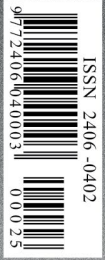


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# HORIZONS

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## THE AGE OF MINILATERALISM



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# CHINA'S INITIATIVES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCO

*Xiaoyun Qiang & Jiahan Cao*

**C**HARACTERISTICALLY, China's diplomatic initiatives play a leading role in cooperation concepts of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a natural result of China's increasing weight in global and regional affairs. All along, China has substantially contributed to the development and growth of the SCO: From the "Shanghai Spirit" and the New Security Concept, to the New Five Outlooks of development, security, cooperation, civilization, and global governance, the concept of jointly building a community with shared interests and future, and the three global initiatives (Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative).

In April 2014, China's President Xi Jinping officially proposed the overall national security outlook (ONSO), emphasizing the need to value both national and common security to build a community with shared future, get all parties involved to seek mutual benefit and interests and pursue common security. In May that year, while attending the fourth summit of Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai, President Xi for the first time put forward the Asian Security Concept:

One cannot live in the twenty-first century with the outdated thinking from the age of the Cold War and the mindset of zero-sum games. We believe that it is

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*The 22<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in session*

necessary to advocate common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in Asia. We need to innovate our security concept, establish a new regional security cooperation architecture, and strive for the Asia security that can be shared by and win-win to all.

**T**his new security concept proposed by President Xi has been widely embraced by representatives of participating countries, and it was also written into the manifesto of the CICA Shanghai Summit. Later on, the Asian Security Concept was upgraded into a new security concept with universal significance to countries in the world.

In September 2015, President Xi delivered a speech at the General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly. As he put it,

We should abandon Cold War mentality in all its manifestation, and foster a new vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. We should give full play to the central role of the United Nations and its Security Council in ending conflict and keeping peace, and adopt the dual approach of seeking peaceful solution to disputes and taking mandatory actions, so as to turn hostility into amity. We should advance international cooperation in both

economic and social fields and take a holistic approach to addressing traditional and non-traditional security threats, so as to prevent conflicts from breaking out in the first place.

In another speech titled “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” delivered at the United Nations Office in Geneva in January 2017, President Xi again emphasized the urgent need of jointly building a world of universal security, and reiterated that “all countries should pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.”

Nowadays, the international security landscape is undergoing the most profound and complex changes since the end of the Cold War. Against this background, it is imperative to establish a common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable new security concept, and collectively create a new landscape featuring fairness, justice, joint contribution, and common sharing. The essence of the new security concept is to respect the security needs of every country and collectively maintain security through international cooperation. The new

security concept is based on morality and philosophy, which is conducive to promoting open, transparent, and equal international security cooperation and embodying China's image as a defender

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of international security, promoter of common development, and builder of the international system. China will work together with other countries to find a new approach to maintain international security. The new security concept is a vital proposal put forward by President Xi Jinping, based on the new dynamics of domestic and international security and from the strategic height of building a community with a shared future for mankind, which conforms to the development trend of our times and is also a Chinese solution to the problems in sustainable development and security of mankind.

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in Eurasia as its mission. Therefore, the SCO can become an ideal platform for practicing the new security concept.

*First and foremost*, to achieve common security is still the basic appeal of SCO member states.

*Second*, the diversity of security elements in the SCO requires a comprehensive security system.

*Third*, the SCO in the new era needs a security framework that fosters closer and more effective cooperation.

*Finally*, sustainable security is a feasible pathway to meet the dual demands of stability and development of SCO member states.

Consequently, the new security concept characterizing equality, commonality, comprehensiveness, cooperation, and sustainable security has gradually become the guiding principle of security cooperation among SCO member states. With the new security concept, the SCO has supplied numerous security public goods which made the organization a reliable institutional platform of safeguarding the national security of member states and also regional stability in Eurasia.

So far, the new security concept advocated by China has been incorporated

into the overall ideology that guides the steady development of the SCO and becomes an indispensable force to drive the organization's institutional innovation and functional enhancement in the new era. On the one hand, the SCO security practices reflect the

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multilateral characteristic of the new security concept. To seek security through multilateral cooperation has always been a crucial component of China's independent and self-reliant foreign policy. On the other hand, the new security concept raises universal security awareness in the practices of the SCO. The new concept that aims to achieve universal

security embodies the characteristics of the era in which security conditions and threats are correlated. Under this general background, the new security concept not only generates an impact on the security activities of the SCO but also encourages SCO member states to find solutions to contemporary security challenges. With the international situation changing and developing, the connotation and extent of SCO security cooperation are constantly being enriched, which echoes with the development of the new security concept and the UNSC.



## THE CHINESE VIEW ON GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND THE SCO

The collective rise of emerging economies is one of the symbols of profound changes unseen in a century. In today's world, the voices calling for the completion of the global governance system are becoming increasingly louder. Global governance and international cooperation require a multilateral mechanism that is more adaptable to the requirements of our times. In this context, China has proposed many initiatives for global governance that lay in the interests of most countries in the world, and advocated a new channel of international coordination which is mutually beneficial, win-win, and inclusive. Additionally, China has been an advocate for intersectant learning through building a community with a shared future for mankind and a new type of state-to-state relationship. Given the inseparability between global and regional governance, communities encompassing the entire mankind cannot stand without the support of regional communities. As a new comprehensive institution of regional

cooperation launched by China, Russia, and Central Asian countries, the SCO can perform as a key platform for improving regional and global governance, demonstrating the Chinese view on global governance, and building

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a community with a shared future for mankind and in particular the Eurasian region.

The upgrade of the global governance system calls for the reform and construction of regional governance. SCO member states have always been active participants in regional governance and played a unique role in building the regional governance system. In reality, the SCO has already set out to launch some regional or sub-regional governance systems in its vast area covering nearly three-quarters of the

Eurasian continent. It is self-evident that the establishment of multilateral arrangements that can be recognized by all parties in the region is of great significance and exemplary to the improvement of regional and even global governance systems. Although the SCO is still in its early twenties as a regional mechanism, it has undoubtedly set a

new paradigm of regional governance, such as advocating dialogue and consultation to resolve conflicts, establishing a solid partnership among regional countries, promoting security through cooperation, and seeking development through coordination. The SCO, in an attempt to solve common regional problems, always respects and upholds the authority of the multilateral system with the United Nations at its core.

The SCO adheres to the principle of building partnership rather than alliance, and no targeting of third parties. It does not aim to become a political and military alliance, but instead advocates mutual benefit and win-win outcomes. For member states with differentiated levels of

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economic development, it is far from easy for them to achieve integration in the short term. As a result, promoting trade investment facilitation and liberalization will be favorable to these weak and small countries to gain profit from multilateral cooperation. It is based on past practices of cooperation that the Chinese President proposed the option of building a community with a shared future, which indicates that the SCO is expected to become an unprecedented example of international coordination

in the future. As Rashid Alimov points out—a seasoned Tajikistani diplomat who once served as Secretary-General of the SCO—the SCO has demonstrated its pioneering role in advancing democratization of international relations and building a community with a shared future for mankind.

As a founding member of the SCO, China has made great contributions

to the construction of a regional community with a shared future. Over the past years, from the height of leading the reform of global and regional governance systems, China has been promoting the development of the SCO community of shared future and taking unremitting efforts to advance regional security and

stability, as well as the development and prosperity of all countries. Especially since 2013, President Xi Jinping has been attending SCO summits for eleven consecutive years, calling on all parties to join hands to build a closer SCO community with a shared future. President Xi proposed a series of meaningful cooperation initiatives, which received positive feedback from all parties. To build a community with a shared future in the SCO region is consistent with the “Shanghai Spirit”

that SCO member states embrace. Just as President Xi pointed out at the 2018 SCO Qingdao Summit, “the Shanghai Spirit is our shared asset, and the SCO is our shared home. We should, guided by the Shanghai Spirit, work closely to build an SCO community with a shared future, move towards a new type of international relations, and build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security, and common prosperity.” President Xi’s proposal was widely accepted by SCO member states which unanimously agreed to write “the shared vision of building a community with a shared future for mankind” into the SCO Qingdao Declaration.

At the SCO Bishkek Summit in June 2019, President Xi proposed to build the SCO a model of “unity, mutual trust, common security, reciprocal benefit, inclusiveness and intersectant learning,” covering four areas of cooperation on politics, security, economy, and humanity. This new proposal is a further interpretation of the “Shanghai Spirit,” a specific requirement and fundamental guidance for next steps in building a community with a shared future in the SCO region. In 2020, President Xi proposed at the virtual SCO Summit the initiative of building the “Four Communities,” namely as “Health Community,” “Security Community,” “Development Community,” and “Humanities Community,”

which has become a “Chinese way” to cultivate the SCO community with a shared future for mankind. Moreover, the “Four Communities” initiative has also broadened the connotation of the “Shanghai Spirit,” adding confidence and momentum to the development of the SCO in the post-COVID-19 era. While addressing the SCO Summit via video conference from Beijing in July 2023, President Xi further proposed to work with all SCO member states to implement the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative as China’s enhanced efforts to innovate global governance and achieve common prosperity.

#### THE BRI AND THE SCO

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a public good that China delivers to the world, and naturally, the SCO has become a significant platform of multilateral cooperation under the BRI framework. Most of SCO member- and observer-states are active participants in the joint construction of the BRI. Currently, China has created unprecedented opportunities of multilateral diplomacy including the three Belt and Road Forums for International Cooperation, and other multilateral events regarding the “Five Connectivities” of policy consultation, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds, in order to enable SCO

member and observer states to benefit from the BRI’s high-quality development. At the same time, China is also working hard to align the BRI with the development strategies of SCO member and observer countries, as well as other regional cooperation initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union. The six economic corridors proposed in the BRI involve almost all SCO member and observer states and can thus bring dividends to the common development of Eurasia. Although globalization and regionalization met another setback due to the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic, most SCO member and observer states remain prepared to carry out multilateral cooperation within the SCO framework.

With similar concepts and approaches, the BRI and the SCO can support and promote each other in practice, both of which provide useful reference in the exploration of new models of regional cooperation and building a new type of international relations centered on win-win cooperation. What’s more, the BRI and the SCO place their emphasis on respecting cultural differences, finding common interests, and

making full use of the advantages of each country. These two can definitely form positive interactions in Eurasia, creating favorable conditions for the economic integration and opening up of the region’s countries. More than a leading platform for regional strategic coordination under the BRI framework, the SCO can extend support and guarantee for multilateral cooperation related to the BRI. Meanwhile, the high-quality development that the BRI offers can also be a practical way for the SCO’s growth and prosperity. The mutual alignment of the BRI and the SCO

offers diversified ways for pragmatic cooperation among countries in the Eurasian region and will prompt countries along the Belt and Road to leap forward on the construction of a regional community of shared future, interests, and responsibility.

The key principles of the BRI, such as peace, development, cooperation, and win-win solutions, echo the “Shanghai Spirit” as the soul of the SCO’s development and growth and consider “respect for the diversity of civilizations” a core value and a code of conduct. They prioritize civilizational

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communication, take seriously cultures, societies, and relevant policies of countries with different civilizations. They also promote mutual understanding, respect, and trust among countries along the Belt and Road. Further, they create a prosperity of multicultural interaction and people-to-people exchanges, and build a road of harmony and mutual aid among human civilizations. Despite their different natures, the BRI and the SCO share basic ideologies and follow principles of global governance including the “respect for diverse civilizations,” “harmony in diversity,” and “co-consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits.” Both pursue a multipolar world and advocate negotiation on an equal footing, replacing Cold War mentality and power politics with a new path of state-to-state relations of dialogue rather than confrontation, and partnership rather than alliance—all this in order to build a world of lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness, inclusiveness, cleanliness, and beauty. In contrast to Western views of “unilateralism,” “protectionism,” “clash of civilizations,” “superiority of civilization,” and “center of civilization,” the concepts shared by the BRI and the SCO—such as respecting the cultural varieties of countries with different nationalities and religious beliefs, inclusiveness, mutual learning, exchanges among civilizations, and people-to-people bonds—can serve as the SCO’s solutions to

pressing challenges in our times. Such concepts, in turn, will help deepen mutual political trust, economic reciprocity and security cooperation among countries, and build a SCO Community of Shared Future and a new type of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation. In synergy with the high-quality development of the BRI, the SCO is expected to be a stable and comprehensive mechanism of multilateral cooperation, as well as a model for building and promoting a community with a shared future for mankind and particularly the Eurasian region.

#### **FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR SCO COOPERATION**

Entering a new phase of development, the SCO needs to build more consensuses, further enhance the sense of identity among member states and maintain sustainable peace, stability, development, prosperity, and harmony in the Eurasian region.

To begin with, SCO members should deepen their mutual political trust and carry forward the “Shanghai Spirit.” The more complex and turbulent the international environment is, the more urgent it is to deepen the common recognition among SCO member states, and embed the “Shanghai Spirit” of mutual trust, reciprocal benefit, equality, co-consultation, respect for diverse civilizations,

and pursuit of joint development into a variety of cooperation within the SCO framework. Achieving cooperation and seeking common ground while shelving differences, and pursuing the greatest common divisor are among the core elements of the “Shanghai Spirit,” and also sources of universal recognition on the SCO by its member states. In the future, the unity and cooperation of the SCO should be further enhanced to create a paradigm of win-win cooperation in the face of profound changes.

Next, SCO members should strengthen their sense of identity on security affairs, co-shape the “soft environment” for Eurasian security and build a Eurasian community with a shared future.

The SCO is the cornerstone of Eurasian security cooperation. Facing the reality of a new round of major-power competition in the Eurasian region, China needs to advance implementation of the Global Development Initiative, enhance strategic trust via the SCO platform and consolidate the new security concept together with Eurasian countries,

thus creating the SCO community with common security responsibility and shared future for members.

Moreover, SCO members should advance their economic cooperation

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as the internal driving force of SCO development. For instance, the trade interdependence among SCO member states needs to be consolidated with more trade-facilitating measures. In the future, it is necessary to tap SCO members’ economic potentials to foster some new growth areas. More specifically, the institutions of regional trade liberalization and facilitation need to be strengthened as quickly as possible. By doing so, the internal trade potentials within the SCO can be unleashed to improve export capacity

and drive economic growth, which will be of great significance for narrowing the development gap among member states to seek win-win economic cooperation, and also in the interests of all members. Besides, a multi-channel financial system can be launched to guarantee the development of a regional infrastructure fund and the industrial

investment market, in order to promote infrastructure-building, especially in the sectors of transportation, energy, and telecommunications. Also, it is necessary for the SCO to strengthen its cooperative ties with multilateral financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the World Bank. Meanwhile, private capital can be introduced to infrastructure investment and construction under the regulation of national laws. Furthermore, the SCO can expand mutual support mechanisms with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative, both of which will serve as ideal platforms to help the SCO optimize its economic functions.

Finally, SCO members should jointly carry out the Global Civilization Initiative, promote mutual learning among SCO members and foster closer people-to-people ties. People-to-people exchanges are indispensable to an

enhanced sense of identity among SCO member states, which usually takes time and demands patience. In this light, the establishment of a special council or committee merits consideration, as it would make people-to-people exchanges more prominent in the interactions among SCO member states. This could contribute to guiding the development of SCO people-to-people exchanges with policies and institutions. What's more, to get more SCO voices heard on the world stage, media cooperation among SCO members should be further promoted. And these existing mechanisms of people-to-people exchange forums including the SCO People-to-People Friendship Forum, the SCO Women's Forum, the SCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Forum and the SCO Media Cooperation Summit, should be vigorously implemented. In addition, cooperation in the fields of culture, tourism, and sports needs to be further expanded, which will make the aforementioned exchanges more popular and beneficial to the general public. ●