



# The Lessons China Taught Itself: Why the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Matters

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**OE Watch Commentary:** China’s changing political landscape and the recent accession of India to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) marks the beginning of a new chapter for one of China’s first self-founded multilateral groupings. First established in June 2001 by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s initial activities were primarily focused on security, namely combating the “three evils”—terrorism, separatism, and extremism. This year’s leader-level summit marks the first instance in which Indian Prime Minister Modi will join the grouping as a full member, introducing a democratic counterweight into an organization historically dominated by China, and to a lesser degree, Russia.

Largely absent from previous outcome-focused Western analyses is a close look at the lessons that China itself has learned on advancing its geostrategic interests through multilateral organizations. A review of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s activities reveals that China perceives the organization as a blank canvas to hone its own approaches to leading on the international stage. Moreover, official releases from the SCO itself acknowledge the need for the group to continue refining coordination and organization mechanisms. Thus, the current value of the SCO is as a forum for China to define and articulate its interests, shape the focus of international institutions based on its own domestic priorities, lobby its neighbors to adopt its approach, and codify those views within an internationally legitimate multilateral process.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was preceded by the Shanghai Five, which was created in April 1996 by all SCO founding member states, excluding Uzbekistan. The Shanghai Five’s initial mandate was limited in scope and focused on the demilitarization and clear delineation borders within the region. China’s initial step into this multilateral grouping was driven by a strategic necessity stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the need for clear territorial boundaries, rather than a broader plan to imbue Eurasia with multilateralism. As time passed, and China’s grip on the security situation in Xinjiang tightened, Chinese officials advocated the expansion of the SCO’s mandate.

In 2004, official SCO documents began to increasingly emphasize the “further development and deepening of the SCO cooperation on trade, economic, investment.” These preliminary discussions served as a precursor to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. By 2006, the SCO was highlighting the role of information and communications technology (ICT) in its forward planning documents, and openly acknowledging that ICT could cause “serious damage to the security...and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.” The SCO’s work on ICT is particularly noteworthy, as it both presaged and proceeded in concert with an evolution of Chinese rhetoric on ICT standards into a robust defense of “cyber sovereignty.” The complementary nature of China’s work in the SCO with its work in other multinational fora is underscored by its repeated efforts to use the United Nations as a means to legitimize and extend China’s illiberal ICT governance norms across new domains.

The Chinese Communist Party’s 18th Party Congress marked the beginning of Secretary General Xi Jinping’s tenure and a sharp shift in how China perceived itself within the existing international order. Chief among Xi’s initiatives is to “unremittingly strive” for the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by 2049. As China has realized success with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in its bilateral dealings with SCO member states, China’s Foreign Ministry is increasingly linking BRI to the upcoming work of the SCO itself. Indeed, a key deliverable for the 2018 SCO Summit was the “strengthening of ties” between the SCO countries and the Belt and Road Initiative, which, “have been closely related...from the very beginning.”

Although China has succeeded in gaining Russian support for the Belt and Road Initiative over the past five years, India’s accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization introduces another actor, one that is keen to check China’s ambitions for regional hegemony. At the 2018 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Foreign Ministers, India refused to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative, highlighting a fissure between the members. Despite this public split, both China and India have used the 2018 SCO Qingdao Summit to highlight regional cooperation rather than competition. However, on controversial issues such as ICT standards, India could constraint the SCO’s ability to forcefully advocate for Beijing and Moscow’s preferred positions at the United Nations. In contrast to the SCO’s 2017 Astana Declaration, the 2018 Qingdao Declaration notably declined to endorse the SCO’s 2015 ICT standards submission to the United Nations.

Altogether, the 2018 Qingdao Declaration totals two thousand more words than the SCO’s 2017 Astana Declaration and includes references to issues as diverse as infectious diseases, e-trade, Afghanistan’s peace process, the Syrian Civil War, international trade barriers, peace on the Korean Peninsula, disarmament and nonproliferation, state sovereignty, counterterrorism, drug-trafficking, anti-corruption efforts, and a host of other topics.

That China’s Foreign Ministry was able to lead multilateral negotiations on such an array of issues demonstrates their bureaucrats’ attention to detail, diplomatic deftness, and desire to influence policy outcomes on a broad range of matters, many of which may not produce tangible impacts for years to come. By building multilateral support for emerging issue sets that remain under discussed within developing countries, China is benefitting from a “first mover” approach to international relations, where it is able to set the parameters and define success on matters that will be of critical importance to future generations.

In the years to come, it remains to be seen if China itself will adhere to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s pledge to advance this “new type of international relations” defined by equality among all states and domestic political non-interference, or if China’s own “great rejuvenation” will impinge upon those in its periphery. What is certain is that China’s engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has taught Beijing valuable lessons on how to form, shape, and engage “new models” of international organizations. **End OE Watch Commentary (Grace)**

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## Continued: The Lessons China Taught Itself: Why the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Matters

*“Trade volume between China and countries along the Belt and Road has exceeded five trillion U.S. dollars.”*

**Source:** “Economic Watch: SCO in closer ties with Belt and Road Initiative,” *Xinhua*, 9 June 2018. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/09/c\\_137241789.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/09/c_137241789.htm)

*...Initiated in 2015, the Qingdao freight trains have travelled from China to Central Asia over 3,000 times, making the coastal city a node on the economic corridor linking China, Central Asia and Europe.*

*Qingdao, which hosts the 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit this weekend, is one of the witnesses of the enhanced connectivity between China and other SCO members thanks to the development of the Belt and Road Initiative...Trade volume between China and countries along the Belt and Road has exceeded five trillion U.S. dollars...*



Aerial view of the Civic District, Singapore River and Central Business District, Singapore.

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