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The Study of Anti-Terrorism Strategy of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the Framework of Regional Security Complex Theory

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) traces its origins to Sino-Soviet negotiations over border disputes, which became multilateral after the Soviet collapse. The talks, begun by the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in Shanghai on 26 April 1996, produced the group known as the “Shanghai Five.” When Uzbekistan formally joined in June 2001, the SCO was established with a focus on combating terrorism and countering American unilateralism. India and Pakistan’s membership requests received final approval in June 2017, and Iran’s full membership was approved on 4 July 2023.

Common threats originating in Afghanistan and its surroundings, namely terror-

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ism, extremism and separatism, led the member states to create a regional platform for security cooperation. Although the SCO has become multidimensional, counter-terrorism remains central to its activity. Its main instrument is the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which supports intelligence exchange and the coordination of joint operations.

After almost three decades, a systematic study of the SCO's approach to terrorism is necessary. The article asks: on which components has the SCO's counter-terrorism strategy been built? It hypothesizes that the strategy embodies the need for regional cooperation to overcome common threats through institutional mechanisms, together with the preservation of member states' sovereignty against separatism and extremism. The literature review identifies three gaps: studies examine either overall performance or a single mechanism such as RATS; regional security complex concepts are rarely linked systematically to the SCO's counter-terrorism documents; and few studies explain how shared threat perception becomes legal rules and practical measures. The article therefore treats the strategy as a multilevel construct rather than isolated measures.

Theoretical Framework

The study relies on Barry Buzan's regional security complex theory. Security cannot be examined state by state; it is a regional phenomenon shaped by interactions among states. A regional security complex is a group of units whose major processes of securitization and desecuritization are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another (Buzan & Wæver, 2022). Because threats travel more easily over short distances, security interdependence produces regional clusters. Buzan also treats security as multidimensional, extending beyond the military to political, economic, societal and environmental dimensions.

The theory combines neorealist and constructivist elements. Its constructivist side stresses that threats arise from shared perceptions, that dialogue and mutual trust are needed to build a common understanding of unconventional threats such as terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking, and that this can lead to shared legal rules and norms. From these premises, seven components of the SCO's counter-terrorism strategy were derived: patterns of amity and enmity;

common threats; security interdependence; regional-level cooperation; the hegemonic role of China and Russia; the multidimensional view of security; and common legal rules and norms.

Methodology

The research is descriptive-analytical and qualitative, using structural content analysis. Four primary documents served as core sources: the SCO Charter (2002), the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (2001), the Agreement on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (2002) and the SCO Convention against Terrorism (2009). The unit of analysis was the explicit statements and provisions of these documents on common threats, cooperation, sovereignty, institutional mechanisms and legal rules. These statements were matched against the seven components extracted from the theoretical framework.

Discussion and Analysis

Patterns of amity and enmity. The preamble and Article 1 of the 2001 Convention present terrorism, separatism and extremism as threats to international peace and security, territorial integrity and political, economic and social stability, and define all three legally, so the “us/them” boundary appears in the organization’s shared legal literature. A common perception of these threats has linked the security of each member to that of the others. RATS coordinates intelligence, maintains a unified list of terrorist groups, provides legal and judicial support and organizes joint exercises. Groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and separatist movements are defined as the “other” who disrupts security. The reduced Western role, especially after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, has pushed regional powers toward an independent security architecture.

Common threats. Article 1 of the Charter places joint struggle against the three evils alongside transnational crime, and Article 2 of the Convention requires cooperation in prevention, detection, suppression and extradition, making common threat a concrete legal commitment. However, broad and vague uses of extremism and separatism have restricted political and civil freedoms in some states, for example the trial of local businessmen in Uzbekistan in June

2004. The absence of independent oversight raises concerns about political misuse of security labels, and state security is emphasized over human security.

Security interdependence. Article 3 of the Charter lists peace, security and trust-building alongside joint measures against the three evils, and Article 6 of the 2001 Convention provides for information exchange, operational requests and coordinated measures. Cooperation rests on the principle of security interdependence, which permits joint action without violating national sovereignty, on the basis of voluntary agreement and non-intervention.

Regional-level cooperation. The 2002 Agreement defines RATS as a permanent organ that assists coordination among competent authorities (Article 3) and assigns it intelligence collection and analysis, a database, support for exercises and operations, and international searches (Article 6). Geographic proximity and shared threats drive this institutionalization.

Hegemony of China and Russia. Content analysis of the Charter indicates that China and Russia play a central role in shaping the legal and security framework. Smaller states often adapt their policies to lines set by the great powers, whose interests are reflected in the counter-terrorism mechanisms, reinforcing their legitimacy in the regional order. China emphasizes preventing terrorism and extremism in Central Asia and Xinjiang, while Russia emphasizes collective security. Balancing collective security against the sovereignty of smaller members remains a central challenge.

Multidimensional security. Article 3 of the Charter extends cooperation beyond security to economic, environmental, scientific, educational and cultural fields, and the preamble of the 2009 Convention bases counter-terrorism on the rule of law and fundamental rights. Military measures are integrated with non-military ones, since purely military action may ignore structural roots, and economic cooperation limits the conditions that feed terrorism.

Common legal rules and norms. Article 1 of the 2001 Convention defines the three concepts operationally, Article 2 provides for cooperation and extradition, and Article 10 foresees the RATS mechanism; Article 12 of the 2009 Convention provides for information exchange. Differences in defining terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking remain a legal challenge, which makes continuous dialogue necessary.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The SCO's counter-terrorism strategy rests on the seven components above and integrates politics, law and collective security to consolidate the regional order and shape a shared security identity. Legal and institutional frameworks, notably the conventions and RATS, have enabled practical coordination while respecting sovereignty, and geopolitical factors, including reduced US and NATO presence and membership expansion to India, Pakistan and Iran, have widened the security complex. The hypothesis is therefore supported. At the same time, the organization's performance is mainly confrontational and focused on protecting member states' sovereignty against separatism and extremism, and preventive aspects and human rights considerations have received insufficient attention.

The findings suggest that the SCO should manage the tension between collective security and national sovereignty; develop clearer shared definitions of terrorism, extremism and separatism to reduce the scope for misuse; establish independent oversight mechanisms; observe human rights standards and fair trial principles; and strengthen the preventive, non-military dimensions of its strategy through economic, social and environmental cooperation.

Key words: Shanghai Cooperation Organization; Counter-terrorism; Extremism; Security Interdependence; Regional Security Complex Theory.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.