU is

presently very important for Kazakhstan's economy, but it does not carry the weight of a geopolitical and military-strategic force in the region.

For the time being, the EU is in retreat in Central Asia, satisfied in considering it a "buffer zone." The EU will therefore encourage (using various tools such as NATO and the OSCE) this role for Central Asia, as buffer against the dissemination of threats against European interests: terrorism, drug trade, illegal migration, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction being prime example.

However, this approach has one important distinguishing feature: in contrast to the USA, the EU has always acknowledged Russia's particular interests in Central Asia. European strategists are also considering ways to further their relations with the region. In this respect, the Turkish problem is reviving, since building and developing formal alliances between the European Union and the Turkic states of Central Asia will depend on, though not be limited to, decisions made regarding the admission of Turkey to the EU and on the stances taken by Beijing and Moscow on this issue.

Some European strategists have not ruled out the possibility of agreements being concluded with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and "democratized" (i.e. post-Karimov) Uzbekistan along the lines of the Lomé and Euromed agreements. Although these agreements do not offer any prospect of entry or associate membership of the EU, they imply more intense contact between partners in economic, customs and various other spheres.

However, the EU's strategy regarding Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus—still considered in Brussels as a single entity, will take as a starting point the demand for energy and natural resources, combining this approach with the doctrine of defending human rights and enforcing democratization.

What Options for Kazakhstan?

Through the SCO, Kazakhstan remains at the mercy of the evolution of the Sino-Russian relations: on the one hand, excessive strategic rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow threatens to establish a double dictate of these powers in Central Asia (including within the framework of the SCO); conversely, however, there is also the danger of a flare-up in Chinese-Russian rivalry in the region, which cannot be ruled out in the future.

The problems that China presents for Kazakhstan are traditional ones and must be conceived of while bearing the long-term in mind: demographic penetration, China's growing economic influence and the threat of Kazakhstan becoming economically dependent on China, as well as growing conflicts between Beijing and other major powers. Yet China's strategy and policy is rapidly changing—which demonstrates an active, offensive vision for the future of CA and its relations with China. Needless to say, Beijing considers itself, in the medium term, the lead power and economic protector of the region. This kind of strategy on the part of China will, in the future, inevitably aggravate Chinese-Russian relations and could shift the style of relations from one of cooperation to one of rivalry over the right to be the major acting force in the region.

The SCO in the mode seen in Moscow and Beijing may become another sizable challenge to the development of Kazakhstan. That is to say, as an influential international organization of geopolitical dimensions, in which China and Russia will undoubtedly dominate, Central Asian states are likely to be assigned the role of “the guided.” In view of this trend, it is logical for Kazakhstan, as far as possible, to work on maintaining a tacit alliance with the post-Soviet states within the SCO with a view to neutralizing the influence of China. At the same time, Astana must continue to be Russia's leading partner out of all member states. This means coordinating with Russia on major energy projects linked with China.

It appears that Washington will transfer its focus to cooperation between Kazakhstan and NATO, and not only with a view to matters of security, but to the broader spectrum. Under these circumstances, Astana is in a difficult position, since expanding cooperation with NATO will inevitably antagonize Moscow and China, as leading powers in the SCO. On the other hand, Kazakhstan cannot, with long-term prospects in mind, afford to forego full cooperation with the West for the sake of the SCO.

The SCO is thus an extremely ambiguous organization: it is not a military-strategic alliance, nor a full-fledged economic union, nor is it a political organization in the traditional (geographical, cultural-civilizational, and so on) sense. Nevertheless the SCO holds an increasingly prominent place in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, even if this might be involuntary,

mostly because of the participation in it of powers such as Russia and China, which Kazakhstan can evidently not ignore. The SCO's Central Asian trend is another factor compelling Kazakhstan to try and play a prime regional role.

In terms of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, the SCO holds risks as well as benefits. Because this policy relies on a clear balance of influences (or "multi-vectored"), the SCO presents Kazakhstan with added options in its dialogue with the West. However, the many priorities of the SCO proposed (or imposed) by Moscow and/or Beijing are inevitably a burden for Kazakhstan. Membership of the SCO thus creates yet more difficulties in terms balancing Russia and China, as it is likely that, in the future, Astana will have to choose between them.

In the end, Kazakhstan is not reaping any real benefit from its membership in the SCO, for the organization has practically no bearing on Kazakhstan's bilateral relations with either Russia or China, nor does it help advance any particular issue. For example, Kazakhstan has been as of yet unable to gain any concessions from China on such weighty problems as the use of cross-border rivers. The SCO's potential in the area of security therefore remains mostly abstract and provides no real guarantees.

In conclusion, taking into consideration all of the objective and subjective factors, the prospect of creating an effective regional organization derived from the SCO's development seems extremely hazy. In any event, the main issues are solved at the bilateral level. And even if the SCO did succeed in developing into such an effective organization, the China's extraordinary growth would confine the other member states into little more than a supply-base for China's natural resources. The organization would then risk becoming an "economic trap" with foreseeable consequences in terms of their political sovereignty. This threat is, as yet, hypothetical. But even today the SCO embodies more challenges and risks for Kazakhstan than it does benefits.