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Comparative Analysis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and European Union Strategy on Central Asia: Confrontation or Cooperation?

Abstract: In 2021, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) turned 20 years old. With “Shanghai Spirit” as its guiding principle, the scope of SCO’s activity has significantly expanded, recently adding India and Pakistan to its members. As a result, SCO policy has heavily influenced the Central Asia region. In response, in 2019, the EU launched a new strategy for Central Asia, adopting “connectivity” as its core concept. As a result, both SCO and EU strategies in Central Asia tend to conflict with each other, thus leading to uneven and inconsistent development of the region. Therefore, this paper aims to identify contradictions between SCO’s “Shanghai Spirit” guiding principle and the EU’s concept of “connectivity” by comparing the SCO and EU strategies toward Central Asia. The methodology in the paper involves a qualitative comparative method, including two qualitative case studies, represented by the SCO’s “Shanghai Spirit” and the EU’s concept of “connectivity” in their strategies on Central Asia. The article concludes that contestation between the SCO and the EU policies in Central Asia impedes stable development of the region, and therefore, a compromise between both policies in Central Asia is suggested.

Keywords: *European Union, connectivity, Central Asia, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Shanghai Spirit*

1. Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a political, economic, and security alliance formed in 2001 based on the Shanghai Five, a mutual security agreement formed in 1996 between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the alliance, thus marking the official establishment of the SCO. Initially, the main premise for the establishment of SCO was the formation of a security alliance in order to

jointly combat terrorism, separatism and extremism¹. Shortly after the establishment of the SCO, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism was signed, which recognised these phenomena as a threat to the integrity and security of member states as well as their political, economic, and social stability (The Shanghai Convention..., 2001).

In 2005, the SCO Secretariat signed memoranda of understanding with the ASEAN Secretariat and the CIS Executive Committee to stress the importance of strengthening peace and stability in Central Asia (Joint Communiqué..., 2005). A few years after its creation, due to adherence to the principle of open regionalism, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation expanded its influence by accepting India and Pakistan in 2017, becoming an international organisation with significant influence in Central Asia.

In September 2021, at the 21st SCO summit in Dushanbe, the status of Iran was upgraded from an observer to a full member, thus launching the process of Iran's accession to the SCO. Iran has come a long path toward full member status. It has been an observer member for over 15 years but had applied to join the organisation as a full member in 2008 (Iran joins..., 2021). Iran considers SCO membership an opportunity for multilateral cooperation within the framework of its foreign policy "oriented towards neighbours and Asia, industrial development and realisation of national interests" (News analysis..., 2021). Members of the SCO also supported Iran's membership in the SCO, marking it as a contribution toward enhancing the organisation's international authority and reflecting SCO's growing influence (Iran joins..., 2021).

The SCO introduces itself as an equal and mutually beneficial alliance for states with significant cultural differences and highly unbalanced development. The SCO policy is based on the guiding principle of the so-called "Shanghai Spirit" – a norm of the relation between SCO member states, described by mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, joint consultations, respect for cultural diversity and aspiration for collective development (Declaration on the Establishment..., 2001). These norms resemble the guiding principles of other regional organisations, such as ASEAN and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The fundamental principles of the ASEAN charter include respect for different cultures, languages and religions while emphasising the spirit of unity in diversity, shared commitment and collective responsibility, enhanced consultations on matters of the common interest of ASEAN and non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member states (The ASEAN Charter, 2020). The EAEU also includes similar scope of basic principles, such as respect for sovereign equality and territorial integrity of the Member States, mutually beneficial cooperation, refraining from any measures that might jeopardise the achievement of its

¹ In particular, special representative of the President of the Russian Federation for SCO Affairs (2001–2006) Vitaliy Vorobyov (2012) states, that the SCO was created as a response to immediate threats of terrorism and drug trafficking from the Afghanistan conflict in the late 1990s. The SCO idea was born from a collective demand for a regional coalition to combat them.

objectives. Hence the “Shanghai Spirit” of SCO shares common norms and principles with other regional organisations (Treaty on the Eurasian..., 2014).

Unlike the SCO, the European Union is the most successful alliance in developing and using foreign relations instruments and initiatives, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy. In terms of Central Asia, the EU hopes to set the course and direction of cooperation through dialogue with the region’s countries. Therefore, in 2007, the EU acknowledged a considerable evolution in political and economic transformations among Central Asian states since attaining independence and released its first strategic relationship paper for Central Asia, titled “The EU and Central Asia: A New Partnership Strategy”, which re-evaluates the strategic position of Central Asia and deepens comprehensive cooperation with the Central Asian countries.

The Strategy offers mutual development and deepening of international relations between EU and Central Asia, based on the principles of good governance, the rule of law, human rights, democratisation, education and training to build a peaceful, democratic, and economically prosperous Central Asia, thus making the countries of the region reliable partners for the EU with shared common interests and goals (The EU and Central Asia..., 2007).

In this regard, Ambrosio (2008), Renard (2013), Cooley (2015), and Aris (2009) indicate that the SCO approaches toward development and cooperation in Central Asia reflect authoritarian norms and principles while countering democratic ones. For example, Ambrosio (2008) states that authoritarian leaders can adopt policies to insulate or protect the regime from cross-border influences to prevent regional trends from being imported into their country. These regimes may also use rhetoric and wordplay to engage in definitional debates over the meaning and content of democracy to undermine or delegitimise external criticism of their political systems. Cooley (2015) defines several authoritarian norms aimed to counter democracy: abuse of “terrorist” labelling as a counter-terrorist measure, respect for civilisational diversity and the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs of sovereign states and the defence of “traditional values”. For example, scholars claim that China declares the Uyghur people as proponents of Islamic fundamentalism, thus defining them as terrorists and extremists, thus justifying its re-education policy toward this minority in Xinjiang. At the same time, Russia introduces a ban on “propaganda of homosexuality” to protect traditional values from Western influence.

Kolpakova and Kuchinskaya (2015), Ūnaldılar Kocamaz (2019), and Yun and Park (2012) see the SCO as a basis for further deepening of Sino-Russian relations, while Kembayev (2017) and Ihsan Qadir and ur Rehman (2016) claim, that the SCO complements One Belt One Road initiative and brings economic prosperity to its member states. The intensification of SCO economic and political activities in Central Asia is also actively discussed regarding its impact on a regional or global scale. For example, Allison (2004), Salter and Yin (2014), and Yussupzhanovich and Tulkunovna (2019) see the SCO as another regional development organisation with an emphasis on multilateral cooperation. However, Antonenko (2007),

Blank and Kim (2016), and de Kerpel (2014) argue that the SCO has the potential to evolve from currently an ad hoc security community to a de facto comprehensive security alliance, including the military domain.

At the same time, Russia perceives its membership in the SCO as an opportunity for further implementation of the concept of Greater Eurasian partnership. The accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO in 2018 presents Russia with a strategically important milestone for promoting the Greater Eurasia concept. Russian experts claim that partnership in the format of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation can be effectively expanded to a broader format – the SCO+. Thus, it is possible to initiate a dialogue with regional blocs, such as ASEAN, RCEP, and the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Persian Gulf (GCC) within the SCO framework to create a regular systemic platform for policy coordination between regional integration groupings (Lousianin, 2018, p. 141).

This kaleidoscope of opinions creates questions worth exploring: What is the difference between SCO and EU strategies in Central Asia? How do SCO and EU strategies in Central Asia conflict with each other? What are the prospects for cooperation between SCO and the EU in Central Asia?

The article aims to test the hypothesis of Thomas Ambrosio (2008) that the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ – the set of principles underlying the SCO – is inherently conservative and designed to preserve the autocratic regimes in the region on the example of SCO policy in Central Asia, the states of which are members of the alliance and therefore experience the direct impact of the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ principle. In this regard, the article follows the analytical point of Alexander Cooley, which claims that “regional groups themselves have become institutional arenas where democratic norms are contested and counter-norms introduced” (Cooley, 2015). The paper attempts to outline both positive and negative social, economic and political impact of ‘Shanghai Spirit’ principles on Central Asian countries to indicate whether ‘Shanghai Spirit’ principles of the SCO can be identified as counter-norms aimed at undermining the development of democracy in Central Asia. The scope of the paper also takes into account alternative views on the subject matter, which assume that “this [SCO] framework is less legalistic and integrated than the one adopted by the EU, which relies more on uncodified concepts and norms of behaviour emerging from the common perceptions between a particular group of states” (Aris, 2009) and that the “norms and values promoted by the SCO are simply not compatible with those of the EU; and the two models of integration fundamentally clash as the SCO ‘exemplifies integration through authoritarianism’ (Hussain, 2011; Renard, 2014). Finally, the article addresses the positive aspects of the SCO activities, which claim that the “SCO is merely an *ad hoc* pragmatic security community². Thus, it was created for the sole purpose of joint combating terrorism,

² Karl W. Deutsch (1969, p. 5) defines security community as a “group of states among which there is a real assurance that the members of that community will not fight each other physically, but will settle their disputes in some other way”.

separatism and extremism to ensure the security and safety of the alliance members. Thereby, it should assure peace and stability among its members and settle all-domain issues through “Shanghai Spirit” consultation” (de Kerpel, 2014). The “SCO aspires to play the role of a unifier of Eurasia, where the key players are likely to coordinate their efforts” (Yussupzhanovich & Tulkunovna, 2019). Despite the wide range of attitudes and perceptions of the general SCO policy, the article takes the EU strategy on Central Asia and its concept of “connectivity” as an alternative approach policy in Central Asia to apply the qualitative method of comparison to the SCO activities in the region. The application of the methodology allows assessing the compliance of the SCO’s “Shanghai Spirit” principles with the EU’s democratic norms, such as the rule of law, human rights, free-market economy and good governance. The applied method attempts to answer research questions regarding differences and points of conflict between the SCO and the EU strategy toward Central Asia. The article assumes that the path toward cooperation mechanism through the analysis of EU and SCO policies in Central Asia indicates that differences in concepts and approaches make it difficult to deepen cooperation between EU and SCO and affect the effectiveness of their policies in Central Asia. Regarding current changes in the international arena, the deepening of cooperation between the two alliances in Central Asia is expected to provide new opportunities rather than challenges. It should be noted that in the 2019 EU strategy on Central Asia, the SCO is barely mentioned. To some extent, this is caused by the fact that the main range of interests of the EU in relation to the Central Asian states is in the economic sphere, and the SCO acts predominantly in the field of politics and security. Undoubtedly, there is some potential for cooperation between the EU and the SCO, especially in the security sphere. However, the EU is mainly interested in cooperation with individual SCO member states and is almost exclusively limited to bilateral cooperation on topics of interest to each Central Asian state separately. Contacts between the EU and the SCO may develop soon if the SCO pays more attention to the Central Asian issues tackled by EU strategy, particularly the fight against drug trafficking, the protection of human rights and the maintenance of democracy in the region. Sources used in the article include works of European and Asian scholars and various opinions and reports of analysts and experts from research centres and think tanks.

2. Impact of EU’s Connectivity Concept on Central Asia

The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia is not the first attempt to establish productive international relations with Central Asia. The first EU Strategy on Central Asia was developed in 2007, marked as an attempt to bring the partnership between the European Union and Central Asia to full fruition (The EU and Central Asia..., 2007). However, unlike the 2007 Strategy for Central Asia, the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia pays greater attention to the varied and dynamic developments among the Central Asian countries as well as the presence and relevance of other external partners and projects present in the region (Dzhuraev & Muratalieva, 2020).

The cornerstone of the new strategy reflects changing context and dynamics by introducing the connectivity theme, which strives to build a comprehensive and sustainable partnership to improve the rule-based order between the EU and Central Asia. Schottli (2019) defines three features of connectivity: an emphasis placed on the economic, fiscal, environmental and social sustainability of projects; a comprehensive view of connectivity, including transport links, digital networks, energy flows, and a crucial human dimension; and the adherence to and promotion of international rules and regulations to create a level playing field. The positive impact of the connectivity concept on the implementation of the EU Strategy on Central Asia is reflected in the works of Kassenova (2019), Dzhuraev and Muratalieva (2020), and Russell (2019).

Nevertheless, the EU connectivity approach toward Central Asia faces numerous challenges that stem from the Soviet era. The effectiveness and capabilities of the EU Strategy to influence the region are frequently questioned (Laumulin, 2019; Vasa, 2020; Saari, 2019). For example, Saari (2019) claims that the region presents several challenges to the EU's vision of connectivity caused by Soviet rule, which left Central Asia disconnected and prone to conflict despite a strong degree of interdependence on shared resources, while illicit networks have replaced public interests with private interests thus undermining long-term policies in the region. These shadow connections weaken the states, prevent sustainable economic development, and often lead to violence.

As a result, tensions and cross-border incidents between ethnic enclaves are quite common in Fergana Valley, resulting in numerous casualties (Gabdulhakov, 2013). As a result, the EU's strategy thus evolved from one with a more cautious ambition of state-building to one that places greater emphasis on democratisation. Norling and Cornell (2016) note that the EU's cautiousness on democratisation is partly due to the pressures exerted by EU member states and various EU agencies. Also, it reflects the priorities of Central Asian governments themselves, which are generally hostile to external interference in their political processes.

Such a discreet approach of the EU's strategy is unlikely to succeed in the short term. The support of democratisation processes and infrastructural development in Central Asia suffers from the strong presence of the economic and political culture of the Soviet era, which affects elites' policy in the region. Therefore, most Central Asian elites share many common views about the EU. They feel that the EU is barely visible in Central Asia, that it is unknown to the general public, that it has complex bureaucratic procedures, and finally, that it has ambitions greater than its actual leverage and ability to deliver (Laumulin, 2019). The elite pacts in Central Asia and the South Caucasus were hammered out almost exclusively between the old elites, who generally had scant interest in democratisation (Norling & Cornell, 2016).

The relations between Russia and Kazakhstan demonstrate that at the elite level, many figures within the two presidential administrations and Security Councils act as conduits of Moscow's interests in Kazakhstan and vice versa. Such close intergovernmental coop-

eration provides Kazakhstan with numerous benefits, including normative ones. Russia's emphasis on stability, state authority, and non-interference suits the Kazakh government better than political designs advanced by any other external actors, especially Western ones that prioritise democratic and liberal standards (Laruelle et al., 2019). These connections between post-Soviet elites in Central Asia make it difficult for the EU to penetrate Central Asia's political and security sphere, whereas the strategic impact of economic support alone is insufficient.

Thus, the EU promotes regional cooperation among Central Asian states to overcome that issue. It is expected to enhance connectivity and economic benefits within the region. However, this approach is costly in the short term, but it offers long-term great strategic advantages.

Although the objectives of the EU policy in Central Asia vary in priority, they mainly focus on four aspects: democracy and human rights, the rule of law, free-market reforms and energy sector cooperation. Unlike the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia, the 2019 strategy recognises the development of Central Asian states and the presence of other regional geopolitical actors (Dzhuraev & Muratalieva, 2020). However, the new strategy has been criticised for its weak foreign policy, hesitation, and prioritising marginal issues from the outside and by member states. The implementation of the strategy proved the limited capacity of the EU to address local needs and challenges while also facing its own internal crises and difficult foreign policy decision-making structure (Vasa, 2020). The spread of democratic values alone cannot contribute to stability in Central Asia and can serve as an obstacle to political modernisation in Central Asian states. According to Laruelle et al. (2018), this process should be underpinned by two main standpoints: first, the EU's interest in democratic societies as more stable trading and security partners and second, while 'democracy' might have a negative reputation among many Central Asian countries, it should be presented as a precondition to lead a secure life with opportunities. It must be a domestic process, which the EU could support through the rule of law and good governance projects.

Despite shortcomings regarding the democratic transformation of Central Asian states, the EU strategy succeeded in maintaining sector reform processes. In 2007–2013, the EU pursued a more balanced dual track of bilateral and regional cooperation, with a regional approach for problems occurring across or involving all five countries, including water resource management, transport infrastructure and anti-drug trafficking initiatives, whilst following a bilateral, tailor-made approach for individual national issues (Bossuyt, 2019).

In addition, using the EU's political and development cooperation infrastructure will enhance EU-Central Asia relations and provide a long-term impact on the region. For example, the European Union has mastered and used water management rules to promote cooperation in Central Asia. The 2019 Strategy considers access to water to be an environmental problem in particular, regardless of its security dimensions. Therefore, addressing water issues is part of Central Asia's EU agenda. EU action and actions on water resources

in Central Asia are summarised in the EU Water Initiative (EUWI), which is at the heart of the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals. In cooperation with the OECD and the UN Economic Commission for Europe, the European Union promotes national dialogues on water policy in various regions. In Central Asia, dialogues were first launched in Kyrgyzstan in 2008. This initiative aims to promote policy reforms that would lead to sustainable water management and the financing of water supply, water infrastructure and water pollution, particularly through better regulatory and administrative frameworks (UNECE, 2016). The comprehensive EU approach tackles water management on three levels: at the sub-national level, the EU promotes efficient use of water by distributing leaflets on responsible water use and creating workshops and seminars on domestic water use and water pollution; at the national level, the EU initiated a cross-border dialogue between Central Asian states on issues regarding water irrigation and hydroelectric power production; at the international level, the EU acts as a mediator on water-related border disputes in Central Asia and invests in sustainable renewable energy projects (Čech, 2018). These EU measures in Central Asia contribute not only to the improvement of water management but also act as an effective EU tool for strengthening cooperation with Central Asia without losing its credibility while respecting its commitments to the environment, peace, stability and the protection of the population.

In addition, the EU supports infrastructure construction in Central Asia, reducing trade barriers for countries in the region, initiating cross-border cooperation between countries, and promoting Western norms and values in developing cooperation. The 2019 Strategy calls for a “sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based” approach to connectivity while implying a shortage of these features in Chinese practices (Kassenova, 2019). For the strategy, connectivity is about more than infrastructure and includes tackling non-physical (e.g., regulatory) barriers to movement (Russell, 2019). In order to promote Central Asian connectivity, from 2014 to 2020, the EU allocated €1.1 billion for Central Asia from its Development Cooperation Instrument. This grant, together with loans from EIB and EBRD, has invested €11,3 billion in the region to support projects in areas, such as rural development, education, renewable energy and entrepreneurship, some relevant to connectivity (Russell, 2019). Furthermore, in order to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Central Asian countries, the EU has implemented the action for Strengthening Financial Resilience and Accelerating Risk Reduction in Central Asia initiative, which aims to build resilience and disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the region. In November 2021, Central Asian countries adopted the Regional DRR Strategy for 2022–2030, which aims to join efforts in strengthening the focus on transboundary hazards, including biological hazards and climate-related risks, improving investments in risk reduction, and enhancing preparedness for response (United Nations Office, 2022).

As for policies in the security sphere, the EU’s 2019 strategy defines several common security priorities for the Central Asian States, such as terrorism prevention and drug trafficking, and acknowledges their negative impact on the security environment in the

region. However, during the launch of the 2007 EU Strategy in Bishkek, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini stressed that the EU did not intend to engage in a geopolitical game in Central Asia (Dzhuraev & Muratalieva, 2020, p. 6). For example, while the 2007 EU strategy on Central Asia prioritised a distinct geopolitical actor, namely Afghanistan, as a regional security threat, the EU's 2019 strategy emphasises current global security threats, such as cyberattacks, terrorism, extremism, etc. (Dzhuraev & Muratalieva, 2020, p. 3).

In general, the EU sees connectivity as the core concept of its new strategy, which can be seen as an alternative approach to the SCO to capture the attention of Central Asian elites and counterbalance SCO's presence in Central Asia. EU's support for Central Asia is more at the sub-national and national level, which is quite confident in its long-term cooperation with local communities and business elites. In this regard, the concept of connectivity allows the EU to expand its influence in Central Asia through a new strategy by promoting sustainability and rule-based order. However, the implementation of this approach has significant risks. On the one hand, if Central Asian countries succeed at improving their governance of infrastructure projects, they will have a chance to connect to the emerging upgrade of global governance, on the other hand. However, the failure to live up to the challenge of more demanding governance standards can result in an aggravation of social and political tensions in the region (Kassenova, 2019).

3. Impact of SCO's "Shanghai Spirit" Concept on Central Asia

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation originally developed from the Shanghai Five, formed in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which was transformed into the SCO in 2001 after Uzbekistan had joined the alliance. The SCO's economic development and political influence have effectively dominated the region of Central Asia, with China and Russia as the main regional powers. In 2017, the major expansion of the SCO occurred after major south Asian states India and Pakistan had joined the alliance.

As an open organisation for regional cooperation, the SCO performs the function of building a mechanism of trust in security and economic cooperation by not only strengthening the influence of Russia and China in Central Asia but also by demonstrating a new model of regional cooperation: "The Shanghai Spirit" as a cornerstone of the SCO, which means mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, respect for diverse civilisations and pursuit of common development. Muratbekova (2019) assumes that by pursuing the "Shanghai Spirit", the SCO can become the platform to discuss fundamental global issues while introducing the Shanghai Spirit as a key principle of dialogue. Kolpakova and Kuchinskaya (2015) also note that the SCO is the embodiment of the concept of China's "new regionalism", the key mechanisms of which are: economic, political, ideological, and cultural development strategies. In this context, Central Asia is a training ground for many of China's "soft" diplomatic initiatives to implement several new diplomatic methods and mechanisms never applied

elsewhere (Kaukenov, 2012). For example, SCO defines its main goal as the focus on key problems of further strengthening the capacity of the Organisation to address modern challenges and threats to security and stability in the region and fulfil practical tasks of expanding multilateral cooperation in the political, economic and cultural fields (Joint Communiqué..., 2005). At the same time, the SCO sets out a map of cooperation based on ideas and principles of how relations should be conducted within and outside the SCO. These principles, especially the norm of non-interference in domestic affairs, have further reassured the leaderships of Central Asia that their ruling authority is not endangered by the membership of the SCO (Aris, 2009). However, such an unconventional approach of the SCO often results in misunderstanding and backlash not only from Central Asian states but also outside of its members. The SCO has attracted mainly sceptical and negative comments: some questioning whether it has more than symbolic substance, others criticising its members' lack of democratic credentials and questioning the legitimacy of their various policies (Bailes et al., 2007).

An example of a major concern of Central Asian countries regarding SCO's approach is represented by China's economic policy in the region. China is the most important economic partner of Central Asia as well as the main initiator of economic cooperation within the SCO, actively promoting and pushing investment projects to the forefront of the SCO agenda. The leading role of China in the economic sphere of the SCO is highlighted by the fact that China uses the SCO as a useful platform for advancing bilateral cooperation with its members. While the SCO regulatory framework provides common values and major principles, all detailed provisions of economic cooperation are governed by respective bilateral instruments. Scholars point out that in this way, SCO is similar to a hub (Beijing) and spokes (other members) arrangement, which allows China to take a flexible approach to both individual Eurasian countries and their integration grouping to implement specific projects (Kembayev, 2017). However, China heavily relies on loans to implement the investment projects in Central Asia, leading Central Asian countries to become financially dependent on China and making them China's debtors in the long-term perspective. For example, in 2009, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, China provided a 10-billion-US dollar credit loan to member states of the SCO to shore up their economies amid the global financial crisis (Embassy..., 2009). The so-called *quid pro quo* deals represent another example of China's economic policy. In 2018, the Tajik government granted a mining license to China-based company TBEA as remuneration for the funds it spent building the 400-megawatt Dushanbe TETs-2 power plant. According to the arrangement, as remuneration for the funds, TBEA spent on building the 400-megawatt Dushanbe TETs-2 power plant with a total cost of \$349 million. As a result, the Tajik external debt at the start of 2018 stood at \$2,9 billion. Of that total, \$1.2 billion is owed to the state-run Export-Import Bank of China, or Exim Bank (Eurasianet, 2018).

However, the financial dependency of Central Asian countries on Chinese development loans and deliberately uneven deals with few possibilities to pay the debt back to Chinese

creditors is only one potential cause of anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asia. The rapid growth of ethno-nationalist movements has spread across the region. These movements are driven mainly by China's so-called re-education policy, which raises numerous concerns among Central Asian countries. Since 2017, reports on large-scale internments of Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz Muslims in China's re-education camps in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have emerged. This policy is considered to be arguably the country's most intense campaign of coercive social re-engineering, which represents the epitome of China's securitisation approach in its restive western minority regions (Zenz, 2018). This policy is embedded in Beijing's concept of the "three evils" of separatism, extremism, and terrorism in regional security structures like the SCO. In Beijing's eyes, all three evils have taken root among the native Muslim Uyghur population in Xinjiang, resulting in unrest and spurts of violence and support for Uyghur terrorist groups domestically and abroad (Putz, 2018). China's attempts to remedy the "three evils" in Central Asia have led to the region's massive spike in anti-Chinese protests. In December 2018, members of the Kyrgyz nationalist Kyrk Choro organisation held their first protest outside the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek to demand the Kyrgyz government deport illegal migrants and stop the persecution of ethnic Kyrgyz in China (Eshaliyeva, 2019). At the same time, the Kazakh government in 2018 commented on the issue publicly, stating that during Kazakhstan-Chinese consultations, the situation of ethnic Kazakhs, who have resettled from China to Kazakhstan and have become citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan, was raised by the Kazakh side. Also, an urgent request was expressed for an objective, fair review of affairs and the release of those ethnic Kazakhs detained in China who have dual citizenship (Pannier, 2018).

The SCO also tackled the issue of water management in Central Asia. The emphasis on rational and efficient use of water and energy resources, prevention of desertification and other degradation processes figured prominently on the SCO's agenda and was mentioned in Tashkent Declaration by Heads of the Member States of the SCO in 2004 (Tashkent Declaration..., 2004). The SCO has also signed a memorandum of understanding with ASEAN, which initiated a strategic plan of action on water resources in 2005 (Memorandum..., 2005). This strategic plan underscores the critical importance of water among its member countries and builds on agreements dating to 1999 to promote integrated water resources management in the region (Asia Society, 2009). Furthermore, the Dushanbe Declaration on the 20th anniversary of the SCO acknowledged the "lack of access to safe, fresh water, basic sanitary services and healthy hygiene" (Dushanbe Declaration..., 2021). It accepted the concept of cooperation in environmental protection for 2022–2024, the execution of which was further discussed during the third meeting of Heads of Ministries and Departments of the SCO member states responsible for environmental protection issues, which took place in Tashkent on May 27, 2022, under the chairmanship of Uzbekistan (Ahmad, 2022).

These examples demonstrate that Sinophobic narratives are widespread among Central Asian countries. However, they are mostly of local and spontaneous character, and governments make minimal efforts to address China's re-education policy. Therefore, despite

frequent coverage of Chinese policy toward ethnic minorities in Central Asia, the resonance among the Central Asian population remains quite limited due to the lack of cohesion in the population and the heavy dependence of Central Asian elites on Chinese financial investments in the framework of the SCO activity.

Nevertheless, the SCO significantly contributes to the development of energy infrastructure while directly impacting Central Asia security. In this regard, the SCO adopts the 21st-century agenda that pushes the joint struggle against various perceived non-state menaces (terrorism, separatism and extremism) to the fore and that recognises the intense relevance of security of infrastructure, communications, energy and the balance of economic power (Bailes et al., 2007). In order to develop new investment mechanisms in addition to bilateral and multilateral treaties between SCO members, as well as to engage China's massive foreign exchange reserves and solve its industrial overcapacity. Therefore, China has established multilateral development banks (MDB) such as the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In 2010, an initiative to establish the SCO development bank for deeper financial and monetary cooperation among the SCO member countries was proposed. Nevertheless, progress toward realising the SCO development bank idea has been minimal (Hooijmaaijers, 2021). The establishment of the MDBs allows the SCO members to realise investment projects aimed at developing sustainable and renewable energy infrastructure, increasing connectivity and regional cooperation between SCO member states and introducing new technologies and know-how in underdeveloped regions. While NDB bank operates primarily among BRICS member states, the AIIB actively invests in infrastructural and sustainable projects in all SCO members, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific region.

The AIIB projects in Central Asia, in particular, are aimed not only at the region's technological and sustainable development but also for further advancement of the One Belt One Road initiative, where Central Asia plays a key role as an energy and economic source of the project. With an increased focus on economic development, member countries of the SCO have increased their mutual dependence through the One Belt One Road Project, supporting economic development through several projects and greater investments (Ünalldılar Kocamaz, 2019). For example, in 2019, AIIB invested \$46,7 million in constructing the Zhanatas wind power plant in Kazakhstan to promote renewable energy in the region (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 2019). In 2020, the AIIB invested \$385,1 million in developing water supply infrastructure in the Bukhara region of Uzbekistan to provide access to safely managed water and sanitation services to strengthen the operational performance of the water utility of the Bukhara Region. Moreover, the second phase of the project is proposed, which is aimed at the improvement of the sewage infrastructure in the Bukhara region, the implementation of which will provide access to safely managed water and sanitation services in the Bukhara Region and strengthen the operational performance of the water utility of Bukhara Region (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 2020).

While the economic and technological spheres of Central Asian states are developed by multilateral development bank rather than the SCO itself, the initial goal of the SCO is defined as a multilateral security organisation which is based on the concept of multilateral security cooperation as a utilitarian foreign policy (Yun & Park, 2012). The SCO members define the main tasks in security as combating terrorism, separatism and extremism, which constitute a threat to international peace, security, promoting friendly relations among states, and enjoyment of fundamental human rights and freedoms (The Shanghai Convention..., 2001). The SCO leaders have recently stressed that security cooperation must be based on comprehensive security to fulfil these tasks. As stated at the 2017 Astana summit, this cooperation should be comprehensive. It should assist the member states in protecting their territories, citizens, livelihoods and key infrastructure sectors 'from the destructive effect of new challenges and threats,' thus creating the necessary preconditions for sustainable development and poverty elimination (The Astana Declaration..., 2017).

Naturally, the security cooperation policy requires regular conducting of military exercises. The first large-scale SCO joint military exercises took place in 2005, known as Peace Mission 2005, the participants of which were represented only by Russia and China. War game of such format also took place in 2007 under the auspices of the SCO (Common exercise..., 2007). Central Asian states' involvement in SCO-initiated joint military exercises occurred in 2010 at the Matybulak training area in Kazakhstan, involving personnel from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in joint planning and operational manoeuvres (Weitz, 2010). These exercises are considered an attempt to reassure the Central Asian governments that they can depend on Russia and China to protect them from external threats and persuade them that they need not rely on other security alliances for their defence (Ünaldılar Kocamaz, 2019). Central Asian states have regularly participated in joint military exercises after this event. This multilateral security approach is deemed an effective tool for further improving the SCO members' capabilities to cooperate against common threats such as terrorism or separatism. The Peace Mission 2014 training, for example, involved all SCO members at the time and was conducted to cope with the threat of terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Central Asian countries (Blank & Kim, 2016). The 2016 Peace Mission, started by the SCO for the first time in Kyrgyzstan, included practice drills with air-to-air missiles and military exercises involving heavy weaponry deployment (Kucera, 2016).

Significant efforts were undertaken in terms of a comprehensive security approach in Central Asia to create a productive security agenda and achieve greater solidarity among the SCO members. However, the excessive presence of two influential members of the SCO, namely Russia and China, raises concerns among international relations scholars, who claim that increasing cooperation opportunities between these two enormous powers in the Asian region may cause them to go beyond these aims and coalesce into a more solid bloc, mimicking Western-type organisations (Ünaldılar Kocamaz, 2019).

4. Comparison of the SCO and the EU Key Concepts

The comprehensive analysis of the EU and the SCO's attempts to stimulate the infrastructural development and security enhancement in Central Asia reveals fundamental differences in their approaches and attitudes towards the region. The SCO is dedicated to building a mechanism based on cooperation and mutual interdependence among members, guided by the "Shanghai Spirit", defined as a cornerstone concept and ideological basis in the economic and security spheres. In 20 years since its establishment, the SCO has proved its capability to build a viable and effective alliance, with prospects for further development and expansion. On the other hand, it not only demonstrates a distinct model of regional cooperation but also strengthens the geopolitical role of powerful and influential SCO members such as China and Russia in Central Asia, thus suppressing and dominating the decision-making process of Central Asian member states. The EU is fundamentally different from the SCO: its strategy on Central Asia is based on the concept of "connectivity", which promotes mutual interaction not so much between the EU and Central Asian countries as between Central Asian countries and other non-governmental actors in the region. The implementation of "connectivity" is achieved by joint work on economic, environmental and security issues in the region, which involves the collective effort of all entities interested in the development of Central Asia. The successful realisation of regional projects is ensured by relying on the rule of law and democratisation, which would dampen existing differences between Central Asian states and result in greater regional cooperation and unity. However, the active promotion of economic interdependence and political diversity, initiated by the EU's connectivity concept and excessive emphasis on democratic and rule-based reforms in Central Asia, creates a backlash from Central Asian elites, who perceive this approach as a threat to their authority in the region. Therefore, Central Asian governments resist the democratisation process and attempt to cease it by developing relations with major SCO members, such as China and Russia.

As a result, the approaches and key concepts of the EU and the SCO tend to differ, making it difficult to cooperate closely with the countries of Central Asia for both alliances and even more difficult to reach any consensus on cooperation. However, this conflict of concepts does not mean that Central Asian countries would openly back and join the EU connectivity strategy in Central Asia. It is because due to significant differences between guiding principles of the SCO and EU strategy in Central Asia, the full-scale participation of Central Asian states in EU strategy and embracing connectivity will inevitably cause deviation from "Shanghai Spirit" values. Therefore, it will require withdrawal from the SCO. This step would be difficult for Central Asian states because long-term membership in the SCO made these states depend on the alliance's economic and security benefits. The loss of such financial and security support might weaken the Central Asia region, thus making it vulnerable to external threats.

First, the SCO activity in Central Asia is subjected to great concern and scepticism among Western scholars and analysts. The analytical papers on the SCO have been mostly US-dominated, thus shaping the EU's attitude towards the SCO as the organisation. It is far from European traditions and norms in its way of dismissing human rights concerns and forbidding mutual interference in internal affairs and is seen as an attempt by Moscow and Beijing to try to instrumentalise the SCO as a regional balancing structure against Washington (Aris, 2009; Allison, 2004; Bailes et al., 2007). However, the 2005 declaration by the heads of the member states of the SCO indicates that "in the contradictory environment of globalisation, maintenance of world peace and security is facilitated by multilateral cooperation based on the principles of equality and mutual respect, non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, non-confrontational thinking, consistent progress towards democratisation of international relations" (Declaration by the Heads..., 2005). These principles act as an asset against criticism from the West for the SCO's lack of political freedoms, market liberalism, and the new foreign policy assertiveness of an 'energy superpower' (Bailes et al., 2007).

Over time, the constant and active participation of the EU in the affairs of Central Asia and the adjustment of the Central Asian strategy allowed the EU to acknowledge the important role of the SCO in maintaining regional peace and stability and strengthening mutual trust and cooperation among member states. IR analysts urged the EU to stop thinking about the SCO purely in geopolitical terms and recognise its contribution to regional stability and development (Antonenko, 2007). Also, they encouraged the EU to seek cooperation with the SCO, as that would help counter Russia's attempts to use the SCO as a tool for its anti-Western policies and prevent the organisation from turning into a militarised entity (de Haas, 2008). The 2019 new EU Strategy on Central Asia acknowledged SCO's prospects to evolve into a much more influential form in Central Asia (Dzhuraev & Muratalieva, 2020), thus indicating that its understanding of the SCO also changed. The SCO demonstrated its capacities and possibilities for successful cooperation through its efforts in tackling various security aspects, such as combating cross-border drug trafficking, trans-border drug crime, and subsequent terrorist-related financing (Yakovleva, 2014), and in implementing major projects in the areas of transport, energy, infrastructure construction, telecommunications, and food security (Yussupzhanovich & Tulkunovna, 2019).

However, while the EU addresses the significant advancement of the SCO, the new version of the Strategy on Central Asia does not explicitly mention cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Due to the lack of joint activity approach in relation to regional cooperation in Central Asia, despite some progress that the EU has made in regional governance hinders the building of a regional multilateral trust mechanism.

Another aspect that impedes EU-SCO cooperation is caused by the EU requirements for cooperation in Central Asia.

In 2016, the European Global Security Strategy defined the concept of a multilateral order grounded in international law as the only guarantee for peace and security at home

and abroad (European External Action Service, 2016). This concept is reflected in the EU Strategy on Central Asia, which urges Central Asian countries to cooperate to promote the improvement of regional governance on an institutional and regulatory basis, as well as to achieve convergence of their values with the European ones. Therefore, the SCO did not immediately attract the attention of Europe when it was created. Instead, it was seen as an authoritarian, bureaucratic organisation. Aris (2009) claims that the SCO framework is less legalistic and integrated than the one adopted by the EU, which relies more on uncoded concepts and norms of behaviour emerging from the common perceptions between a particular group of states. Cooley (2015) and Lewis (2012) point out that liberal democracies consider the “Shanghai Spirit” approach to be an authoritarian counter-norm that criticises universal democratic norms and displaces the liberal-democratic principles of global governance institutions.

On the other hand, the SCO is not the kind of rules-based multilateralism as the EU understands it. According to Hussain (2011) and Renard (2013), the SCO promotes values that significantly differ from and conflict with European ones to some extent. Therefore, the SCO is more a hindrance than a facilitator in the EU’s attempt to implement rule-based order and democratic values. As a result, the two integration models fundamentally clash as the SCO exemplifies integration through authoritarianism.

This misunderstanding has hampered the EU’s multilateral cooperation in Central Asia. The EU’s concept of “connectivity” based on the rule of law and democratic principles does not correlate with SCO’s “Shanghai spirit” guiding principle, which, as Ihsan Qadir and ur Rehman (2016) note, denotes mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity and pursuit of common development, in a bid to build a community of shared destiny in the region. The new EU Strategy on Central Asia already stresses the openness of the EU to joint efforts with Central Asian and external actors in pursuing shared objectives, such as security, connectivity, environmental sustainability and many more. Promoting joint effort in areas such as public administration, human rights, civil society, and bilateral and multilateral partnerships is necessary to influence the SCO agenda in the region for a more flexible and effective form of cooperation instead of intensifying confrontation between two alliances in Central Asia.

Conclusion

The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia envisions its primary agenda as the mission to promote democracy and the rule of law and strengthen stability in the region by fighting against corruption (Dzhuraev & Muratalieva, 2020). The Strategy’s goal is to promote sustainable long-term cooperation between the EU and Central Asia, guided by the “connectivity” concept, which implies rule-based order based on democratic principles and values. Unlike the EU, the SCO “Shanghai Guiding Spirit” has six components: mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multicivilisations, and striving for common development

(Declaration on Establishment of Shanghai ... , 2001). The SCO emphasises finding common ground while maintaining differences, focusing on conceptual and pragmatic cooperation. By clarifying the organisational development model of the SCO, the level of cooperation in specific areas, cultivating trust between member states, a consensus is reached, based on which collective identity and a strong sense of community are formed, and the healthy development of regional cooperation is gradually moving forward. From the beginning, the SCO declared that it was not an enemy of any international organisation or country. The SCO regards the maintenance of regional stability and combating terrorism and extremism in the region as its most important function. In addition to these important security functions, the SCO is gradually strengthening its economic cooperation, mixed with complex international, geoeconomic and political factors, becoming more complex over time. However, Ambrosio (2008) has pointed out that there is no commitment to democratic values in the SCO Charter and its founding documents are almost devoid of any mention of democracy. The example of Central Asia demonstrates that despite the region's significant economic and security development via investing in large-scale sustainable projects and conducting multiple military exercises, the SCO activities aimed at preserving authoritarian policies among Central Asian states while promoting cooperation, non-interference and equality in the region. On the contrary, the EU concept of connectivity sees its main mission as a joint partnership with Central Asian states, which in the long-term perspective will trigger the democratic transformation of the region via the principle of effective multilateralism with the rule of law, free market, and human rights at its core. The EU and the SCO approaches to Central Asia are fundamentally different in their guiding ideology, the definition of cornerstone norms and values, and the vision of the region's future development, resulting in their incompatibility and non-interchangeability. As a result, Central Asian elites are reluctant to further cooperate with both alliances. The Central Asian members of the SCO heavily cooperate in the security sphere combating terrorism and extremism but carefully choose investment projects due to China's financial domination in the SCO and its lack of transparency in deal-making, which often results in the indebtedness of Central Asian to China. Also, the re-education policy of China, aimed at ethnic minorities in Central Asia, caused civil protests in Central Asia, urging Central Asian governments to withhold tighter cooperation with SCO, led by China. On the other hand, Central Asian states actively participate in the EU's initiatives toward infrastructural development and technological modernisation of the region. However, despite the EU's attempts to launch a free-market economy and democratic transformations that involve a fight against corruption and political pluralism, Central Asian elites undermine these reforms and rely on non-interference and cultural norms of the SCO membership. The authoritarian elites, which dominate in Central Asia, perceive the EU strategy as a spread of democratic norms and values, which are considered a threat to their governance in the region. Moreover, the EU programs in Central Asia have been repeatedly criticised by official and unofficial Central Asian actors. Peyrouse (2017) identifies several critiques, such as grandiose objectives but only modest means, absence

of transparency in the recruitment of European companies to work on EU programs in the region, disproportionate salary levels offered to European expatriates, lack of monitoring of allocated funds and an overly opaque bureaucracy for NGOs and social activists who wish to benefit from offered opportunities. Nevertheless, Central Asian governments are interested in EU programs, which involve investment in infrastructure development of the region, for example, improvement of water management or diversification of energy sources. However, Central Asian states are mostly disappointed with the EU activities in the region due to the slow pace of implementation, insignificant investment in comparison with Chinese or Russian investments and promotion of democratisation, which is seen as political pressure. Therefore, the EU efforts to promote democracy in the region are unlikely to attract the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia due to the unsatisfying results of EU investment and development activities.

Nevertheless, The EU has sufficient capacities and capabilities to become a noticeable and influential actor in Central Asia. However, in order to make a positive impression on Central Asian elites and to prove itself as a reliable and effective partner, the EU should focus on the long-term development of priority areas in the region, especially those aimed at improvement of security in the region as a major concern for Central Asian governments. Furthermore, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused significant changes in the foreign and security policy of the EU. Sweden and Finland applied for membership in NATO, thereby signalling the expansion of NATO toward Russian borders to deter Russia's aggressive and assertive policy. In this regard, the EU strategy in Central Asia is likely to pay more attention to the region's security. The political and economic repercussions caused by the invasion on Ukraine may urge Central Asian states to seek more attractive partnerships. Therefore, the focus of the EU's Central Asia strategy on ensuring the security and stability of the region may result in positive feedback from Central Asian states.

In general, the implementation of a long-term development policy and additional emphasis on security and stability improvement of the region increases the chances for the EU strategy on Central Asia to become an influential and effective actor in the region and put it as a credible alternative to SCO in Central Asia.

The constant geopolitical manoeuvring between two influential and powerful organisations leads to uneven and inconsistent development of Central Asia, which hinders economic, social and security balance, thus making it prone to volatile conflicts and causing geopolitical instability in the region. In order to achieve positive transformations in Central Asia in quantitative and qualitative forms, the EU and the SCO must acknowledge each other's presence in the region without excessive efforts to undermine the opponent's influence. Instead, mutual agreement for cooperation in Central Asia on various economic and security issues as well as joint investment in the sustainability and security of the region is expected to cease conflicts and disputes among Central Asian states, thus turning them into pillars of greater transcontinental cooperation between Europe and Asia, such as the Belt and Road initiative. The role of Central Asia as a financial and technological hub between two powerful

geopolitical alliances such as the EU and the SCO will ensure the long-term prosperity and self-sufficiency of the region.

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