

IRSTI 03.29.00

<https://doi.org/10.26577/JH.2022.v106.i3.03>**David Elam** 

University of Glasgow, Great Britain, Glasgow
KIMEP University, Kazakhstan, Almaty
e-mail: David.elam@kimep.kz

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AS A REGIONAL CORNERSTONE: REGIONALIST CRITIQUES

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has had its critics since its inception in 2001 with regards to how meaningful and organisation it really is, and its capabilities in becoming a regional cornerstone. The purpose of this piece is to critically evaluate how any why the SCO has struggled to establish itself, through the main directions of Russian and Chinese power projection and what effect that has on the SCO's region building capability. The significance of this work lies in bridging traditionally competing schools of thought on regionalism: classical regionalist and new regionalist approaches. The analytical utility of classical approaches account well for power projection, but are not sufficient to explore the role of the SCO as an institution within which a community of like-minded states interact and reify shared norms. The use of either approach in isolation therefore struggles to account for the intricacies of the SCO, and thus limits the explanatory potential of critical approaches to the SCO as an organisation. The significance thus lies in a recognition of the need for theoretical flexibility when dealing with regional organisations that do not quite fit the normative culture of recent new regionalist schools of thought, instead adopting a more multi-faceted critical approach to harness the explanatory power of multiple theories for a single-case study.

Key words: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Classical Regionalism, New Regionalism, Russia, China.

Дэвид Элам

Глазко университеті, Ұлыбритания, Глазко қ.
КИМЭП университеті, Қазақстан, Алматы қ.
e-mail: David.elam@kimep.kz

Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымы аймақтық актор ретінде: аймақтанушы сыны

Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымы 2001 жылы құрылғаннан бастап сынға ұшырады: аталған сын оның болмысы мен ұйымдастырушылық құрылымына қатысты болғандықтан, оның аймақтың актор ретіндегі қызметі хақында біраз сұрақтар тудырды. Бұл жұмыстың мақсаты ШЫҰ қалыптасуының себептері мен шарттарын аймақтағы ресейлік және қытайлық қозғалыстардың призмасы арқылы талдау және олардың бұл ұйымның қалыптасуына қалай әсер еткенін анықтау. Аталған жұмыстың мәні – мұнда аймақтанудың әр түрлі мектептері – классикалық және жаңа аймақтану мектептерінің өзара әрекеттестігі қарастырылады. Классикалық тәсілдердің аналитикалық құндылығы – ол мемлекеттің ықпалын бақылауға мүмкіндік береді, дегенмен де, бұл көзқарастары ұқсас және ортақ ережелері бар мемлекеттердің өзара әрекеттесуі жүретін институт ретінде ШЫҰ рөлін зерттеуге жеткіліксіз. Бұл тәсілдерді жеке пайдалану ШЫҰ жұмысындағы кейбір егжей-тегжейлерін бағалауға мүмкіндік бермейді, сол себепті аталған аймақтық ұйымның жұмысын сыни зерттеудің аймағын тарылтады. Бұл мақаланың пайда болуының қажеттілігі – аймақтық ұйымдарға арналған зерттеулердің теориялық икемділігінің жеткіліксіздігімен негізделеді. Соңғы мәселені жаңа өңіртану теориялары көмегімен айналып өтуге болады, бұл аталған мәселені зерттеуде жаңа көпжақты тәсілдерді қолдануға жол ашады.

Түйін сөздер: Шанхай ынтымақтастық Ұйымы, классикалық аймақтану, жаңа өңіртану, Ресей, Қытай.

Дэвид Элам

Университет Глазго, Великобритания, г. Глазго
Университет КИМЭП, Казахстан, г. Алматы
e-mail: David.elam@kimep.kz

Шанхайская Организация Сотрудничества как региональный актор: критика регионалиста

Шанхайская Организация Сотрудничества подвергалась критике с периода ее основания в 2001 году: эта критика затрагивала ее сущность и организационную структуру, что ставило под вопрос ее функционирование в качестве регионального актора. Целью данной работы является анализ причин и условий появления ШОС через призму российских и китайских движений в регионе, и того, каким образом эти движения повлияли на возникновение этой организации. Значимость этой работы состоит в том, что здесь рассматривается взаимодействие разных школ регионализма: классического и новой регионалистики. Аналитическая ценность классических подходов заключается в том, что она позволяет проследить влияние государства, однако этого недостаточно, чтобы исследовать роль ШОС как института, в котором взаимодействуют государства с близкими взглядами и общими нормами. Использование этих подходов по отдельности не позволяет оценить некоторые тонкости в работе ШОС и сужает границы критического исследования работы этой региональной организации. Необходимость данного исследования обосновывается недостатком теоретической гибкости исследований, посвященных региональным организациям. Именно последнее обстоятельство можно обойти с помощью теории нового регионализма, что позволяет применить новый многослойный подход к исследованию данной проблемы.

Ключевые слова: Шанхайская Организация Сотрудничества, классический регионализм, новый регионализм, Россия, Китай.

Introduction

The official descriptors of the SCO mark it down as a political, economic, and security organisation – however since 2001 the SCO has had its critics in terms of how meaningful an organisation it really is. In essence, the central thesis of this piece is that the SCO failed to form the basis of regional order in Eurasia as the pre-existing competing interests and projection of Russian and Chinese power are not conducive to the SCO becoming a regional cornerstone. Regarding critical theoretical approaches, two broad schools of thought will be applied to determine the level how it failed to emerge as the basis for a Eurasian regional order. Classical regionalist critiques concern themselves primarily with the efficacy in drawing up and enacting policy as part of the construction of regional frameworks, and is an area that has seen success since the inception of the SCO. However, new regionalist critiques investigate beyond the scope of classical approaches – seeking to elucidate the SCO's contribution to the region in terms of norms, culture, and the overall creation of regional frameworks. These divergent approaches provide two theoretical yardsticks with which to account for the failure of the SCO to emerge as the basis for a Eurasian regional order, and as such the first part of this piece will discuss the merits of these approaches. The second part will seek to apply an

understanding of both classical and new regionalist approaches to key actors within the SCO – Russia, China, and the CA states, as well as India and Pakistan and what their inclusion means to the SCO. Any international regional organisation has to balance the interests of the various states as actors within a regional framework – and as such applying two competing theories to key actors within the SCO best lends itself to a critical understanding for the failure of the SCO to establish itself as the basis for a Eurasian regional order.

Materials and Methods

The analysis of state interests within the framework of the SCO and how that translated into the failure of the organisation to emerge as the basis for a regional order must therefore begin with a discussion around classical and new regionalist theoretical approaches. Such a consideration lends itself to elucidating whose regional order the SCO was set out to form the basis for, as well as coming to an understanding as to how specifically the SCO failed as a regional organisation. A classical approach will allow for an analysis of structural and procedural issues within the SCO, whilst a new regionalist approach will enable analysis to highlight the more constructivist failings of the organisation as a whole. These considerations will enable a more in-

formed actor-centred analysis that will follow this theoretical section, and will allow for a more critical understanding in terms of determining on whom the failure of the SCO to emerge as an essential regional pillar for Eurasia centres. Given this approach the analytical section will seek to pinpoint various interests of the different actors in the SCO as opposed to approaching the organisation through a linear historical analysis.

Literature Review

Classical regionalism in broad terms can be defined as an understanding of regional systems and organisations that finds its basis in realist approaches to international relations. The realist tradition has four key tenets, proposing that states are the most important actors, the international (regional) system is anarchic, all states are rational actors pursuing their own interests to maximise power, and the primary concern of all states is survival (Donnelly, 2008: 150). Proceeding with this realist logic, any regional organisation's primary aims are best explained by examining the core interests and aims of the biggest states in the region, and how these interests are institutionalised by these actors (Pedersen, 2002: 678). This process of large states instrumentalising regional organisations to promote their relative gain over that of the smaller states is defined as institutional capture (Krebs, 1999: 343-356). It is through the actualisation of the interests of large state actors in regional organisation that these states construct what Pedersen identifies as "Cooperative Hegemony", whereby large states recognise the need for regional cooperation but only do so to the extent that it still suits their broader hegemonic strategy for the region (Pedersen, 2002: 677-678). In this sense classical regionalism as understood through its realist tradition allows for an appreciation of the motives of key actors in regional systems and more importantly allows for an appreciation of which states instrumentalise regional international organisation in constructing a regional order that suits them best. Such a theoretical approach is further pertinent to the case of the SCO and CA where the two key players are Russia and China, whose projection of power in a realist sense would be the foundation of regional order. These are large states with their own goals, but more importantly their aims as realist states individually necessitate an appreciation of where their interests collide and how differing power projections influence the regional order dynamic. The log-

ic then follows in assuming that if two large states with their own visions for how to instrumentalise a regional organisation cannot come to a working compromise that suits both of them, the organisation will not be able to effectively function owing to this power struggle inherent to the processes of institutional capture and cooperative hegemony. This can be seen in a very simplistic manner as the SCO does not have an official leader, which would mean that there is an element of realist anarchy that is inherent to the SCO from its inception in terms of large state actors (Naarajärvi, 2012: 116).

The emergence of new regionalism was centred around a need for addressing the new contexts that came into play in international relations. As a direct response to the fall of the Soviet Union, new regionalist approaches cultivated by Björn Hettne seek to go beyond the classical tests for the success of regional organisations in that the approaches expanded analysis from classical concerns to incorporate notions of shared norms – emphasising "the social, political and cultural dimensions" (Hettne et al., 1994: xviii). Such theory is further conducive to the actor-centred approach that the analysis will adopt as new regionalism's primary concern is those regions that were not typically the subject of scrutiny, with the focus on post-colonial regions and the global south a fruitful tradition for an analysis of CA (Naarajärvi, 2012: 188). Taking the general rhetoric of the SCO into account, it would seem that a new regionalist approach is justified due to its broad general aims that it seeks to promote – aiming not only to provide a platform to strengthen ties but also to form an anti-pole to traditional Western regional blocs (Naarajärvi, 2012: 187-188). These aims can be realised through the success of constructed organisation norms. Hettne's five-step progression metric for testing the level of 'regionness' of the scope of a given regional organisation is however where the true utility of new regionalism as a theoretical lens lies. The scope of the SCO can be defined geographically (step one), there is a level of interdependence in the region (step two), and there is a regional society that acts in socio-political and cultural fields (step three) (Hettne, 2001). However as Naarajärvi crucially points out, the SCO fails the last two steps in that it does not have a fully fledged regional community (step four) owing to the various disputes between the CA states themselves, as well as not having a regional institutionalised polity as a result of the interests of Russia and China overriding those of the region as a whole (Naara-

järvi, 2012: 189-189). Naarajärvi's identification of the SCO's failure to actualise these last two steps further justifies the actor-centric approach that the analysis section adopts as it will best allow for pinpointing the clashing interests in lacking a regional community or a regional institutionalised polity due to the competing interests and realities of the SCO member states.

In essence, the analytical utility of comparing classical and new regionalist theoretical approaches find themselves in the fundamental differences in criteria between the two theories for a successful regional organisation. Whilst a classical approach gives primacy to realist notions of power in forming regional orders, it does not place cultural convergence and shared norms as central facets of a successful international organisation as the regionalist approach does. It is this theoretical interplay that can therefore lead to a more profound understanding of the failure of the SCO to emerge as the basis for a regional order, given that the application of a classical regional analytical lens would suggest power struggles inherent to the SCO that contributed to its failure. Furthermore, the added layer of a minimal cultural convergence and promotion of shared value systems seen in the new regionalist approach suggests a further aspect failure in assuming the role of a regional lynchpin. The following analytical section will therefore apply these themes through an actor centric approach, seeking to show through these theoretical lenses that the interplay of aims, wants, and needs of SCO member states are crucial to understanding the failure of the SCO to become an avenue for the large states to establish a cooperative hegemony that favours them, as well as actualise the last two steps of Hettne's criteria for fully fledged 'regionness'.

Results and Discussion

Any international organisation's primary aim is to be more than the sum of its parts, blocs and power players are present in ways that are particular to the make-up of a given organisation and the nature of the states that are part of it. The SCO has three different kinds of actors: (1) the large state actors of Russia and China, and the smaller CA states. This section will therefore seek to apply classical and new regionalist theory to each of the two categories of SCO member states to elucidate why the SCO failed to become the basis for a Eurasian regional order, specifically focusing on notions of coopera-

tive hegemony and institutional capture, as well as new regionalist approaches concerned with a lack of regional community and a regional institutionalised polity.

Central Asia has emerged as a key theatre for Russia to further its foreign policy goals since the economic sanctions it incurred in 2014 after its annexation of Crimea – as it sought to foster better relationships with previous allies in the region as well as counterbalance the cost of economic sanctions (Lanteigne, 2018: 121). The SCO was therefore an important opportunity for Russia to become closer with the once Soviet CA states, with previous attempts at institutionalised regionalism in the Commonwealth of Independent States after the fall of the Soviet Union largely unsuccessful due to failed economic policy, as well as the short-term goal of guaranteeing the region's security in the face of territorial issues between the newly independent republics (Dadabaev, 2014: 105). Further attempts at regional integration along the lines of establishing cohesive economic ties in CA through the Russia backed Eurasian Economic Union did not actualise to a workable and sustainable regional economic policy (Kirkham, 2016: 111-128). The common goal that unified these experiments in regional order were the continuation of Soviet-era cooperative hegemony in the region, however in a way that was reframed to suit the post-Soviet contexts (Kirkham, 2016: 115). Given Russia's previous attempts at establishing regional order through organisation, the SCO still has its role to play in Russia's vision of cooperative hegemony given the shared Soviet past between them and the CA states, with such a legacy further paving the way for institutional capture.

However, it is further clear that the fostering of regional community and an institutionalised regional polity are not congruent with the hard power aims of Russia in the region (Lanteigne, 2018: 123). In this sense any regional organisation involving Russia and the CA states will always be seen by the Russian state as an avenue to further its own interests through its hard-power foreign policy approach, and as seen with the CIS and the EEU these organisations are not a question of a Eurasian regional order, but the continuation of Russian notions of regional order in their historic sphere of influence. The SCO's ability to provide a platform for Russia to ensure its economic security concerns is a further motivator for Russia's involvement, and is realised in a way where the benefits of economic cooperation are skewed in Russia's favour as opposed to that of the

CA states (Flikke, 2016: 162). What this means for the SCO is that Russia cannot meaningfully participate in the SCO in a constructed manner as it would contradict Putin's avowal of hard power projections in Russian foreign policy. The SCO therefore is a convenience in terms of solving economic security concerns, whilst also feeding into Russia's cultivation of itself as a major power.

As the other large state in the SCO, China has two primary objectives within the organisation: furthering its own interests as a state, whilst as a direct result simultaneously seeking to counterbalance Russian interests. China enjoys and relishes a leading role in the SCO and its institutional processes – not only does the organisation bear the name of one of its major cities, but its institutions are also funded by the Chinese state in a form of *de facto* institutional capture (Yuan, 2010: 857). It is further remarked that China is the most motivated partner within the SCO, with the distribution of the benefits of the organisation favouring China in its vision of cooperative hegemony given its central goal of mutual economic development through the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiatives in the region (Song, 2014: 86–87). The economic power asymmetry inherent to China's relationship with its SCO partners as a result of OBOR adds a further layer to how the state realises its aims in the region – OBOR agreements with the CA states are not achieved through the institutions of the SCO, but rather through multi-lateral agreements with the states directly (Song, 2014: 87). Such power asymmetries do however result in a power imbalance in multilateral agreements, with the relative importance of China's energy security, goals in international politics, and the security of Xinjiang all conveniently part and parcel of multi-lateral relations with the CA states (Song, 2014: 88).

In this sense for China the benefit of furthering its aims of cooperative hegemony and institutional capture come at the expense of policies such as a free trade area and concrete arrangements for cooperation within the SCO that would satisfy a more new regionalist view of the SCO as a successful basis for a regional order (Song, 2014: 101). Avenues to pursue new regionalist integration between China and the CA states within the SCO are further held back by growing popular disapproval of China in the region owing to the extent of OBOR projects as well as the transfer and rent of CA territories (Dadabaev, 2014: 109). The fostering of a regional community is therefore made increasingly difficult given Sinophobic responses to China's involvement in the

region, and provides a further irreconcilable contradiction. This is further problematic for Chinese notions of cooperative hegemony in the region – with Chinese economic projects in the region simultaneously guaranteeing the financial security of the CA regimes, whilst also threatening them in terms of popular approval. New regionalist lines of organisational development are therefore at direct odds with China's goals understood in the sense of classical regionalism, and China's actions – despite being a key lynchpin within the SCO – provide it with inherent contradictions that make the SCO fail in realising its potential as the basis for regional order.

The immediate benefit of the SCO to the Central Asian states is the consolidation of the security of their regimes, seeing it as a tool through which they can gain international legitimacy, and extract economic benefits backed by Russia and China (Song, 2014: 98). The CA states would likely see their interests better represented and realised within the framework of the SCO were it not for territorial, ethnic, and economic disputes between themselves (Dadabaev, 2014: 103). These conflicts between what are clearly smaller states than Russia and China mean that the possibility for collective bargaining is much reduced, and therefore the likelihood of them mounting any real challenge to the institutional capture and cooperative hegemony that favours the large states as a bloc through collective bargaining is in turn quite limited. Such conflict further limits the scope for the SCO realising the two last steps for actualising fully fledged 'regionness' seen in the new regionalist approach, as the fostering of a regional community and a regional institutional polity is not a viable goal given the immediate security threats that they represent to each other. The scope for the CA states to have their interests included in the construction of a regional order therefore lies in the niche they can carve out for themselves within the SCO institutions as opposed to the fostering of shared values that was more of an aim immediately after their independence from the Soviet Union (Dadabaev, 2004).

This is not to say that the CA states have no interest in fostering shared values and norms, but rather that initial agreement on these with "Shanghai Spirit" espousing "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation...and the pursuit of common development" (SCO Declaration, 2006) has not been realised on their terms beyond traditional security concerns of tackling organised crime and terrorism in the region under the auspices of cooperative

hegemony (Dadabaev, 2014: 106-107). Despite the presence of Russia and China as counterweights and guarantors of regional security, divergent approaches to regional security mean little can be achieved in the way of mediating inter-CA state conflict not only as it would go directly against the Shanghai spirit, but also due to differing approaches to achieving and maintaining cooperative hegemony in the region between Russia and China (Lanteigne, 2018: 120).

Whilst there has been little concerted effort in fostering positive shared norms as understood by a new regionalist approach, the SCO's capacity to guarantee the security of authoritarian regimes in the region is extensive (Flikke, 2016: 162). In a sense authoritarian government and guaranteeing the security of their respective regimes could be said to be shared normative values – but would not be along the lines of the positive values Hettne associates with his concept of 'regionness'. Nevertheless, this absurdity of the SCO is worth noting, however as has previously been discussed the true guarantee of regional regime security in CA is not the SCO, but rather the bilateral economic and energy ties between CA and Russia and China. In short, the conflict between CA states further contributes to the failure of the SCO to emerge as an ordering principle in the region as it limits the scope small state collective bargaining. This further complicates active participation in shaping the vision and institutions of the SCO to favour the very states it seeks to empower and develop, and holds back the SCO's capability to form the basis of regional order.

An actor centric approach has therefore allowed the analysis to pinpoint indicators of failure that were identified in the theoretical discussion, and that can be found to be common throughout the levels of member states of the SCO. Russia as a large state can be said to have clearly defined hard power goals in Eurasia, with their primary motivation for regional order being one that favours their economic security concerns. Given the role of hard power

in Russian foreign policy, the theoretical interplay between classical regionalism and new regionalism has shown that hard power projection can come at the expense of meaningfully contributing to regional frameworks in a new regionalist sense. This inherent contradiction can further be seen in China's role in the SCO as a large state. China's primary concern of energy security as well as furthering OBOR comes at the cost of fostering a regional community on the basis of shared norms and cultures.

This is partly due to popular discontent with China's increased presence in the CA region – with Sinophobia severely limiting the prospects of the SCO establishing itself as the basis of regional order. The CA states and their roles as actors within the SCO have been generalised with few analyses of specific CA state interests, however patterns of inter-CA state tensions are a commonality throughout. A further commonality is the convenience of the SCO in guaranteeing the security of their authoritarian regimes – however this guarantee is not given through the institutions of the SCO, but rather through energy and OBOR partnerships with China.

Conclusions

In essence, classical regionalist theoretical approaches have shown that the interests of large states can clash and override that of the SCO as a whole – with the inherent contradiction in the individual foreign policy aims coming at the cost of meaningful regional integration shown for both Russia and China. New regionalist theoretical approaches would suggest that there is a perverse set of shared values in the culture of authoritarianism, however the theoretical test prefers positive shared values. These two theories have therefore enabled an informed actor-centric approach to the analysis of why the SCO failed to emerge as the basis of regional order, finding that large state interests, and a lack of small state collective bargaining were key contributors to this failure.

References

- Dadabaev, T., *Towards Post-Soviet Central Asian Regional Integration: A Scheme for Transitional States* (Tokyo: Akashi Shyoten, 2004).
- Dadabaev, T., "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Regional Identity Formation from the Perspective of the Central Asian States", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No. 85., (2014), pp. 102-118.
- Declaration on the Fifth Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, (15 June 2006, Shanghai, China,) available at: www.sectsc.org/EN/show.asp?id=94.
- Donnelly, J. "The Ethics of Realism", in: Reus-Smit, C., Duncan, S. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2008),

Flikke, G., “*Sino-Russian Relations: Status Exchange or Imbalanced Relationship?*”, *Problems of Post Communism*, Vol. 63, No. 3, (2016), pp. 159-170.

Hettne, B., *Communication and non-communication in a regional system: the pathological cleavage pattern of South Asia*. (2001) Paper to the SASNET Workshop on Global Networking in South Asian Studies. <http://www.sasnet.lu.se/hettne.pdf>. Accessed 10 April 2019

Hettne B., Inotai A., Sunkel O., (eds.), *The new regionalism and the future of security and development*. (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1994)

Kirkham, K. (2016). The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union: How successful is the Russian regional hegemony?. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7(2), 111-128.

Lanteigne, M., “*Russia and China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Diverging Security Interests and the Crimea Effect*”, in: Blakkisrud, H., Rowe, E. W., (eds.), *Russia’s Turn to the East: Domestic Policymaking and Regional Cooperation*, (Cham: Springer Publishing, 2018),

Naarajärvi, T., “*China, Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: blessing or a curse for new regionalism in Central Asia?*” *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2012), pp. 113-126.

Pedersen, P., “*Cooperative Hegemony: Power, Ideas, and Institutions in Regional Integration*”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (2002), p. 677-696.

Krebs, R., “*Perverse Institutionalism: NATO and the Greco-Turkish Conflict*”, *International Organisation*, Vol. 53, No. 2, (1999), pp. 343-356.

Song, W., “*Interests, Power, and China’s Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No. 85, (2014), pp. 85-101.

Yuan, J-D., “*China’s role in establishing and building the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)*”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol.19, No. 67, (2010), pp. 855-869.