

ON THE ROLE OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN COOPERATION ORGANIZATION WITHIN THE SCO

Farkhod TOLIPOV

*Ph.D. (Political Science),
assistant professor,
University of World Economy and Diplomacy
(Tashkent, Uzbekistan)*

Chronology of the SCO Summits

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is over seven years old; it started as the Shanghai Five (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) set up at the Shanghai summit of 26 April, 1996, which signed the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions.

Since that time summits have developed into a regular feature. The second summit held in Moscow on 24 April, 1997 adopted the Treaty on the Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions.

The third summit held on 3 July, 1998 in Almaty concentrated on further strengthening confidence and stability in the region and enhancing trade and economic cooperation.

The fourth summit held on 24 August, 1999 in Bishkek signed a Joint Declaration on Combating National Separatism, Religious Extremism, and Transborder Crime.

The fifth summit was held on 4-5 July, 2000 in Dushanbe; it discussed problems of regional security and stability, cooperation in fighting international terrorism and religious extremism, as well as border problems. Attended by President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov it signed the Dushanbe Declaration and passed a decision on transforming the organization into the Shanghai Forum.

The sixth summit held in Shanghai on 15 June, 2001 adopted a Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and a Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism.

The seventh summit held on 7 June, 2002 in St. Petersburg adopted the SCO Charter, the Agreement on Setting Up the Regional Antiterrorist Organization (RATO), with its center in Bishkek, and the Declaration by the Heads of Member States of the SCO.

The eighth summit met in Moscow on 29 May, 2003 to make two important decisions: on the SCO Secretariat to be set up in Shanghai and on the transfer of the RATO headquarters from Bishkek to Tashkent. Uzbekistan became the new SCO chairman. The president of the member states endorsed a set of normative documents related to the way the SCO structures (its financial mechanism included) should function;

adopted a financial charter dealing with the procedure for forming and executing the SCO's budget, as well as setting forth the provisions on the councils of the heads of state, heads of government, foreign ministers, and national coordinators. The Moscow summit also adopted a document on the SCO secretariat, conferences of the ministry and department heads, and permanent representatives of the member states at the Secretariat, as well as on the operating rules for the RATO headquarters.

This shows that the organization set up to strengthen confidence-building measures in the border area has gradually embraced the issues of combating terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism as part of the regional security issue. At the time of increased threats to regional security however (acts of terror carried out by the so-called Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—IMU, escalation of warfare in Afghanistan, and flare-ups of religious extremism and separatism in some of the countries), the SCO remained passive and ineffective even though by the time it was set up the Central Asian countries had been trying to create mechanisms for ensuring regional security.

The SCO Geopolitical Dimension

An analysis of its evolution shows that it was primarily devised as a geopolitical organization.

Let us discuss two of its dimensions: *its geographic configuration and its political composition*. There are two world powers among the SCO members and four smaller Central Asian countries. This is not a six-member structure; the participants are not equal as far as their political, economic, military, demographic, and social potential is concerned. It can be presented as 2 + 4, or as 1 + 1 + 4. The last component (four Central Asian states) cannot be further divided, in order to avoid further political asymmetry. This is confirmed by the SCO's geographic factor.

Central Asia is the key element in the new political process known as the SCO. The organization itself became possible only when (and because) the Soviet Union fell apart. It became possible thanks to the geopolitical transformation of the post-Soviet expanse, the process itself being conditioned by the new world order taking shape in the post-Cold War context. *These factors—post-Soviet geopolitical transformation and the new world order—serve as the key to the SCO's mystery*.

In connection with the above, some observers tend to concentrate on two possible scenarios of the SCO's future. The first of them suggests that the organization will develop into an anti-Western alliance, an anti-NATO of sorts. The second suggests that the "Six" will serve as the starting point for an organization integrated with Western structures on the basis of open regionalism with a great number of observers and member states. The efforts of certain politicians, especially Russian, to make the Cold War philosophy and the ideas of the already dead bipolar world part of the SCO documents confirm that the first scenario has a chance of being realized.¹ Obviously, because of their long-term interests, the member states cannot accept this alternative. The anti-Western approach will play into the hands of those political forces in the West that continue to look at the RF and the PRC as their traditional and eternal rivals; it should be added that both Moscow and Beijing are objectively interested in developing their cooperation with the West.

The second scenario is also hardly possible: any enlargement of this structure will probably make it politically and organizationally more complex. It will have to cope with the "responsibility zone" issue. Open regionalism is a vague and, therefore, inadequate conception which may undermine the foundations, destroy the meaning, and weaken the mission of the SCO. Asia, and Eurasia, for that matter, is too fragmented to be regarded as a single region; if enlarged the SCO may degenerate into the failed Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia.

There are two more possible options. In the third scenario, Central Asia may find itself under the joint patronage of Russia and China; there are indications that this option is possible. Russian analyst Dmitri Trofimov, for example, believes that "stability of the Shanghai Five/SCO structure is still rooted in Rus-

¹ See: S. Luzianin, "'Shankhaiskaia shesterka' uzhe nikogo ne ustraivaet," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 6 June, 2002.

sia and China's common interest in using its multilateral format to spur up their bilateral relations." He goes on to say: "Their link within the SCO can potentially allow Russia to address its strategic tasks in the region," for instance, to play "the role of an envoy plenipotentiary of three Central Asian states (without Uzbekistan.—*F.T.*)."² From the point of view of traditional geopolitics his recommendations are absolutely logical: "Today, Russia and China are working toward transforming the SCO, as promptly as possible, into a mechanism of dialog that will make it possible to realize, in the best way possible, certain common Russian and Chinese (underlined by the author.—*F.T.*) foreign policy tasks within the enlarging Central Asian geopolitical expanse."³ Precisely Russian and Chinese tasks! This speaks of possible joint patronage of Central Asia.

Another version of the same scenario: the SCO can serve as a mechanism to mutually balance Russia and China in Central Asia, a process that will involve local states. This is what D. Kalieva has to say: "China's participation in the Shanghai Five is not only raising the military-political potential of the union, but is also making it possible for the Central Asian participants to use it as a tool for creating a balance between Russia and China, whose interests are represented in the region."⁴

It seems that the impressive role D. Kalieva promises the Central Asian countries is a disservice. Any revived model of the balance of power on the regional scale (between the RF and the PRC, the RF and the U.S, the PRC and the U.S., among the Central Asian states, or between them and the above-mentioned states and all the rest) is in fact returning to the first scenario doomed to reproduce the Cold War philosophy and politics. It seems unlikely that the new independent Central Asian states will be able to test out the old paradigm of the balance of power on Russia and China, or among themselves for that matter. There are forces outside Russia and China that, having discovered their interests in the region, would like to impose this behavior model on the international scene on the weak independent republics, thus dooming them to perpetual dependence and backwardness (see below).

These three scenarios are inadequate and even dangerous.

Let us turn to the fourth scenario associated with an absolutely novel idea of the SCO's mission. It is rooted in recognizing an independent role for the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) within the SCO. This approach, which orients the Shanghai political process toward Central Asia, has not yet been discussed. It is highly symbolic that the Central Asian integration structure, which appeared at almost the same time as the SCO, is also called a cooperation organization.

Below I shall proceed from the development problems of the Shanghai process to analyze the fourth scenario as best suited to the Central Asian states' strategic interests.

The SCO Conceptual Problem and Central Asian Interests

When discussing the absence of concerted efforts of the SCO member states or at least their barely discernible desire to act together, especially in opposing terrorism after 9/11, Chinese academic Pan Guang has pointed out that from the very beginning Washington became the leader of the struggle against global terrorism; the SCO is not a military bloc, therefore its members could not act as such; the Shanghai Six members are also members of other international structures (the CIS, the Dushanbe Group, the NATO Partnership for Peace program); the United States wanted different types of cooperation with different SCO members. "This is the main reason why the SCO states have played different roles in the war on terrorism."⁵ It should be said that these circumstances are of a long-term, if not permanent, nature.

² D. Trofimov, "Shanghai Process: From the 'Five' to the Cooperation Organization. Summing up the 1990s and Looking Ahead," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (14), 2002, pp. 89, 90.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴ Quoted from: X. Guangcheng, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Fight against Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 4 (16), 2002, p. 16.

⁵ P. Guang, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Context of International Antiterrorist Campaign," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (21), 2003, p. 49.

From this it follows that the SCO is not destined to become an effective organization, at least in the near future.

The global antiterrorist campaign has revealed one unresolved task of the SCO: it needs organizational clarity, which, in turn, *requires a clear conceptual foundation*. We get the impression that political will in the member states outstrips their strategy; the organization itself has not yet fully tapped all its potential. So far, the SCO has not caught up with the other members of antiterrorist coalition; the same can be said about economic cooperation, which is less developed than in other similar structures.

This is confirmed, besides the factors Guang enumerated in his article, by the fact that there are structures (the Antiterrorist Center of CIS, and bilateral working groups RF-U.S.A. and RF-PRC for the antiterrorist struggle) functioning outside the SCO. On the other hand, the SCO member states have not yet demonstrated their attitude toward certain organizations (the terrorist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the extremist Hizb ut-Tahrir party, the separatist Eastern Turkestan organization—"the three evils"), or toward concrete manifestations of the "three evils" in the SCO "responsibility zone." According to American analyst M. Oresman, "in the wake of 11 September, the SCO has had to continuously justify its existence given the fact that the United States did more for the member states' security in five months than the SCO did in five years."⁶

The foreign economic activity of the SCO member states is disunited to the extent that no one can expect them to pool their efforts in this direction. Even though they have common interests in the energy fuels of the Caspian and Central Asia and their transportation, in communication lines, and in more active trade and economic cooperation, they cannot create a common market and have not formulated this task. It seems that Li Gang and Liu Huaqing were quite right when they said that in the mid-term there are no prospects for efficient economic cooperation among the SCO members (especially in the free trade zone) since the countries differ greatly as far as their domestic economic and political situations are concerned.⁷

Can we conclude that Russia and China do not think much of this organization's potential? By attaching themselves to Central Asia from both sides, they are probably pursuing much more modest aims than those described as strategic.

There are no simple answers, they depend on the two factors mentioned above: the nature of the new world order and the post-Soviet geopolitical transformation. Here I would like to use Brzezinski's term to say that Central Asia is living through geopolitical pluralization. This is evidenced, first, by foreign policy diversification of the local states; second, by the U.S. military presence; third, by that fact that new states (China, Iran, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Japan, and the EU countries) have joined the Big Game.

Any careful study of the transformations now taking place in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan will identify *national-regional dualism* in the content, directions, and specifics of these transformations. An effort to identify or describe the essence of the post-Soviet geopolitical transformations in the region may produce the following formula: *real resurrection and enhancing of regionalism in Central Asia*.

The present world order can be described as *a globalized hierarchical political system* in place of the disintegrating Yalta international system, which, in fact, realized the balance of power principle on a worldwide scale. Today, in the post-Cold War era, we are witnessing a diffusion of power in the context of transnational mutual dependence, to borrow the description from American political scientist Joseph Nye. The author has rightly pointed out that we are dealing with multi-layered mutual dependence. The balance of power in contemporary politics, says he, looks like a layer cake, the upper layer of which (the military one) belongs to the unipolar world (the U.S.); the middle (economic), to a tri-polar world (the U.S., Europe, and Japan), while the lower one lies in the multipolar world created by the transnational

⁶ M. Oresman, "The Moscow Summit: Tempered Hope for the SCO," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Wednesday, 4 June, 2003.

⁷ See: M. Oresman, "Judging the Future Success of the SCO," *CEF Monthly*, October 2003, China-Eurasia Forum [<http://www.chinaeurasia.org/Newsletter.html>].

diffusion of power. His conclusion is an important one: the new world order taking shape in the post-Cold War epoch is a very specific one. All attempts to fit it into the Procrustean bed of traditional metaphors with their mechanistic polarities are mind-boggling. Force is acquiring more dimensions; structures are growing more complicated, while the states are becoming more porous. This mutual penetrability means that the world order cannot hinge solely on a simple balance of military forces.⁸ In this way, the world order depends on globalization, on the one hand, and preserves its hierarchical structure, on the other.

In the 2000 Dushanbe Declaration, the SCO members made a political statement to the effect that the world needs a multi-polar order and that the member states are prepared to oppose world hegemonism. It seems that in this case Russia and China imposed their delusion of a conceptual nature concerning the character of the world order (unipolar, multipolar, American hegemony, etc.) on the Central Asia countries, thus deluding them, too.

According to Joseph Nye, multipolarity does not mean a balance of power—it means mutual dependence. This more adequately reflects the world order in the process of shaping, thus obviously contradicting, the hegemonic model. The Dushanbe Declaration fits multipolarity into the balance of power conception and views it as an alternative to American hegemony.

Applied to Central Asia this theory says that the new independent states—splinters of the old structure of international relations—have acquired the old, well-known, and habitual foreign policy instruments. It seems that both for the extra-regional powers and the regional countries the conception of the balance of power turned out to be the only possible model of international relations at a stage when, in the process of molding their foreign policies, the new independent states will have to borrow certain “well-tested” forms. It is these elements of *ersatz* policy that resulted in negative foreign policy diversification. The Central Asian countries have found themselves in a situation that can be best described as a double balancing act: on the one hand, they must provide a counterweight to the extra-regional powers; on the other, there is the hypertrophied idea about a need to achieve balance among themselves within the region.

In their recent Soviet past they were raw-material appendages to the more advanced Soviet republics (Russia, in the first place)—today the new independent states run the risk of remaining the same to the world powers in the globalized world. *To avoid this they must abandon the inadequate conception of balancing and absolutizing national-state sovereignty for the sake of a new, regional strategy.*

It is becoming increasingly clear that the SCO was created to produce an answer to the Central Asian question: indeed, its orientation toward Central Asia is so far the only possible and the most natural factor. Neither the antiterrorist struggle in Russia or China, nor the trade and economy dimensions of the relationships among the six states can be transferred to the SCO: being self-sufficient in many respects they can either deal with these issues themselves, or within the bilateral (not only the Russian-Chinese) format.

From this it follows that the Shanghai process is concentrated on Central Asia: it is an *a priori* regional process; no new members will be able to change this basic fact. This is at once the main problem of this organization and its main claim to further political existence.

It seems that today the following can serve as the main adequate principle of the SCO's activity and the conception of its future: *it should move through confidence-building measures and regional security to developed trans-regional economic cooperation.* Indeed, China, the Russian Federation, and the CACO are located in three different, yet neighboring, regions with very different strategic interests: the first of them looks at the APR; Russia, at the EU; while landlocked Central Asia is looking at the West and the East. To my mind, the only possible basic scientifically substantiated conception is the conception of trans-regionalism, or trans-continentalism. This is vitally important for all Central Asian countries: being locked on the Eurasian continent they should use the Russian Federation and China as a key to this “lock.”

⁸ See: J. Nye, “What New World Order?” *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1992.

This conception also meets the strategic interests of the two world powers-members in the SCO. While helping the Central Asian countries within this structure, China and Russia will acquire a dynamically developing, stable, secure region as a neighbor, which is integrating into the globalizing world.

The Organization's Immediate Tasks

The first command post and live exercises carried out on 6-13 August, 2003 in Kazakhstan and the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of China are a serious claim of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to its involvement in dealing with the regional security issues. Together with the future functioning of the Regional Antiterrorist Center in Tashkent, the Secretariat in Beijing, and the beginning of the budget process, the Organization members will be actively involved in these spheres. It remains to be seen how well these structures will be organized: they should be armed with a conception conducive to the SCO's mission. Indeed, we are completely aware of what the U.N., OSCE, NATO, ECO, and many other international organizations do, what aims they are striving to achieve, and what is their main mission.

Finally, the SCO should clearly state its position regarding the IMU, Eastern Turkestan, Hizb ut-Tahrir. The SCO should outline its possible approach to the problem of drug trafficking, poverty, environmental protection, sustainable development, and cultural cooperation. All SCO member states undoubtedly regard Afghanistan as an object of their common interest. It seems logical and topical to elaborate a common approach to the principles and methods of peaceful settlement and restoration of Afghanistan's statehood. Can the SCO contribute to the international efforts designed to settle the Afghan problem?

In the organizational sphere, the Secretariat should create a working mechanism of discussion and decision-making based on *the principle of consensus as the one best suited to success*. This is in the interests of the Central Asian alliance; what is more, the small number of members will make it easier to reach a consensus.

The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism is of special interest because it has provided definitions of "the three evils," the term used in Chinese political vocabulary. Terrorism is described as an act that is considered a crime under any of the relevant international conventions, as well as "any other act designed to cause the death of any civilian or any other person uninvolved in hostilities in the context of an armed conflict or to inflict severe injuries on such person, or to cause considerable damage to any material object; or the organization and planning of such acts, complicity in their implementation and abetting in them, if the goal of such acts due to their nature or context is designed to intimidate the population, violate social security, or force the authorities or an international organization to act or to abstain from acting."

Why is a definition of terrorism acceptable to all so vitally important? So far, despite the pertinent international conventions, the world community has not coined a commonly accepted definition of terrorism. On many occasions this invited arbitrary definitions of terrorism and made it a geopolitical instrument.⁹ Today, there are attempts to create an international Convention on Combating Terrorism designed to contain a unified definition. In this way, the SCO convention has taken a step forward.

The Antiterrorist Center in Tashkent could act in the following directions:

- Collection and analysis of information about terrorist organizations;
- Exchange of relevant information and experience among the SCO members;
- Study of the regional context of terrorism, the degree of its intensity and threat;

⁹ An analysis of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, for example, suggests a conclusion that the world community's antiterrorist struggle that brought the nations closer together and geopolitical rivalry in Southern and Central Asia that breeds conflicts and disunite the nations have complemented one another in an amazing way (see: F. Tolipov, "Ispytanie geopolitiki terrorizmom i antiterrorizmom," *SShA-Kanada: EPI*, No. 3, 2002).

- Study of different forms of terrorism, including nuclear terrorism and terrorism that uses WMD;
- Operational assessment of the efficiency of concerted efforts, as well as monitoring the antiterrorist struggle of the SCO members;
- Elaboration of new concerted approaches, methods and means of struggle against terrorism, as well as prevention methods and suggestions for bringing relevant laws into harmony;
- Establishment and development of cooperation with similar centers and organizations; encouragement of wider interstate and international cooperation in this sphere;
- Organization of seminars, conferences, symposiums, and other meetings of experts, analysts, politicians, and task force agents to discuss the problem of combating terrorism;
- Encouraging successful implementation of the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism;
- Publication and dissemination of relevant materials.

The idea that the future of the ATC directly depends on its potential ability to incorporate efforts to combat drug trafficking and other types of organized crime into its mandate is worth closer attention.¹⁰

I would like to mention here that the political declaration of the Moscow SCO summit adopted on 29 May, 2003 points out that acknowledging the important role of the U.N. and its Security Council in dealing with major international issues is of fundamental importance. This is an important and well-timed statement. There are two permanent members of the U.N. Security Council involved in the Shanghai process, a fact which enhances the SCO's international prestige and opens up new vistas for the Central Asian states wishing to formulate their regional and international initiatives.

Talking at the Dushanbe summit on 5 July, 2000, PRC Chairman Jiang Zemin pointed out that the five principles of peaceful coexistence and the U.N. Charter should be strictly observed and that the SCO should protect the authority of the U.N. Security Council.

The 2003 Moscow Declaration specifically pointed out that the SCO countries intend to actively cooperate with the Counterterrorist Committee of the U.N. SC; and that they thought it important to promptly complete elaboration by the U.N. of drafts of an International Convention on Combating Acts of Nuclear Terrorism and a Universal Convention on Combating International Terrorism. The presidents of Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan pointed out that recognizing the important role of the U.N. and the U.N. SC in dealing with major international issues was of fundamental importance.

It was at that summit that the SCO members clearly stated for the first time that the U.N. should play an important role in rebuilding Iraq. The Declaration said, in particular: "Observance of the national interests and sovereign rights of the Iraqi nation, as well as concrete and efficient aid granted by the international community will serve as a prerequisite of this country's transfer to a peaceful life and the building of a flourishing democratic society."¹¹

The SCO summit (June 2004) will undoubtedly become another step in the development of the SCO. We can expect it to intensify its efforts and spread in new directions, by which I mean implement specific joint projects (economic, ecological, cultural, military, and in the security sphere, etc.) and cooperate with other international regional organizations.

Today the SCO is being actively discussed as a security provider. I have already said that this role has not been fully developed yet, compared with other bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. A comparison of the contributions the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the SCO have made to regional security is very interesting. I fully agree with American analyst M. Du Mont that the CSTO has

¹⁰ See: M. Oresman, "Judging the Future Success of the SCO."

¹¹ "Vstrecha liderov ShOS v Moskve," *Vesti.ru*, 29 May, 2003.

not achieved impressive results because Uzbekistan remains outside its scope. At the same time, the largest regional terrorist organization is called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. He goes on to say: “The CSTO’s overlapping membership with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) and the differing priorities that member states place on each organization may increasingly be an obstacle to CSTO unity in the future, particularly if the SCO gains in international stature.”¹² The same is true of the SCO—if the CSTO gains in international stature, the SCO may find its role in ensuring regional security decreased.

On the other hand, there is an overlapping of functions and goals between the CIS Antiterrorist Center in Bishkek and the SCO Antiterrorist Center in Tashkent. Along with Russian-American and Russian-Chinese bilateral mechanisms and international (within the U.N.) antiterrorist cooperation on the whole, as well as when dealing with the Afghan question, both ATCs became part of the market of antiterrorist services.

The same can be said (by way of comparison) about the possibility (or impossibility) of correlating the SCO mission and its interests in the context of its cooperation with the U.N., NATO, EU, and OSCE, which are working on Central Asian security programs of their own. Can they implement division of labor in this sphere? Given the geopolitical factor, which at all times has been causing what Clausewitz called “friction,” this is hardly possible.

Let us take NATO as an example. In 2003 it assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. This gives hope that the international community will step up its efforts to achieve stability and security in this country because the North Atlantic Alliance has a wide range of peacekeeping means. Today, this is the only organization capable of similar operations.

At the same time, its involvement far beyond its responsibility zone is unique. As a country involved in the Partnership for Peace program, Uzbekistan believes that trust in NATO, as well as the viability of the new international structures and regulatory instruments applied in future conflicts will depend, to a great extent, on the Alliance’s efficiency in Afghanistan. It is too early to assess the results of NATO’s mission in Afghanistan; at the same time, we should not add a geopolitical dimension to any discussion of its operations outside its “responsibility zone.”

How does this correlate with the SCO’s tasks of assisting security in Central Asia? This is not an easy question: the region is living with a sophisticated and far from ambiguous intertwining of various ideas, aims, and means pursued and employed by the current actors in the region. We should always bear in mind that each of the actors—be it a superpower, regional power, or other interested political force—looks at Central Asian security through the prism of its national interests. This brings us back to geopolitics: in the geopolitical context Central Asia has found itself in a symbolic triangle of superpowers composed of Russia, China, and America. To succeed in assisting security and stability in this part of the world, they must seek consensus on their interests and the methods employed.

In anticipating an Asian boom and the enhanced strategic importance of contacts between South-eastern, Southern and Central Asia, the global powers should ensure their future cooperation among themselves in these regions, primarily in Central Asia, since *the new independent states will do their best to avoid one-sided dependence on any of the global powers; today they are forced to manipulate the great powers’ divergent interests in a way they can profit from*. The “zero sum game” in the region does not suit the interests of the U.S., or Russia, or China; actually none of them can play it single-handedly: each of them has an arsenal of geopolitical means to create a counterbalance to another power in order to prevent it from dominating in the region.

This confirms that out of the four possible scenarios, only the fourth may meet the interests of the Central Asian countries: it is for them to select those means and aims from this sophisticated intertwining that are best suited to the idea of regional unity. This brings us back to the conception of transcontinentalism/transregionalism.

¹² M. Du Mont, “That Other Central Asian Collective Security Organization — the CSTO,” *CEF Monthly*, January 2004, China-Eurasia Forum [<http://www.chinaeurasia.org/Newsletter.html>].

In Lieu of a Conclusion

When analyzing the Central Asian countries' positions, R. Burnashev concluded that since Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan cannot ensure their security without stable contacts with Russia and China and cannot, at the same time, disrupt their contacts with their regional neighbors (with Uzbekistan, in the first place), they "are creating and participating in security assistance models in Central Asia that presuppose the involvement of various extra-regional forces. This ensures a balance among them and counterbalances Uzbekistan's military potential and regional ambitions (underlined by the author.—*F. T.*)."¹³

These deliberations obviously contradict his warning: "We should bear in mind that today China is treating the 'Shanghai Five' as a 'transitory structure'—the basic agreements will expire on 31 December, 2020, that is, they are valid for the period of China's possible development into a world center of power. After that China will probably act harshly, especially toward its neighbors."¹⁴ If this is well substantiated, then the Central Asian countries should stop suspecting Uzbekistan of imaginary regional ambitions and counterbalancing its military potential: they should pool forces with Uzbekistan rather than playing into the hands of ambitious China.

If we bear in mind that the geopolitical factor is fairly stable and that an obvious political, economic and military asymmetry exists among the SCO members, we can conclude that the SCO will not be always efficient.

This adds special importance to the strategy that the Central Asian countries will opt for and correlate their strategies to the best of their ability in order to achieve greater unity and use the SCO's mechanisms and goals to reach the highest possible degree of security and through this greater integration within the region. Most of those who study the SCO phenomenon tend to ignore the importance of the regional countries' positions.

Meanwhile, they are now faced with making a choice among one of the four possible geopolitical statuses: a buffer zone, a cordon sanitaire, a springboard, or a center of power.¹⁵ The last possibility looks impossible, yet since it meets the interests of the local states to the fullest extent it should be considered probable.

Today, the SCO is not so much an organization that ensures security as a political forum designed to cement cooperation and develop partner relationships. A model of transregional cooperation is probably its main task. To some extent the Shanghai process brings to mind the road traversed by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which later became the OSCE. The Shanghai Forum/SCO can be regarded as an analogous structure. At the same time, *the SCO could not only study the experience gained by the U.N., NATO, OSCE, and other international organizations in Central Asia and elsewhere, but also try to cooperate with them.*

If successful, this structure could finally reach the cooperation level described as strategic partnership. This is a special type of cooperation based on long-term relations, permanent common strategic interests, and cooperation in practically all spheres based on shared or close security interests of the sides and their close positions on key international issues. The SCO's experience should at least point the way to this type of relationship for the Central Asian countries. In other words, the SCO "school" may teach these states political wisdom and toughness.

¹³ R. Burnashev, "Shankhaiskaia piaterka': k voprosu o regional'noy politike Uzbekistana," *Agentstvo politicheskikh issledovaniy* [<http://www.caapr.kz>], 18 June, 2001.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ See: F. Tolipov, "Are the Heartland and Rimland Changing in the Wake of the Operation in Afghanistan?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (23), 2003, pp. 105-106.