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# China's Approach to Central Asia

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Weiqing Song

# China's Approach to Central Asia

This book examines, comprehensively, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the regional organisation which consists of China, Russia and most of the Central Asian countries. It charts the development of the Organisation from the establishment of its precursor, the Shanghai Five, in 1996, through its own foundation in 2001 to the present. It considers the foreign policy of China and of the other member states, showing how the interests and power of the member states determine the Organisation's institutions, functional development and relations with non-members. It explores the Organisation's activities in the fields of politics and security cooperation, economic and energy cooperation, and in culture and education, and concludes with a discussion of how the Organisation is likely to develop in the future. Throughout, the book sets the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the context of China's overall strategy towards Central Asia.

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# Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
BRICS forum	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa Forum
CAEC	Central Asian Economic Community
CDB	China Development Bank
CISCO	China Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation
CSTO	CIS Collective Security Treaty Organisation
CHG	Council of Heads of Government
CHS	Council of Heads of State
CNC	Council of National Coordinators
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
RDF	Collective Rapid Deployment Force
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
CNPC	Chinese National Petroleum Corporation
EAEC	Eurasian Economic Community
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
IBC	Inter-Bank Consortium
IMF	International Monetary Fund
GDP	Gross Domestic Products
GNI	Gross National Income
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OBOR	One Belt One Road
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PLA	People's Liberation Army
RATS/RCTS	Regional Anti-terrorist Structure/Regional Counter-terrorist Structure
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
UN	United Nations



# Preface

As a native of Shanghai, I have a clear memory of the first ‘Shanghai Five’ summit in 1996 and the inaugural summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001. Even when I was a layman of international relations as an academic field, I was curious about this international event that attracted leaders and diplomats from Russia and several Central Asian countries. Although these countries are geographically close to China, they are unfamiliar to ordinary Chinese people due to longstanding political separation. Nevertheless, the Chinese people are proud of this first and only international organisation named after a Chinese city, particularly as the SCO has become more visible internationally as it has developed.

After I embarked on my academic career as a professional international relations specialist, my interest in the SCO became more scholarly. The SCO is the first inter-governmental organisation largely initiated and driven by China. In this respect it is quite unusual, considering China’s age-old doctrine of bilateralism and suspicion of Western-dominated multilateral cooperation. From the perspective of foreign policy analysis, this change alone deserves special attention. The SCO also refreshes Chinese analysts’ memories of the historical links between China and Central Asia associated with the legendary Silk Road. Most Chinese learn about the Silk Road in school history classes and it seems that people today only think of it as part of history. Nevertheless, the Silk Road story is central to Chinese people’s feelings about the glorious past of their country and civilisation. Through this difficult yet enduring route people living far apart were able to exchange goods, ideas and cultures until the Silk Road finally became obsolete in the Cold War era.

After the end of the Cold War and the sudden and shocking collapse of the Soviet Union, the geopolitics of Central Asia began to undergo a dramatic change. Since then, there has been an increase in public discussion in China about the almost forgotten Silk Road. The change in the international political system has opened a door between China and its Central Asian neighbours.

In fact, China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is geographically part of Central Asia and has significant ethnic and cultural ties with countries in the region. Furthermore, China’s rediscovered interest in Central Asia is due to several factors, including its frontier stability, national security, economic

expansion and search for new sources of energy. Recognition of the importance of the region has culminated in the recent Chinese grand strategy of 'One Belt, One Road', which highlights Central Asia as the essential link in China's planned New Silk Road strategy. In this regard, the SCO has a crucial role in China's 'Go West' strategy.

This book mainly focuses on China's foreign strategy and policy towards Central Asia via the SCO. It discusses the power and interests of the SCO member states and their influence on the formation and evolution of the organisation, concentrating on China's leading role in this process, and covering a range of issues related to the SCO's organisational development. This discussion covers the broad context of China's neighbourhood policy, a coherent framework of analyses of interests and power relations, the internal aspects of the SCO institutionalisation and external aspects of its international interactions, and finally the SCO's emphasis on cooperation in the three major areas of politics and security, economy and energy, and culture and education. The book will be of great interest to academics, practitioners and students. Others with an interest in Chinese foreign policy, Central Asia and international relations in general may also find this book useful.

I wish to thank the University of Macau for its financial support through a research grant, and my former and current graduate students of the same university, who provided helpful research assistance.



*Figure 0.1*

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shanghai\\_Cooperation\\_Organisation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shanghai_Cooperation_Organisation), accessed online 10 October, 2015.

# **Introduction**

## **The Silk Road rediscovered**

### **The return of Central Asia**

Corresponding to its peripheral status in the perceptions of people from other parts of the world, the region of Central Asia does not rank highly in Chinese public discourse or the Chinese people's imagination. Little public attention has been paid to the region by the media or the populace and ordinary Chinese people have very little personal experience of the region. However, when prompted, it will almost immediately occur to most Chinese people that Central Asia is an important region, closely associated with Chinese history and national glory. Indeed, Central Asia features in the Chinese collective memory of the renowned Silk Road, which connotes Chinese military, political and commercial expansion and influence well beyond the western frontier of China over the past two millennia. China's first 'discovery' of Central Asia can be traced back to the second century BC, when the legendary Zhang Qian, an ancient Chinese envoy authorised by Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty, embarked on his courageous expedition to the Xiyu region (or West Land, largely referring to today's Central Asia). Superficially, this historic event opened up a commercial trade route. More deeply, it linked China to regions as far away as Europe and Africa and led to an exchange of civilisations lasting for the next two thousand years. There is evidence that although the close links between China and Central Asia ebbed and flowed, they remained for a very long time. In fact, until the Russian occupation about two hundred years ago, parts of Central Asia were still territories of China's Qing Dynasty. The ancient link between China and Central Asia was practically suspended during the time of the Russian Tsarist Empire, and later when the Soviet Union ruled the region.

This suspension of contact between China and Central Asia was suddenly disrupted in 1991 when the Soviet empire imploded at the end of the Cold War. A group of former Soviet republics became independent, some of them reluctantly and most of them unprepared. This transformation brought the region back to the world stage. Observers became increasingly aware of the strategic significance of Central Asia in terms of geopolitics, economics and regional development. Geopolitically, the return of the region reminds onlookers of

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Sir Halford Mackinder's famous 'Heartland Theory' which defines Central Asia as part of the pivotal heartland area of the World Island. For historians the situation is also reminiscent of the 'Great Game' of the nineteenth century during which the Russian and British empires launched strategic rivalries for supremacy in the region. Given its heartland position in Eurasia – connecting Asia, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Europe – the geopolitical importance of Central Asia still holds. Its significance accounts for the widespread predictions that the region would resume its position as a battlefield for the great games of the major powers when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s. Central Asia is rich in oil and natural gas and boasts other natural resources.<sup>1</sup> Kazakhstan has an estimated oil reserve of 30 billion barrels and natural gas reserves of 2.407 trillion cubic metres, ranking twelfth and fifteenth in the world, respectively. It is now one of the top ten oil exporters in the world and a major gas exporter. Turkmenistan, a relatively small country, has estimated natural gas reserves of 17.5 trillion cubic metres, ranking fourth in the world, and it is now the world's eighth largest exporter of natural gas. Uzbekistan is also a major exporter of natural gas and has large reserves. Besides oil and gas, Kazakhstan is also the world's largest producer of uranium. This abundance of energy and other natural resources appeals to the rest of the world, which is thirsty for ever more scarce resources. The geographical position of the region also makes it a hugely promising transit route for commercial products and people. In terms of regional development, the newly independent republics have undertaken a political, economic and social transformation. The transition is truly an enormous project, which has had varying degrees of success and has led to both convergent and divergent trends across countries in the region. The consequences of this upheaval are directly borne by the individuals and social groups of the new nations but the transformation has also attracted much attention from the outside world. Numerous activists and organisations observe, and sometimes participate in, the processes of transition, focusing on such issues as democratisation, human rights, anti-corruption and good governance.

As a close neighbour and an emerging global power, China cannot afford to neglect this newly open region, with which it has a long and significant history and a potentially huge stake in the present. It is imperative for China to re-establish working relationships with the new nations to solve urgent matters including the demarcation of common borders, the emergence of organised crime, and, more seriously, religiously motivated terrorism. Moreover, China sees an opportunity to pursue its more profound national interests in the region. China has geopolitical interests in Central Asia for many reasons. The primary motivation for expanding its influence in the region is securing its own border. A strong connection with the region could also provide a more effective counterweight against external powers in its close neighbourhood, and prevent encirclement around its borders. Almost equally important, China is attracted to the rich energy reserves, sizeable export market and potential transit role of the region. China relies on sea lanes for the foreign supply of

more than half the oil it consumes and feels insecure because most of the maritime shipping routes are out of its control and some pass through unstable regions. This leaves the country in a vulnerable position, especially as demand for imported energy and other natural resources is steadily increasing. Central Asia provides a valuable alternative, in this regard. For the first time, China could import energy resources more conveniently from neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, countries in Central Asia could be a valuable market for China's manufacturing industries. The region has a population of more than 50 million. For historical reasons, the Central Asian countries have not developed sufficient industrial capability to provide many consumer or industrial products for their own markets. Geographic proximity is another advantage for China, particularly in its western provinces such as Xinjiang. In addition, China desires to expand its cultural, educational and other 'soft' influences in the region.

The strategic value of Central Asia is well understood in China. The veteran Chinese analyst Wang Jisi (2012) has proposed a 'Go West' strategy, which advocates an assertive approach to China's western frontier. Ancient China always set its strategic focus on its interior, with further expansion along its western frontier, as exemplified by the Silk Road which served as the key land bridge and facilitated commercial and cultural exchanges between the East and the West. In more recent times, China was forced to adopt an 'open door' policy, as a result of gunboat diplomacy by Western powers, and maritime routes have become the key channel connecting China with the outside world. Coastal areas in China's southeast have had the advantages of external exchange and overall development but the northwest regions have lagged far behind. Wang argues that it is time to make a strategic shift towards the northwest, given the constraints and competition in the southeast and the new opportunities in Central Asia and beyond.

### **Central Asia in China's foreign strategy**

It seems that by highlighting the strategic importance and opportunities of China's northwest frontier, Wang is prescribing a new strategy for the Chinese government. In fact, Chinese policymakers took the opportunity to engage with the region almost immediately after the former Soviet republics became independent in the early 1990s. Since then, China has made continued efforts to manage relations with Central Asian states and pursue its interests and influence in the region. What makes China's effort in the region different now is its practice of largely experimental multilateral diplomacy. This practice is centred on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an international organisation that brings together China, four Central Asian states and Russia. This Chinese experiment fits perfectly with China's official priorities for foreign strategy. At a practical level, the current Chinese government has defined 'four major dimensions' to its comprehensive foreign policy for the new century: great powers as the key, neighbouring countries as the priority, developing

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countries as the basis, and multilateralism as the important venue. The four dimensions are further elaborated in President Hu Jintao's report to the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in November 2012.<sup>2</sup>

Through this comprehensive approach, China has begun to implement more active policies towards selected states, regions, issues and venues. The SCO is extremely important to China because it represents all four prioritised dimensions of China's foreign strategy. First, great power diplomacy targets countries with the most powerful status, predominantly in the Western developed world, of which the US is the most important. Chinese policymakers also identify other major powers, including Russia, Japan and some other traditional and emerging great powers. Given their status and influence, relations with these great powers are crucial to Chinese national interests. However, Chinese leaders admit that difficulties exist in developing relations with most Western powers, due to various differences and divergences. Therefore, they will improve and grow relations with great power states by expanding areas of cooperation and properly addressing differences. Recently, China has defined the concept of a 'new type of great power relations', mainly with reference to the United States. This concept stresses the need to base workable relations on equality and mutual respect for long-term stability and development. Within the SCO, China can manage its great power relations with Russia and very soon India, considering the probable admission of India in the near future. The SCO could provide China with a venue to coordinate its relations with great powers in a multilateral and institutionalised framework.

Neighbourhood diplomacy, in which geographically near countries are targeted, is another key dimension of China's overall foreign policy. The Chinese leadership is determined to construct a favourable environment in its immediate neighbourhood. The Chinese top leadership has made a commitment that China will continue to promote friendship and partnership with its neighbours, consolidate friendly relations and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation to ensure that China's own development will bring more benefits to its neighbours. China has, however, suffered major setbacks in the smooth implementation of this policy, mainly due to territorial disputes with several neighbouring countries, particularly India, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam. Tensions have intensified in recent years and analysts have no reason to be optimistic about the possibility of solving these disputes in the foreseeable future. China's neighbourhood diplomacy is therefore to some extent structurally weakened. Fortunately, China has successfully solved border disputes on its northwest frontier through peaceful negotiations with its neighbours, including Russia and the three Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and created a favourable environment for further engagement with these northwestern neighbours.

Since Mao's time in the Cold War, China has made continuous efforts to strengthen relations with the wider developing world, formerly better known as the Third World. However, after the adoption of the reform and opening policy in the late 1970s, the developing world was gradually marginalised in

the minds of Chinese policymakers and attention was focused on industrialised countries in the West for opportunities of trade, investment and technology. Only in recent years, with the 'Go Global' strategy for the expansion of its economic and overall power, has China realised the importance of the developing world as a valuable source of energy and raw materials, a target for markets and investments, and a venue for global influence. For this reason, the Chinese leadership has promised that China will remain a reliable friend and sincere partner of developing countries. It will increase unity and cooperation with these countries, and work with them to uphold their legitimate rights and interests, including their representation and voice in international affairs. However, China's approach has undergone a fundamental shift. In the past, driven by ideological thinking, China took a more 'selfless' attitude towards the Third World. Despite its own poverty, the Chinese government managed to contribute large-scale aid to developing countries, mostly in Asia and Africa. In more recent years, China has adopted a pragmatic approach, focusing on countries that are of strategic significance to its national interests. These include emerging regional powers and regional blocs in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. In this arena, China finds it much more useful to exercise its economic statecraft, for example, by providing preferential loans and constructing basic infrastructure in return for market, energy and other natural resources. In Central Asia, China is faced with a group of newly independent countries that are rich in energy but desperately in need of investment for infrastructure. There is therefore a good match between the two parties.

Multilateral diplomacy is a new focus of China's foreign strategy. China is more used to traditional bilateral diplomacy and has long been suspicious of multilateral organisations, which were perceived as a Western conspiracy to collectively control world affairs. Through more interactions with the outside world, the Chinese government has gradually come to realise that its national interests are increasingly intertwined with the outside world in complex interdependencies. First, a stable and amenable external environment is crucial to China's national development. Second, protection of China's ever-growing overseas interests requires direct participation in external cooperation. Multilateralism is generally effective for a wide variety of common demands and challenges. China's determination in strategic shift towards multilateralism is typically illustrated by its joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, which meant enormous opportunities for its domestic economic sectors, but also a daunting overhaul of its economic structures. The report of the Chinese Communist Party's 18th Plenary Committee explicitly states that such multilateral venues as the United Nations, the G20, the SCO and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are prioritised in China's endeavour to 'make the international order and system more just and equitable'. The importance of the SCO for China is self-evident. It is a Chinese experiment in international leadership in multilateral diplomacy. Never before has China tried to play a leading role in a multilateral organisation. In this context, Central Asia provides an opportunity for China's exercise of multilateral leadership.



## 6 *Introduction*

It is no exaggeration to say that Central Asia is a region where China can apply all four prioritised aspects of its foreign strategy. This book assesses China's approach to Central Asia through the SCO. It traces the evolution of the SCO, from its predecessor to its most recent development, focusing on how China interacts with other member states in the organisation. The book has two major themes: Chinese foreign policy towards Central Asia and the internal dynamics of the SCO. The former theme is discussed in relation to the Chinese grand strategy and its neighbourhood policy. The latter concerns the international politics of China, other SCO members and other countries with substantial stakes in the region, such as the United States. More specifically the book has several objectives:

- to identify China's motivations, opportunities, and strategies towards Central Asia, in relation to its overall foreign strategy;
- to trace the evolution of the SCO from its very beginning;
- to describe and explain the development of the SCO in terms of institutionalisation and functional cooperation;
- to describe and explain the interactions between China and other SCO member states, namely, Russia and four Central Asian countries; and
- to describe and explain the interactions between the SCO and some non-member states, particularly the United States.

### **Structure of the book**

This book is intended to be a comprehensive study of the context, evolution and scope of the SCO that provides the reader with a detailed and well-rounded analysis from a Chinese perspective. The first part of the book introduces the general context of China's interests and motivations for engaging with its neighbours, in particular, its strategies towards Central Asia through the SCO framework. The first chapter traces the trajectory of China's foreign strategy in the post-Cold War era as it relates to the country's grand development plan. Within this broad context, China has adopted and implemented a neighbourhood policy towards Central Asia. This chapter describes the general context of China's relations with Central Asian countries, its interactions with Russia in the region and the role of Chinese leadership in the origin and evolution of the SCO. Chapter Two establishes a framework for empirically analysing the SCO process, with special reference to China's role. It identifies the various interests, motivations and power statuses of SCO members and argues that they have individual, albeit occasionally mutual, interests and priorities. An initial asymmetry of interests is observed – the principal reason the SCO's strategic situation is largely a suasion game between China and the other members – with China demonstrating a greater interest in the SCO. The power asymmetry between China and the Central Asian members and the power equality between China and Russia further complicates the situation. China attempted to exercise leadership by creating and running a regional

organisation for the first time. However, SCO members' interests in promoting the organisation's further development have converged in recent years. China and Russia now have more common ground on which to cooperate with the Central Asian states in this regional initiative.

Part two of the book addresses the internal and external dimensions of the SCO, focusing on the organisation's institutionalisation process and the interactions between the SCO and its member states and other actors, including observers and great powers with substantial stakes and influence in the region. Chapter Three focuses on the SCO's regional institutionalisation process. It traces the evolution of the SCO from its origin as a border settlement mechanism to the informal coordination process of the 'Shanghai Five' and eventually to its current formalised incarnation. This chapter also discusses the consolidation of the SCO's organisational structure and functional divisions. Chapter Four touches upon factors external to the SCO, including the foreign policy orientations of the SCO member states, international responses to the SCO and interactions between SCO members and others, particularly China and interested non-member states. Many analysts argue that the SCO is essentially an inward-looking organisation that concentrates on managing internal relations and developing cooperation between its member states. However, factors external to the SCO cannot be neglected. Since the organisation's inception, its implications have extended beyond Central Asia and increasingly it has developed links with other states and organisations to promote its international visibility and participation. This chapter addresses the SCO's relations not only with the observer and dialogue states, including Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan, but also with countries with strong stakes and interests in the region, including the United States, Japan, Turkey and EU countries. It also considers the SCO's participation in major international organisations such as the UN and contact with other international organisations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Part three of the book provides detailed information on and analysis of the SCO's substantive cooperation in three major areas: political and security spheres, economic and functional areas, and cultural and educational matters. Chapter Five examines the SCO's security and political cooperation. Beyond formalisation and institutionalisation, SCO member states have expanded the scope of security cooperation from issues of border settlement, military confidence building and regional stability to international terrorism, trafficking, weapons proliferation and political and foreign strategic cooperation. The SCO's cooperation involves various military, public security, judicial and political actors and departments. Development of member states' cooperation in this area is described using major variables previously discussed, particularly, configuration of power relations and convergence and divergence of national interests. When the interests of member states, particularly the most powerful China and Russia, converge, the SCO can more easily promote political and security cooperation and take collective action. Chapter Six examines another

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major aspect of SCO collaboration, namely, cooperation in functional economic areas including trade, investment, energy, transport, telecommunications, technology and agriculture. Encouraged by progress in the institutional setting and cooperation on security, some SCO member states, particularly China, have made efforts to promote economic cooperation in the SCO framework. This chapter describes the development of member states' cooperation in these areas, with major variables discussed within the analytical framework defined in Chapter Two. It argues that given members' divergent interests, developing the SCO is challenging, despite some moderate progress. Member states that are keen to promote economic and functional cooperation, such as China, have to resort to bilateral options to push their agendas forward. Chapter Seven covers cooperation within the SCO in the fields collectively known as *renwen* (the Chinese term for the humanities or culture). The humanities represent an interesting but often neglected area of member states' cooperation. In this chapter, the major components of the SCO's cultural cooperation are described, and the motivations of individual member states are analysed using the framework defined in Chapter Two. Culture, education and related issues are relatively new and undeveloped areas of focus for studies of the SCO. However, China and other members of the SCO have become increasingly motivated to increase their 'soft' power by pursuing cultural and educational advancement through channels such as public diplomacy. In recent years, the SCO has made some progress in its cultural cooperation. However, this cooperation is significantly impeded by member states' lack of resources and motivation, as well as cultural and religious differences across the SCO. Of the many SCO member states, China has the greatest motivation and capacity to contribute to the SCO's cultural cooperation.

## Notes

- 1 Information on energy and other natural resources of the Central Asian states is drawn from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) *World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>, accessed 9 July 2015.
- 2 Report of Hu Jintao to the 18th CPC National Congress, 8 November 2012, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th\\_cpc\\_congress/2012-11/16/content\\_27137540.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27137540.htm), accessed 10 July 2015.

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