

Time for the EU and NATO to engage with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation



The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation groups China, Russia and all the key players in Central Asia. **Marcel de Haas** argues that the EU and NATO should work more closely with it

It brings together almost half the world's population, several of its members own nuclear weapons, many are big energy suppliers and numbers some of the world's fastest growing economies. Yet few in Europe have heard much about the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and fewer still have considered how Europe should respond to it. Yet instead of viewing it as a potential threat, there are good reasons to believe that the SCO offers opportunities for positive cooperation.

The SCO emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union when in 1996 five former Soviet republics together with China launched as the "Shanghai five" group (Uzbekistan was to join in 2001) with the limited goal of promoting arms control. Five years later, its members vowed to lift the organisation to a higher level of cooperation and created the SCO. Its main new goals were to fight terrorism, separatism and extremism.

The SCO today includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as members, and Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan and India as observers. Russia and China remain the leading actors. Since its launch, the organisation's military exercises have become increasingly ambitious and have grown from being largely bi-lateral to include all the members. The SCO membership is also beginning to work together in the fight against drugs trafficking and organised crime. Three years ago, the SCO countries agreed on terms for mutual assistance in case of natural disasters and other emergencies, and at the cultural level, arts, folk dance festivals and exhibitions are also encouraged.

The organisation spans both major energy exporters and importers. Until recently, energy issues were addressed only bi-laterally, but last year the SCO launched an energy club that unites energy producing and consuming states, transit countries

and private companies so as to coordinate energy strategies and strengthen energy security. The Shanghai grouping promotes free trade too, and aims to build essential infrastructure such as roads and railways to link its members and boost commerce between them while also harmonising customs systems and tariffs.

These accomplishments still look somewhat more impressive on paper than in reality. Cooperation remains focussed on national rather than collective objectives because its members' interests vary so much. China, for example, is seeking markets in which to sell the products of its expanding economy along with further energy resources, while Russian aims are based much more on

Moscow's efforts to regain leadership in the international arena. Russia would like to use the SCO to promote its anti-Western agenda, but its other members – led by China and Kazakhstan – want to strengthen their already robust levels of economic cooperation with the West.

These diverging objectives make it hard to believe that the Shanghai organisation will evolve into an eastern version of NATO. It is true that its members have held joint military exercises and have expressed a desire to build the SCO into a full-grown security organisation, and also that what started out as an arms control organisation and counter-terrorism body has since begun to influence wider security issues. But the

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Shanghai grouping still lacks many essential elements of a mature NATO-style security organisation. The SCO has no integrated military-political structure, and no permanent operational headquarters. It has no rapid reaction force and does not engage in regular political deliberations. NATO's focus is on external security risks, while the SCO's members, in contrast, target security issues within their own territories.

The inter-governmental body that more closely resembles the Shanghai organisation is probably the European Union. Like the EU, the Shanghai group's members emphasise economic and security cooperation and are concerned with a similarly broad range of trade and energy issues. Now that the EU is also concerned with international security, it would make sense to seek cooperation with this new organisation as that would also help counter Russia's attempts to use the SCO as a tool for its anti-Western policies. It would also prevent the new organisation from turning into a militarised entity.

These may look like negative reasons for the EU to engage with the Shanghai grouping, but there are also ample positive reasons for encouraging cooperation. Europe needs energy supplies from central Asia, and central Asia needs European investment. Another sphere of mutual interest could be security in Afghanistan. At present, the EU offers financial support to the Afghan government

and helps to train its police and judiciary, and the SCO has established a contact group with Afghanistan. Both sides want to do more, and they might be able to make a greater impact there by working together rather than separately. The EU has money and the Shanghai organisation, whose members almost all border Afghanistan, has trained personnel and direct experience of the region.

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The EU had until recently refrained from developing structures to facilitate cooperation with the Shanghai grouping. But that began to change in October 2007 when the EU stated in its strategy for central Asia that it was prepared to establish regular *ad hoc* contacts with regional organisations like the SCO. In February of this year, the European Council extended the mandate of

the EU's Special Representative for central Asia to develop appropriate contacts and cooperation with all relevant regional and international organisations, including the SCO.

Cooperation with NATO also looks strategically wise. Given the increasing importance of China in both military and economic matters, growing energy and trade relations between central Asia and the West, and the reasonable assumption that the central Asian region's security will continue to have great significance for western security, then cooperation within the triangle of the SCO, the EU and NATO looks

increasingly inevitable. That is especially the case given the common security threats faced by NATO and the SCO in central Asia – such as Al-Qaeda and Taliban-sponsored terrorism and drugs trafficking.

The time may look right for the two to forge links, but both NATO and the SCO have so far appeared hesitant to engage in closer contact. It is hard to discern whether the NATO alliance has any opinion at all on the SCO group and at best NATO seems to regard it as being neither a problem nor an opportunity. Dr Jamie Shea, Director of Policy Planning in the Office of the Secretary-General of NATO, has stated that although NATO has no direct contact with the Shanghai club, it has bilateral contacts with individual member states, but he has also said that so far the SCO has not signalled any desire to open a dialogue with NATO, even though there is nothing to prevent the alliance from taking steps in this direction.

Making an approach to the SCO would certainly seem to support NATO's stated objectives. After 9/11, the alliance came to the conclusion that threats may need to be dealt with on a worldwide basis, which explains NATO's presence in Afghanistan. As a part of this global strategy, NATO strengthened its relations with partners globally, including in south east Asia which is the SCO's chief area of responsibility. Perhaps inevitably, the Shanghai grouping and Russia and China as its leading member states regard NATO's increased presence in the region with some mistrust. As long as NATO remains reluctant to enter into a dialogue with the Shanghai club, such a

cautious attitude looks set to linger, and, may even intensify. Thought also needs to be given, therefore, to the establishment of a NATO-China Council along the same lines as the NATO-Russia Council, and to the creation of arrangements that would facilitate greater cooperation with the SCO as a whole.

Such cooperation would not bridge the main differences between SCO members and the West over issues like democratisation and human rights. Cooperation would also need to comprise much more than mere joint policy development, and should involve the practical pursuit of mutually beneficial, smaller-scale ad-hoc projects. NATO and the SCO could work together on neutralising anti-personnel mines in Afghanistan, and other possible types of confidence building cooperation could be joint police training and counter-narcotics operations.

If security cooperation is to be a success, then clearly politically sensitive issues have to be avoided. It's the sort of practical approach that would serve the interests of the EU, NATO, the SCO's members and, not least, of Afghanistan. At the Dushanbe SCO 2008 Summit of last August, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bokiev suggested the SCO expand its cooperation with European structures, including the EU. This first mentioning of SCO-EU cooperation could well be the start of a fruitful relationship. □

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