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* Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

** Doç. Dr.,

Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi, İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, Trabzon/TÜRKİYE

✉ ozgurtufekci@ktu.edu.tr

ORCID : 0000-0002-4335-2909

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RUSSIA-CHINA RIVALRY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION (SCO)**

Özgür TÜFEKÇİ**

Abstract: The SCO was initially organised as the Shanghai Five in 1996. Along with Uzbekistan's membership in 2001, it was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The main aim of the Organisation is to strengthen mutual trust and friendship between the member states. The SCO has deliberately restricted its own authority so that it lacks the power to enforce any specific actions on its members. This statement accurately portrays the situation since the two primary powers of the organisation - China and Russia, who were founding members - have conflicting plans for the region. Any effort that benefits one of them at the cost of the other is certain to fail. The tensions arising from the competition between these two powers will inevitably increase as their own power surpasses that of a declining America. This weakening threat, which initially solidified their alliance of convenience, combined with various shocks during this delicate transition period, will almost certainly result in the complete disappearance of any form of cooperation between the two powers. In this case, the study aims to identify the role of the Russia-China rivalry in Central Asia through the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

ORTA ASYA'DA RUSYA-ÇİN REKABETİ VE ŞANHAY İŞBİRLİĞİ ÖRGÜTÜ (ŞİÖ)

Öz: ŞİÖ, ilk olarak 1996 yılında Şanhay Beşlisi olarak örgütlendi. 2001 yılında Özbekistan'ın üye olmasıyla birlikte Şanhay İşbirliği Örgütü (ŞİÖ) olarak yeniden adlandırıldı. Örgütün temel amacı üye devletler arasında karşılıklı güven ve dostluğu güçlendirmektir. ŞİÖ, kendi yetkisini kasıtlı olarak kısıtlayarak üyelerine yönelik herhangi bir aksiyon uygulama yetkisini ortadan kaldırmıştır. Bu açıklama, örgütün iki ana gücünün (kurucu üyeler olan Çin ve Rusya) bölgeye yönelik çelişkili planlara sahip olması nedeniyle durumu çok doğru bir şekilde ortaya koyuyor. Böylece birine yarar sağlayacak, diğerinin zararına olacak herhangi bir çabanın başarısızlıkla sonuçlanması kesindir. Bu iki güç arasındaki rekabetten kaynaklanan gerilimler, kendi güçleri Amerika'ninkini aştıkça kaçınılmaz olarak artacaktır. Başlangıçta çıkar ittifaklarını güçlendiren bu zayıflayan tehdit, bu hassas geçiş döneminde çeşitli şoklarla birleşince, neredeyse kesin olarak iki güç arasındaki her türlü işbirliğinin tamamen ortadan kalkmasıyla sonuçlanacaktır. Bu bağlamda,

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makale, Şangay İşbirliği Örgütü'nün faaliyetleri üzerinden Rusya-Çin rekabetinin Orta Asya'daki rolünü tespit etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

1. A Tool to Enhance Trust and Cooperation: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions, which established the Shanghai Five, was signed in Shanghai on 26 April 1996 by the heads of state of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. In a meeting held in Moscow on 24 April 1997, the countries above ratified the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions. Following that meeting, a declaration regarding a "multipolar world" was jointly signed by Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Russian President Boris Yeltsin on 20 May 1997.

In 2001, following the 9/11 attacks, China and Russia acted together to address terrorism and the security vacuum in Central Asia, which could pose a security risk for them with regard to populations that could be radicalised or vulnerable to radicalisation by extremist organisations.¹ The year 2001 marked Uzbekistan's accession to the SCO, and 2002 saw the signing of the SCO Charter. Today, the SCO has risen as a full-fledged anti-hegemonic, non-western international organisation, countering American influence among its members, as well as international terrorism. Preserving harmony among its constituents, whose existence is imperilled by the colour revolutions, has emerged as a primary concern on the SCO agenda. When heads of state of the SCO met in 2005, the general concern about the political unrest in the countries was coupled with the dissatisfaction with the US bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In addition, the member countries have conducted anti-terrorist military exercises since 2003.²

Although Russia and China share the goal of limiting American influence in the region, they hold slightly divergent expectations regarding the SCO. The Security Council of China assumes lesser significance in safeguarding Central Asia than China, which attempts to manipulate the organisation for its own economic gain. Nonetheless, the SCO is vital for Russia because it facilitates dialogue between Russia and China, its principal adversary in Central Asia, allowing Russia to manage confrontations with China. Russia has advocated strengthening the SCO as a formidable international political organisation. In this regard, it, along with China, advocated for Iran's participation as a significant anti-Western actor in the organisation; however, complete membership was withheld from Iran due to Western sanctions.³

Despite the SCO being a nascent alliance, it has garnered significant interest since its inception, mostly from China and Russia. Additionally, the group comprises the former Soviet Socialist Republics of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Despite the fact that Turkmenistan has chosen not to participate thus far, the membership list has been rejuvenated by the addition of Pakistan and India. The membership of the SCO encompasses 80 per cent of Eurasia's total land area and nearly 50% of the world population. As of 2022, its combined GDP was around 30% of global GDP.

Hence, the SCO wields significant power, which it actively employs to foster confidence and cooperation among member nations while also facilitating collaboration in energy, trade, transportation, and several other domains. Additionally, the organisation aims to collectively work towards maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region. However, it cannot be assumed that the goals stated on the organisation's website align with its true intentions. There are compelling arguments suggesting that the SCO may not succeed in achieving its actual objectives. The SCO's leading members, China and Russia, view the control of Central

¹ Tsygankov, 2016: 159

² Donaldson and Nadkarni, 2014.

³ Bolt and Cross, 2018.

Asia and its energy resources as vital elements of their national goals. In this sense, they view the SCO as a useful means to achieve that control. As the world approaches multipolarity and the former American hegemon declines, the rivalries will continue to escalate.⁴ Russia will endeavour to impede its own decline, while China will solidify its newfound dominance. Consequently, the SCO would be rendered ineffective as both nations strive to weaken each other's control in Central Asia.

2. The Trajectory of Russian Foreign Policy towards Central Asia

Russia exerted a substantial influence in Central Asia/Turkistan and disseminated its diaspora and culture in the region from the 1800s until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Russian President Vladimir Putin characterised this event as the most momentous geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.⁵

Geographically open and geopolitically precarious in the post-Soviet era, Central Asia (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan-Associate state to the CIS, Uzbekistan) was endowed with abundant natural resources that fuelled a power struggle between Russia and the United States, and more recently, between Russia, China, and the United States. Security is a concern for the authorities of the region that maintains close political ties with Moscow in regard to Islamic radicalism. Political stability and economic growth in the region are of the utmost importance to Russia, which is attempting to solidify its hegemony there. Russian endeavours to bolster its hegemony in Central Asia run concurrently with its aspirations to become a great power. Central Asia furnishes Russia with the sphere of influence required to attain regional superpower status, comparable to that of the United States in the West and China in the East.⁶

In recent decades, Russia, possessing about one-fifth of the global gas reserves and being the third-largest oil producer, has strategically and systematically sought to exploit energy as a weapon. This is consistent with a broader Russian strategy to re-establish its global influence: seize energy resources from its former Soviet colonies and export them to industrialised countries.⁷ This aligns with a wider Russian aim to regain its worldwide influence by acquiring energy resources from its previous Soviet territories and exporting them to developed nations. Both European countries, including Germany, rely on Russia for approximately 20% of their energy imports. Similarly, China has experienced a 19% increase in Russian energy imports, which is expected to rise further due to the construction of new pipelines.⁸ Russia might subsequently resume the cycle by employing the profits from these transactions and the influence it has acquired to strengthen its dominance over energy resources in its neighbouring countries. Given the significant size of its energy reserves and the vulnerability of the countries in the area, Central Asia is an evident centre of attention for Moscow.

The second economic aspect of concern relates to the cultivation of opium in the southern border regions. Until 2022, Afghanistan dominated the world's production of opium poppies and opium. Afghanistan has held the position of being the primary producer of opium, accounting for over 80 per cent of the global opium yield. Opium is mainly used to produce heroin, and 95 per cent of the heroin made from Afghan opium reaches European markets. In April 2022, the Taliban announced a ban on opium poppy cultivation, raising the question of the implications this will have for Europe. The European heroin market is closely bound to the fate of the Afghan opium market as it is almost exclusively supplied with heroin from Afghanistan via Turkish, Iranian and Pakistani organised crime networks. Despite the significant drop from

⁴ Dag and Tufekci, 2023.

⁵ Osborn & Ostroukh, 2021.

⁶ Lo, 2015.

⁷ Tsygankov, 2011.

⁸ He, 2024; Eurostat, 2024.

previously consistently high opium harvests in recent years, the future of Afghanistan's opiate trade remains uncertain as it grapples with economic instability and a humanitarian crisis.⁹ Traffickers and troops returning from the Afghan War of 1979-1989 brought white heroin back to Russia. Consequently, Russia now possesses a very precise awareness of the dangers linked to heroin addiction. Given that many trafficking routes to Europe still traverse Central Asia and Russia, it is in Russia's national interest to eliminate the illicit product as close to its origin as possible.¹⁰

This southern menace not only affects it personally, but it also incites a paternalistic imperative to protect the homeland. When the factions come together, they create a powerful political alliance: neo-Soviets and ultra-nationalists compete to regain control over former Soviet territories and those of its tsarist predecessor; energy oligarchs aim to increase their financial profits by merging with their competitors; the extensive civil service heavily depends on a large government to carry out its operations; and nationalists want Russia to regain its influence on the global stage. Without a doubt, this partnership obstructs the Russian government's capacity to pursue goals that go beyond its push into Central Asia.¹¹

3. The Trajectory of Chinese Foreign Policy towards Central Asia

China possesses geopolitical and commercial interests in Central Asia. Their main priorities are to protect China's sovereignty and avoid a repetition of the period known as the "Century of Humiliation"¹². Central Asia is strategically important for attaining these aims because of its closeness to significant energy resources and its historical significance as a base for separatists seeking to split the eastern region of Xinjiang. The geopolitical entity encompassing Central Asia garnered immediate focus after the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. Due to its strategic geographical position and substantial reserves of oil and gas, Central Asia swiftly emerged as an arena where prominent international political actors and capital engaged in intense competition.¹³

China is a significant producer of energy and other related commodities, in addition to being the largest consumer and importer of energy worldwide. It has a tremendous impact on international energy markets and commerce. In 2022, the Asian superpower defined over a quarter of worldwide consumption. It is also among the top three consumers of wind, solar, oil, gas, and coal, as well as nuclear and hydroelectric power.¹⁴ Currently, 60% of these imports come from OPEC countries, mainly from regions in the Middle East and Northern Africa that are deemed to be more vulnerable.

The energy routes in China are vulnerable to assault or interruption as a result of this layout. The imports are transported either by sea, through the Strait of Hormuz and the Straits of Malacca, two narrow passages that lack close monitoring by American allies, or by land, where they must navigate Iran's rugged mountainous terrain or, more likely, cross the Caucasian mountains and then pass through Russia's territories, which have a history of rivalry and potential future challenges. Both situations are less than ideal for China; using the resources of Central Asia is regarded as a more advantageous choice owing to its nearness to Chinese borders.

⁹ Landay, 2021.

¹⁰ Giommoni, Gundur, and Cheekes, 2020.

¹¹ Umland, 1998.

¹² The "Century of Humiliation" is the period from the beginning of the first Opium War in 1839 to the triumph of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese civil war in 1949. During this time China's effective territorial control shrank by a third, its millennia-old imperial system collapsed, and the country was riven by internal uprisings, invasion, and civil war (Kaufman, 2010).

¹³ Zhou, He, and Yang, 2020.

¹⁴ Nakhle, 2023.

China strategically positioned itself to gain control of the region's energy resources at an early stage through the implementation of energy export diversification strategies, construction of Sino-Kazakh oil and gas pipelines and China-Central Asian natural gas pipelines. This meant that the oil and gas trade between the two regions had been strengthened. Furthermore, the Chinese government actively participates in direct interference. China successfully compels the Central Asian countries to grant concessions. Beijing has successfully employed a strategy in Africa where they provide loans to struggling countries without any humanitarian conditions in order to divert the government's attention from offers made by the Western/World Bank. Subsequently, in cases when the borrower is incapable of repaying the loan, Beijing absolves the debt in return for political or economic concessions. This covert financial assistance, typically conditioned on the stipulation that a designated amount of the loaned capital is directed towards Chinese businesses, therefore enables China to expand its economic influence and establish domination in the receiving nation.¹⁵

Given this information, it is probable that similar political manoeuvres occurred after China provided billion-dollar loans to the Central Asian republics. Also, China signed \$4 billion worth of agreements and made long-term commitments to Central Asia through the Xi'an Declaration, which was officially adopted at the China-Central Asia Summit on 18-19 May 2023. From 2001 to 2022, China's trade volume with the countries in the region increased from \$1.5 billion to \$70 billion.¹⁶

China's first concession was a pledge to abstain from providing assistance to Uyghur insurgents. China, in an official capacity, consistently rejects any explanation that links Uyghur separatist sentiment to government oppression, instead stating that it is a result of external influence. The size of Uyghur communities in the newly independent Central Asian Republics varies considerably, with the greatest community residing in Kazakhstan and the smallest in Tajikistan. With the exception of the Uyghurs residing in the Ili Valley borderlands, who were annexed by the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century and ultimately settled in present-day Kazakhstan, the majority of Uyghur communities in Central Asia emerged due to the geographical proximity of Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and migrations prompted by both domestic and international affairs within the Uyghur homeland. Historically, the Uyghurs inhabited two primary regions in Central Asia that were densely populated: the Ferghana Valley (Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) and the Semirechye Valley, which is located in Kazakhstan. The two primary Uyghur groups in Central Asia were composed of individuals who migrated from Kashgaria, the southern domain of East Turkestan, and the northern Uyghurs (Taranchi) from the Kulja region. In addition to the regional distribution of the Uyghur population in their respective homelands, the origins of these two communities diverged. Midway through the 1990s, the Uyghur separatist movement peaked in the Central Asian republics, primarily in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, with the formation of the Shanghai Five organisation in 1996 (which later evolved into the SCO in 2001), Central Asian governments were compelled to suppress all local Uyghur political organisations due to intense Chinese pressure. At present, Uyghur public organisations operating in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are dedicated solely to advancing the socio-economic development of Uyghur communities, education, and culture.¹⁷

China has placed a high importance on fostering economic connections with Central Asia, namely for the benefit of Xinjiang. The belief is that economic progress in the region will diminish the allure of separatism and terrorism, thus ensuring the robust integration of Xinjiang within China. This has resulted in a stimulation of trade with neighbouring countries in Central Asia.

¹⁵ Kurlantzick, 2006.

¹⁶ Oztarsu, 2024.

¹⁷ Kamalov, 2009: 130.

4. New Strategies for an Old Rivalry: China and Russia

Regarding bilateral relations and China's burgeoning status as a great power, China occupies a significant position in Russian foreign policy. China has adhered to the same political position as Russia regarding NATO expansion and operations, the withdrawal of the United States from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a unipolar global order dominated by the West since the 1990s, and the colour revolutions.¹⁸ Furthermore, similar to Russia, Western nations have levelled accusations against China's political system on the grounds that it lacks democracy, an assertion that contradicts their conception of state sovereignty. Later adopted by Putin, China was a crucial component of Primakov's strategy to counterbalance the American influence in Asia. The dynamics of Russia-China relations evolved into a pragmatic-realist framework, characterised by the avoidance of a zero-sum game and the recognition of the competing interests of both parties.¹⁹

Moreover, in spite of their tense diplomatic ties with the Western world, both China and Russia highly regard the Western bloc's contribution to international economic and political institutions. They proceed with caution so as to avoid becoming entangled in the conflict between the other and the West. Conversely, the intensifying hostilities between the United States and China grant Russia strategic leverage that it can employ to thwart the unilateral initiatives of the United States and the unbridled escalation of the Chinese threat emanating from the East.

Official relations between Russia and China were re-established in 1991, notwithstanding the Chinese censure of Gorbachev's embrace of Western values. Nevertheless, by means of reciprocal presidential visits throughout Yeltsin's term, the involved nations established a consensus on a collaborative venture and reached a mutually binding accord to restrict the military presence along the Chinese borders of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. To prevent offending the United States, whose support was crucial for the continued development of both nations, they refrained from referring to their relationship as an alliance. The 2001 signing of the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation established the framework for their partnership and the 2004 resolution of the Soviet-era border dispute between Russia and China in the Khabarovsk Krai. Russia and China have been able to establish and partake in international organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in 2010 due to their partnership and collaboration on a number of security and economic issues.²⁰

China and Moscow have maintained a longstanding interest in fostering economic relations. The bilateral trade is, however, unsatisfactory for both China and Russia. During the initial decade of diplomatic ties, economic relations progressed at a moderate rate. However, the anticipated acceleration in the 2000s was once more impeded by the 2008 financial crisis and subsequently rekindled in the 2010s, owing to Russia's energy exports. Oil and gas supplies to China constitute a significant portion of the commerce relationship between Russia and China. After multiple rounds of negotiations aimed at reaching a consensus, crude shipments through the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline commenced to China in 2011. The volume of these shipments was scheduled to increase over time. To prevent Chinese dominance in Eurasia, Putin supports the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and seeks to integrate other institutions, including EAEU, ASEAN, and SCO.

A significant driver of economic relations since the 1990s has been the export of Russian munitions to China, which has since implemented technologies appropriated from Russia. Due to the arms trade, China and Russia developed a military-political alliance through joint military

¹⁸ Tufekci and Dag, 2022.

¹⁹ Tufekci, 2020; Tufekci and Birinci, 2020.

²⁰ Donaldson et al., 2014: 294; Tufekci, 2018.

exercises concerning security concerns such as separatism and terrorism. This alliance was crucial to Russia's strategic success.

The populational imbalance between the neighbouring regions of the two countries sets a security problem for Russia. The economic backwardness and the low population of Far East Russia still make it vulnerable to any threat from its overpopulated neighbour. Currently, there is no serious problem of any Chinese demographic pressure towards the Far East since the visa agreement with China to control illegal Chinese immigration to Russia (1994). The agreement aimed to halt Chinese illicit immigration to Russia, which increased after the collapse of the USSR.²¹ The demographic problem of the region raises concerns among Russian politicians and experts, such as warnings against a possible Finlandization of unpopulated Siberia in the future, should the regional balances not shift.²²

On this knowledge and perspective, China and Russia aim to prevent the United States and the European Union from forming solid relationships with the Central Asian countries. Following the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US invasion of Afghanistan, the Central Asian republics joined together to find a third ally that may help them preserve their strategic position between China and Russia. Askar Akaev, the President of Kyrgyzstan, agreed to provide the United States and NATO authorisation to use Manas Airport for security operations in the region. Additionally, the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, opened their respective nations' airspace. In addition, Uzbekistan showed a higher degree of dedication by endorsing a Declaration on Strategic Partnership for the foreseeable future. China, Russia, and the United States will undoubtedly maintain a long-term presence in Central Asia, as they consider the region to be of critical strategic importance. Future geopolitical repercussions among the three principal entities will require China to devise strategies to mitigate the destructive competition, soften the geopolitical energy pattern in Central Asia, and avert geopolitical repression resulting from entry into the region.²³

China and Russia expressed apprehension on the potential ramifications of a lasting American military installation in a politically stable nation in Central Asia since it would necessitate an extra region for them to safeguard. The inclusion of a robust American advocate within the SCO might impede the group's capacity to make resolute decisions since the SCO lays significant emphasis on achieving consensus.

Beijing and Moscow shared a common goal in this situation: to prevent the United States from establishing strategic positions in their vulnerable areas. Their secondary objectives of eliminating separatist networks that posed a threat to their countries were also in agreement and did not conflict with each other. However, there are instances where Chinese and Russian interests are in conflict. These occurrences may be relevant to either the domain of economics or politics. The former, natural and energy resources, are clearly understandable owing to their limited and non-renewable nature.

The primary sector of Russia's economy, which will rank fifth globally in 2023, is the exportation of hydrocarbons. As the second-largest exporter of oil and the world's leading exporter of natural gas, Russia is a significant player in the global energy market. As one of the primary drivers of the global economy, Russian energy policy has a direct impact on global oil prices; by entering OPEC+, Russia has increased its market leverage. To advance its national interests, Russia employs a variety of economic instruments, including energy, foreign aid, financing of foreign states, economic sanctions, and the armaments trade. Despite the ineffectiveness of foreign aid as an instrument of Russian foreign policy, the country did participate in

²¹ Singleton, 1997: 112.

²² Karaganov, 2013.

²³ Zhou, He, and Yang, 2020.

international aid programmes that supported the development of the G-8²⁴ and was among the leading debtors. A portion of Russian foreign aid, including financing and the sale of gas at reduced prices, has been allocated to the CIS.²⁵

The energy sector significantly influences the diplomatic ties between Russia and the energy-rich nations of Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Similar to its Soviet-era approach towards these nations, the Russian foreign policy towards these countries aims to increase its influence over the utilisation of gas and hydrocarbon resources and pipeline routes. Indeed, the Russian Federation's geopolitical stance regarding oil and gas transit routes originating from Central Asia has evolved into a shrewd instrument of foreign policy that has effectively advanced its economic and geopolitical national interests. Nevertheless, by circumventing Russia in the construction of pipeline routes from these nations to Europe or China, its influence in these regions is undermined.²⁶ Putin has endeavoured, since assuming power, to strengthen its economic, political, and military ties with the countries of the region on the basis of security concerns in order to maintain their proximity to Russia, capitalising on the economic growth of Russia caused by high oil prices. The Russian Union has achieved a degree of success in its endeavours by establishing economic unions and reaching a number of energy and security agreements, all of which could impede further Western intervention in the region. With the investment in the region and the construction of new gas pipelines from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan to China, which disrupted the Russian monopoly on Central Asian energy, Russia was unable to prevent China from entering the energy sector of Central Asia.²⁷

Russia's participation in stabilising Kyrgyzstan would have several consequences. The primary and readily apparent outcome would be the imposition of a burdensome financial liability on Kyrgyzstan to align with Moscow. If the survival of the regime, which is perceived by the majority of Central Asian nations as inseparable from the existence of the state²⁸, relies on the presence of the Russian military, then Moscow could effectively use the potential withdrawal as a means to influence Bishkek into conforming to any preferred course of action. This would be a direct expansion of Russia's current goal to acquire complete dominance over foreign military outposts in the region.²⁹

This results in a zero-sum game: China's victory comes at the expense of Russia's defeat in certain areas. When Russia emerges victorious, China experiences defeat in certain areas different from Russia's. When a foreign entity emerges victorious, both parties suffer a loss. Currently, Russia and China have established a partnership to fight external pressures, giving them the motivation to prevent the occurrence of the third scenario. Both nations saw the importance of forming an alliance to counter Western dominance on the world stage. They considered making compromises with each other as a necessary sacrifice for the enormous advantage. The dynamics of this relationship are expected to transform as the United States diminishes and the global landscape transitions from a unipolar to a multipolar structure, wherein China (and, to a lesser extent, Russia) can sustain themselves autonomously without relying on one another.

²⁴ The Group of Eight (G-8) is a global institution formed in 1975 through informal summit gatherings of the leaders of the world's most advanced industrialised nations, which include the United States, the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan. In 1994, Russia's involvement in the talks led to the group being referred to as the Group of 8 (G8). In March 2014, Russia provoked a worldwide crisis by forcibly taking control of Crimea, which was formerly an autonomous area of Ukraine, and merging it into its own territory. As a response, the G7, which is the original body consisting of 7 countries, decided to indefinitely suspend Russia's participation in the group.

²⁵ Bratersky, 2012: 232.

²⁶ Donaldson et al., 2014: 206.

²⁷ Omelicheva, 2018: 239.

²⁸ Wu, 2005.

²⁹ Buszynski, 2005.

Conclusion: The Future of the Rivalry in Central Asia and the SCO

Following the end of the Cold War era, Central Asia was opened up for new actors. China maintained a comparatively neutral stance on foreign policy while the United States reevaluated its approach, and Russia struggled to manage the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. Since the geostrategic and geopolitical environment had changed in Central Asia, new actors were also looking for a *raison d'être* in both realms: political and military. Undoubtedly, geopolitical competition is intensifying in Central Asia. China appears to have taken a proactive and favourable action, which carries significant ramifications for both established global powers and emerging powers in the region.³⁰

From this standpoint, it is exceedingly challenging to contend that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation will persist in achieving substantial advancements. Moscow would need to consent to receive only a fraction of the income that it believes rightfully belongs to it in its totality, and it would have to widen the economic disparity between itself and China intentionally. However, Beijing would need to agree to relinquish a portion of the wealth that it feels rightfully belongs to it and transfer it to a state that is becoming weaker. Despite the preexisting tensions among the other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which may incite them to the SCO is likely to be reduced to occasionally issuing hollow statements when meaningful progress is achieved on a bilateral level, given its ability to veto any initiative that benefits another, which will probably worsen in this new multipolar system.

Although Russia cannot be disregarded at present, it is challenging to argue against its decline. Following the Cold War, along with experiencing significant losses in people, resources, and economy, Russia has continued to decline. The quality of living is much inferior when compared to the former Soviet satellites that aligned themselves with the European Union.³¹ Moreover, if the population of Russia continues to get older and decrease in number, it will place a significant burden on the capabilities of the Kremlin.

China is acutely conscious of the impact that civil upheaval may have on its economic progress as a whole, particularly how tensions in Central Asia can lead to violence in Xinjiang. The Xinjiang problem has become more critical in China's diplomatic relations with Central Asia during the past two decades. China has leveraged its increasing geopolitical and economic influence in Central Asia to convince the governments of the Central Asian republics, both individually and collectively through the SCO, to endorse its stance on Xinjiang and the Uyghur matter.³² The Xinjiang issue has prompted a wave of Uyghur protests in Central Asian states from time to time. In this case, because of its longtime policy of refraining from sending soldiers or establishing military bases in other countries,³³ China can only depend on equipping and instructing indigenous forces, whose loyalty may be uncertain. Considering Russia's proficiency in manipulating local forces and even having its own officers act independently, it is particularly significant to acknowledge their ability to incite conflicts that conveniently align with Moscow's interests.³⁴ China is showing indications of preparing for unconventional tactics. It has started the process of establishing military bases beyond its own borders to enhance its military reach.³⁵

China and Russia aimed to use the SCO to balance against the US at the regional level in the political field.³⁶ From the perspective of China, SCO's primary purpose is to ensure regional

³⁰ Tufekci, 2018, p. 42.

³¹ Tsygankov, 2011.

³² Clarke, 2010, p. 214.

³³ Chung, 2004.

³⁴ Cuthbertson, 1994-5.

³⁵ Lendon and MacCarthy, 2023.

³⁶ Onel, 2022, p. 66.

stability and security by countering the “three evils of separatism, terrorism, and extremism” and to maintain Xinjiang under Beijing’s authority through the promotion of a “new security concept” based on China’s peaceful rise.³⁷ Regrettably, the SCO, if it ever harboured genuine intentions to function as a forum for meaningful policy deliberations, was founded in an unsuitable context and location. It united an emerging force and a fading behemoth, both of whom eagerly coveted a sole treasure that grows in worth with each passing day. Moreover, the anticipated disruptions and potential outcomes arising from the advanced age of different authoritarian leaders indicate that the period of restricted self-governance in Central Asia and the temporary alliance between China and Russia are likely to conclude soon. The emergence of the SCO may provide valuable insights into how other international organisations, consisting of several influential nations, may effectively navigate a new multipolar global order.

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³⁷ Clarke, 2010, p. 126.

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