



Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Comparative Politics

**Between Pragmatism and Multilateralism:
China's Role in the Establishment and
Advancement of the Shanghai Cooperation
Organization (SCO)**

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Sincerely,

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Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, China has shown growing interest in its immediate neighborhood, emerging as an active participant in the Asian region. This evolving stance has prompted Beijing to join numerous regional organizations, reflecting a heightened confidence in regional cooperation. As the first regional organization created under China's impetus, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is widely considered a concrete embodiment of China's foreign policy and diplomacy evolution over the last three decades. This Eurasian organization, created on China's own initiative, reflects Beijing's evolving approach to institution-building, its growing commitment to multilateral cooperative frameworks, and its new, positive approach towards its neighbors.

Since the creation of the SCO in 2001, China has demonstrated a strong commitment to the organization, actively promoting and advancing it. This commitment has been instrumental in the development and consolidation of the SCO, establishing it as a significant regional entity within the current international system. China's involvement in the SCO reflects a dual approach. On one hand, Beijing leverages the organization to advance its national interests, particularly in energy, economics, and security, while exerting influence across the Eurasian space. On the other hand, China genuinely pursues regional cooperation, underscoring a deep commitment to multilateralism that has progressively shaped its foreign policy over the past three decades.

This thesis offers a balanced and dual-sided analysis of China's role within the SCO, exploring both the pragmatic and cooperative aspects of its involvement. To achieve this, the study integrates insights from two prominent theories of international relations: realism and neoliberal institutionalism. Realism underscores how China's engagement with the SCO serves its strategic ambitions, enabling it to expand its influence across the Eurasian region, promote its national interests, and pursue global superpower status. From this perspective, China's involvement in the SCO is seen as a pragmatic strategy to reinforce its position on both regional and global stages, using the organization as a platform to garner support from its neighbors in challenging the current international order. However,

neoliberal institutionalism adds a deeper dimension to this analysis by suggesting that China's commitment to the SCO is not solely driven by self-interest. Instead, it reflects a genuine dedication to multilateralism and regional cooperation, which have increasingly shaped its regional and international presence over the past three decades. Through the SCO, China seeks to create a stable, rules-based regional order that emphasizes principles such as mutual benefit, equity, and win-win cooperation among member states. This approach aligns with China's broader vision of a new global order characterized by dialogue, shared development, peaceful coexistence, and collective progress. This vision is exemplified by China's adoption of the New Security Concept (NSC) in the early 2000s, the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the proposal to build a "community with a shared future for all mankind" in 2018, and the recent introduction of the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022.

By examining China's actions from the inception of the Shanghai Five (S5) in 1996 to the most recent developments, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of China's role in the SCO. It highlights Beijing's dual approach: strategic and pragmatic on one hand, and genuine and cooperative on the other. This duality characterizes not only China's involvement in the organization but also its broader role in regional dynamics and the international system. The study thereby demonstrates that China's role in the SCO reflects a complex interplay between pragmatic interests and sincere multilateral aspirations. By considering both, it provides a nuanced understanding of China's foreign policy and its evolving role in regional and global governance.

Key Words: China, Multilateralism, Pragmatism, Regional Cooperation, SCO

Abbreviations

AIIB: Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APEC: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF: ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI: Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CHG: Council of Heads of Government
CHS: Council of Heads of State
CICA: Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CIS: Commonwealth of Independent States
CMBs: Confidence-Building Measures
CMFA: Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs
CSCAP: Council on Security Cooperation in Asia and Pacific Region
CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organization
ETIM: Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement
FTA: Free Trade Area
GDI: Global Development Initiative
GSI: Global Security Initiative
IMF: International Monetary Fund
IR: International Relations
MMCBM: Mutual Military Confidence-Building Measures
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEACD: Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue
NSC: New Security Concept
PRC: People's Republic of China
RATS: Regional Anti-Terror Structure
SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization
S5: Shanghai Five
UN: United Nations
U.S: United States
USSR: Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics
WTO: World Trade Organization
WWII: World War II
XUAR: Xinjiang Uyghurs Autonomous Region
6PT: Six-Party Talks

Introduction

Over the past three decades, China's international engagement has undergone a remarkable transformation. Once a relatively passive participant in global affairs, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has steadily opened up to the world and become increasingly active in international matters, emerging as a major global power. A key feature of China's foreign policy evolution during this period has been its shift towards multilateral organizations, where China has moved from a position of reluctance and caution to one of active participation. Since the mid-1990s, the PRC has gradually abandoned its isolationist and domestically focused approach in favor of a more multilateral orientation. This embrace of multilateralism is evident in its involvement in various regional and international organizations, as well as its growing support for institution-building endeavors.

One prominent manifestation of China's shift towards multilateralism is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the first multilateral initiative championed by China and created on its own initiative. Established on June 15, 2001, the SCO is a security, economic, and political organization located in the Eurasian region. Presently, it consists of ten member states: Belarus, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Initially conceived for security purposes, the SCO has expanded its scope to encompass several areas of cooperation, emerging as a comprehensive cooperative framework across multiple sectors.

As the first multilateral endeavor initiated under its auspices, the SCO holds significant importance for the PRC. China has positioned itself as the primary driving force behind the SCO, dedicating substantial resources to its development and strengthening. The organization is viewed by Beijing as a cornerstone of its foreign policy, serving as a critical platform for engaging with its neighbors across Eurasia. From its inception, the PRC has assumed a leadership role within the SCO, actively shaping its policies, guiding its strategic direction, and fostering deeper regional cooperation. This leadership reflects China's broader ambitions to enhance its influence in the region and to play a key role in the

evolving international order. Furthermore, by championing the SCO, China underscores its commitment to multilateralism and its vision for a cooperative regional framework.

Scholarly interest in China's role within regional and international organizations has surged over the past three decades, in tandem with the country's growing multilateral approach. Numerous studies have explored Beijing's participation in these settings, analyzing its behaviors, policies, and objectives, resulting in a rich body of literature. While there has been considerable research specifically focused on China's involvement in the SCO, much of it is outdated, with only a few recent contributions. This thesis aims to refresh and enrich this academic discourse by providing an in-depth and up-to-date analysis of China's role in the SCO. It takes an innovative approach by blending theoretical perspectives with real-world dynamics, offering a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors driving China's engagement in the organization.

The central research question guiding this work is: "*Why has China actively contributed to the establishment and development of the SCO?*". This inquiry aims to uncover the main motivations guiding China's conduct within this regional organization and to illuminate its contributions to both the establishment and advancement of the SCO. This exploration encompasses two key facets: first, examining the factors that prompted the PRC to initiate the SCO in 2001, and second, exploring the reasons behind Beijing's efforts to promote and strengthen the organization since its inception. Through this analysis, the thesis seeks to highlight the complex interplay of motives that influence China's actions within the organization. It aims to reveal the dual approach driving China's involvement, one that carefully balances pragmatic interests with a genuine and sincere commitment to cooperation and multilateralism.

Beijing's dual approach within the SCO is emblematic of its broader foreign policy strategy. On one hand, Beijing's actions are driven by pragmatic considerations, such as advancing its national interests, expanding its influence in Eurasia, and securing its goals. Through the SCO, the PRC strategically positions itself to counterbalance other major powers and assert its role as a leading force

in regional security and economic cooperation. This pragmatic aspect of its engagement reflects China's desire to safeguard its national interests and enhance its regional and global standing. At the same time, Beijing's involvement in the SCO also demonstrates a genuine commitment to multilateralism and regional cooperation. This sincere approach is guided by principles of mutual benefit, dialogue, and the aspiration to create a stable and cooperative regional order. China's vision of building a "community with a shared future for all mankind" and its advocacy for a new global order based on fairness, equality, and win-win cooperation highlight this deeper commitment. Within the SCO, this manifests in China's efforts to foster a collaborative environment where member states can address common challenges and pursue shared goals.

This dual approach not only shapes China's actions within the SCO but also showcases its broader strategy in international relations. It reflects how China navigates the complex landscape of global governance, balancing its pragmatic pursuit of national interests with a sincere desire to contribute to a more cooperative and stable international system. By examining this duality, the thesis seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of China's role in the SCO, illustrating how this balance influences both regional dynamics and China's overall approach to international affairs.

Addressing a "why?" question in international relations presents considerable challenges, as it requires an exploration of the underlying motives behind a state's actions. These motivations may not always be immediately evident, particularly in matters concerning foreign policy decision-making. While material and strategic interests often surface in analyses of state behavior, the drivers of these motivations can be multifaceted and intricate. To effectively address this inquiry, it is essential to establish a coherent and detailed structure for the thesis.

The work begins with an extensive literature review that situates the analysis within existing scholarly discourse, identifying key concepts, debates, and gaps that this research aims to address. Following this, the study introduces a robust theoretical framework, clarifying the primary theoretical perspectives applied or applicable to the topic. By integrating insights from realism and neoliberal

institutionalism, the framework allows for a comprehensive exploration of China's dual approach. In the context of international relations, a solid theoretical foundation is crucial for providing structure and coherence to the analysis. Such framework enhances the validity of research findings and enables informed discussion and interpretation. It also allows comparisons with existing theories, facilitating the identification of potential relationships or contradictions, and the generation of new insights. The adoption of a robust theoretical foundation is particularly crucial in this study, as it aims to shed light on China's participation to the SCO and generate insights into broader regional and international dynamics. Following the theoretical framework, the methodology section outlines the main methodological approaches utilized in the analysis.

The main body is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides contextual background, tracing the SCO's historical trajectory, elucidating its foundational principles, outlining its institutional framework, and highlighting its initial security-centered focus. Chapter 2 examines the main reasons motivating the PRC to spearhead the creation of the SCO, focusing on China's development during the 1980s and 1990s, its engagement with Central Asia after the USSR's fall, and its growing commitment to multilateralism in the 1990s. Chapter 3 blends theoretical insights with real-world dynamics, using realism and neoliberal institutionalism to analyze China's motives in endorsing the SCO. By integrating a robust theoretical background, this chapter thus enhances our understanding of Beijing's stance towards the organization. Subsequently, Chapter 4 shifts focus to China's efforts in advancing the SCO, exploring its role in shaping the "Shanghai Spirit", driving institutionalization, fostering security and economic cooperation, promoting cultural cooperation, and advocating for expansion. This chapter thereby illuminates the diverse endeavors undertaken by the PRC to promote and reinforce the SCO over time. Finally, Chapter 5 synthesizes findings from previous chapters and examines them through the theoretical framework, offering a deeper picture of the interplay of pragmatism and multilateralism driving China's engagement with the SCO.

The central premise of this thesis posits that the PRC has been the driving force behind the SCO's establishment and development. China's contributions have been fundamental to both the creation and progression of this regional organization. To expand upon this premise, the thesis endeavors to illuminate the motivations behind China's active involvement in the SCO, investigating both the reasons for its endorsement and for its continued proactive efforts.

In examining China's actions, this study acknowledges the significance of strategic and pragmatic factors. As a rational nation-state, the PRC naturally seeks to advance its domestic interests and enhance its position on the regional and global stage. In this context, the SCO serves as a strategically important tool for China, allowing it to pursue national interests, fuel aspirations for regional and global dominance, and challenge the existing status quo. Ignoring this reality would overlook the fundamental role that states play in shaping international affairs. An analysis that neglects the centrality of states risks losing sight of the dynamics of international relations, potentially leading to biased or one-sided perspectives. Such oversights can be detrimental to scholarly inquiry, particularly in the rapidly evolving field of international relations. However, a purely state-centric and power-focused examination may introduce biases and oversimplify complex dynamics, neglecting the growing significance of intangible factors that shape state behavior. In today's increasingly complex international system, states are influenced by a multitude of factors that extend beyond narrow national interests. Among these influences, moral and ideological considerations are gaining prominence.

To avoid the limitations of perspectives that either dismiss or overly prioritize the role of states, this work aims to provide a balanced and innovative perspective. It will scrutinize China's involvement in the SCO by uncovering the underlying factors that influence its actions while recognizing the undeniable impact of pragmatic concerns. This analysis will illustrate that Beijing's participation in the SCO reflects not only a strategy for power and influence, but also a genuine dedication to multilateralism and regional cooperation. It will demonstrate that the SCO represents a crucial

instrument for China's domestic interests and regional and international aspirations, while simultaneously embodying its broader ambition to create a new regional order rooted in principles such as mutual benefit, equity, and win-win cooperation among member states. This approach aligns with China's larger vision of a new global order characterized by dialogue, shared development, peaceful coexistence, and collective progress. This vision is exemplified by initiatives such as the BRI, the concept of a "community with a shared future for all mankind", and the recent introduction of the GDI and the GSI. Through these efforts, Beijing not only seeks to enhance its own standing but also to foster a collaborative international environment that benefits all participating nations.

By employing a theoretical framework that combines realism and neoliberal institutionalism, this study delves into the multifaceted motivations driving China's participation in the SCO. This dual approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of China's deep-seated motivations while acknowledging the pragmatic considerations that significantly influence its conduct. While strategic considerations are undeniably significant in shaping China's behavior, this research contends that they do not fully capture the complexity of its involvement in the SCO. Thus, the thesis challenges the view that China's actions are driven solely by material calculations, advocating for a more nuanced analysis that also considers the genuine factors motivating its engagement with the organization. This dual perspective seeks to enhance the understanding of China's role within the SCO by acknowledging both the strategic imperatives and the broader considerations that influence its behavior. While realism elucidates the pragmatic aspects of China's engagement, neoliberal institutionalism offers a more optimistic interpretation of its actions, emphasizing China's commitment to multilateralism, regional cooperation, and international governance. By leveraging this dual theoretical lens, this research provides a multi-dimensional analysis of China's motivations, examining both its strategic interests and its authentic dedication to the SCO. Through this comprehensive approach, the study aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics that shape China's

participation in the organization, ultimately enriching the discourse on its foreign policy and approach to international relations.

This thesis aims to contribute to the academic discourse on China's multilateralism by providing an innovative analysis of its participation in the SCO. By integrating theoretical considerations with real-world dynamics, the research seeks to illuminate the complex factors influencing China's behavior, offering a nuanced explanation of its actions within this organization. This holistic approach is essential not only for advancing academic inquiry but also for dispelling prevalent misconceptions in Western discourse that often depict China's actions as purely power-driven. Often, there is a prevailing belief that China is primarily focused on achieving global dominance and lacks motivations beyond challenging the traditional American-led order. While it is clear that the PRC aims to pursue its goals and expand its regional and international influence, reducing its actions to purely pragmatic or strategic motives oversimplifies the complexities at play. To fully understand China's behavior, it is necessary to move beyond conventional narratives and delve into the deeper determinants of its actions. With its innovative approach, this exploration thus reveals a more nuanced view of Beijing's motives, which includes an intricate interplay of pragmatism and multilateralism. By adopting this broader perspective, we can counter the reductionist view that views China's actions as merely about power and dominance, instead recognizing the diverse influences that shape its engagement with the world.

Consequently, this thesis provides a thorough examination of China's behavior within the SCO, highlighting both the genuine motives and pragmatic concerns that underpin its contributions to the organization. On one hand, the study investigates the pragmatic aspects of China's actions, including its efforts to further national interests, achieve geopolitical goals, enhance regional and international influence, and strategically counterbalance other major powers. These pragmatic considerations are crucial for understanding the strategic calculus behind China's behavior. On the other hand, it emphasizes Beijing's sincere commitment to the SCO as a reflection of its embrace of multilateralism

and institution-building, showcasing the organization as an expression of China's evolving vision for regional cooperation and a positive relationship with its neighbors. Furthermore, the research explores the significance of the SCO within China's broader vision for international cooperation. While it is widely acknowledged that the PRC utilizes the SCO to challenge the existing global status quo, this study also considers China's efforts to shape a new international paradigm based on principles of fairness, equality, mutual benefit, and win-win cooperation. The analysis will argue that the SCO is intricately linked to Beijing's strategy of establishing this new era of state-to-state relations, positioning China not merely as a challenger of the existing order but as a proactive architect of a more inclusive and cooperative global system.

In summary, this thesis provides a comprehensive perspective on China's engagement with the SCO, tracing its role from the organization's inception to its current developments. By providing an updated perspective on the subject, this work enriches the existing literature, which often relies on outdated sources. The thesis specifically examines the dual facets of China's involvement, focusing on both its pragmatic pursuit of national interests and its genuine commitment to multilateralism. By integrating theoretical insights with real-world dynamics, this research provides a thorough understanding of how China's pragmatic and sincere motivations intersect within the SCO and its broader foreign policy. Ultimately, this study enhances our comprehension of China's evolving role in regional and global dynamics, shedding light on the intricate interplay between its strategic imperatives and its dedication to multilateralism.

Literature Review

Ever since its creation, the SCO has been the subject of extensive analysis within the existing literature, sparking diverse interpretations. One common interpretation views the SCO as a non-traditional security organization focused on addressing issues related to terrorism and borderland stability in Eurasia. Many scholars, including Lanteigne (2006) and Aris (2009), contend that the establishment of the SCO brought fundamental changes in the security landscape of the Eurasian space, contributing to regional stability and fostering cooperation in security matters. Similarly, Wang & Kong (2019) highlight that the SCO members have achieved a common understanding of essential terms such as "terrorism", "secessionism", and "extremism", simplifying the process of combating them. On the contrary, some Western scholars tend to perceive the SCO either as an anti-Western coalition comprising authoritarian states (Ambrosio, 2008) or as a military bloc or alliance aimed against the West (Bhadrakumar, 2007; Tugsbilguun, 2008; Akthar & Javaid, 2021). A unique perspective comes from Crosston (2013), who characterizes the SCO as the "Pluto" of international organizations due to its dominance by micro-agendas that run counter to the conventional purpose of international organizations. Additionally, the SCO can be viewed as an example of "regionalization", as emphasized by Alimov (2018), who describes it as a significant illustration of an "hybrid or mixed model of interstate regional partnership" within the Eurasian region. He highlights that the SCO's evolution is driven by multilateral agreements, without a fixed agenda but rather an effort to find common ground for addressing regional concerns.

Nevertheless, despite the diverse perspectives on the SCO, most analysts concur that this organization is primarily driven by Chinese initiatives. Many observers, including Yuan (2010), Cheng (2011) and Mursaliev (2021), have concentrated their research on China's pivotal role in initiating the SCO, suggesting that Beijing's initial motivation for establishing the organization primarily revolved around shared security concerns threatening regional stability. However, China's commitment to the SCO has evolved beyond its original security-centric focus to encompass broader objectives, such as

promoting economic integration, ensuring a stable energy supply, and advocating a new security paradigm. Chinese scholars widely acknowledge China's proactive involvement in establishing, institutionalizing, affirming, and advancing the SCO (Chung, 2006; Zhao, 2013). Furthermore, they recognize China's driving role in the SCO across various domains. According to Pan (2007), Beijing's main contributions include formulating theoretical frameworks, advancing institutionalization efforts, and providing substantial support to key projects within the organization.

The SCO has additionally served as a prominent example of Chinese multilateralism, a subject that has garnered attention in academic works. Many Chinese scholars, such as Cheng (2018) and Song (2020), have examined the significant shifts in China's approach to multilateral diplomacy over the past three decades. This transformation has seen China move from historically prioritizing its national interests in international affairs to actively engaging in numerous regional and international organizations, including the SCO. From this perspective, Jia (2007) argues that Beijing sees the SCO as a platform to promote its own vision of multilateral cooperation and as an opportunity for the Chinese government to cultivate its leadership capabilities and expertise in multilateral diplomacy.

The extensive body of literature has also delved into the relationship between China and Central Asian states and the contributions of the SCO to this dynamic. Experts such as Hu (2004), Chung (2004), Allison (2004), and Sheives (2006), have extensively examined China's historical interests in Central Asia, which include enhancing diplomatic relations, fostering economic cooperation, and collaborating to address emerging cross-border challenges. Additionally, as highlighted by Yuan (2010), both China and the Central Asian states face a range of shared non-traditional security concerns, such as extremism, ethnic separatism, terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration, prompting them to cooperate. However, some scholars, like Chang (1997) and Marketos (2010), have raised arguments regarding China's underlying motivations in Central Asia, suggesting that China's primary objective is to secure control over the region's abundant energy resources. Similarly, scholars

such as Goldstein (2005) and Swanström (2005) perceive China's engagement in Central Asia as akin to imperial China's "vassal" relationships with neighboring states.

Within the SCO, the China-Russia relationship has been a critical area of focus. Many researchers, including Cohen (2006) and Stobdan (2008), emphasize that both countries pursue distinct agendas within the SCO. Similarly, Reeves (2014) highlights the competition between China and Russia within the SCO, noting that both states have conflicting views of the organization's utility. Hence, while Russia conceives the SCO in “narrow security terms”, China’s approach to the SCO is driven largely by “energy, commercial, and domestic security consideration” (Stronski & Sokolski, 2020, p. 15). Other observers, such as Swanström (2005) and Zhao (2023), have likened the rivalry between the PRC and the Russian Federation to a modern iteration of the historical "Great Game" for power and influence in Central Asia. This comparison draws parallels with the 19th-century competition involving Russia, Qing China, and British India (Fredholm, 2013, p. 8). Nevertheless, despite the competition between the two “godfathers” of the SCO (Cabestan, 2013, p. 435), some scholars accept the idea that the SCO may represent a valuable platform for cooperation between Beijing and Moscow (Rahman, 2007; Lukin, 2019; Yun & Park, 2012).

The acceptance of India and Pakistan as full-fledged members of the SCO in 2017 has become a focal point for numerous analysts examining prospective developments and challenges. Alimov (2018, p. 116) suggests that including these two nations elevates the organization to the status of a "cornerstone of the Eurasian continent". Some Chinese scholars, including Chung (2006) and Panda (2012), particularly interested in China's perspective on the expansion, have raised concerns about potential efficiency and agenda-related issues regarding India's membership. Their concerns primarily stem from the possibility of New Delhi emerging as a significant competitor to Beijing for influence and access to hydrocarbons in Central Asia. Additionally, numerous analysts contemplate the potential security challenges and shifts in power dynamics within future trilateral relations involving Beijing, Moscow, and New Delhi (Efremenko, 2019; Xue & Makengo, 2021). Similarly, the recent inclusion

of Iran as a permanent member in July 2023 has prompted further analysis in the literature, like the one by Grajewski (2023).

Scholars' reflections on the limitations and challenges confronting the SCO enrich our comprehension of the organization's dynamics. Xu & Rogers (2023) raise questions regarding its objectives, priorities, and achievements. In his contribution, Fan (2021) reveals that despite numerous declarations and legal documents in the realm of security cooperation, the level of actual collaboration remains relatively low. Similarly, Xue & Makengo (2021) point out the SCO's weak sense of community as a significant challenge going forward. Consequently, the future trajectory of the SCO remains uncertain. These discussions contribute to a nuanced understanding of the potential trajectories and challenges that the SCO may face in its future development.

The existing literature on China's involvement in the SCO is substantial, with many scholars focusing on specific aspects of its participation. However, most studies either concentrate on China's role in the creation of the SCO or analyze its subsequent contributions, often overlooking a comprehensive approach that examines both its role and underlying motivations. This thesis fills that gap by offering an innovative and thorough analysis that integrates both dimensions. What makes this study particularly innovative is its dual focus: it not only provides an in-depth examination of China's contributions to the SCO from the establishment of the "Shanghai Five" in 1996 to the most recent SCO Summit in Astana in July 2024, but it also delves deeply into the motivations behind China's actions. By doing so, this thesis offers a more holistic understanding of China's foreign policy, its strategic goals within the SCO, and its broader role in the international system. Additionally, this research stands out by offering an up-to-date analysis that incorporates the latest developments, addressing a significant void in the current scholarship. Most of the existing contributions are outdated, with few recent works on the subject. By reconstructing Beijing's evolving role over the past three decades, this thesis provides fresh insights and a more nuanced perspective that is often missing in earlier studies. This comprehensive and current approach not only enhances our

understanding of China's behavior within the SCO but also contributes to the broader discourse on China's current influence in global affairs.

Theoretical Framework

Since its inception, the SCO has been the subject of extensive academic scrutiny across multiple theoretical frameworks, particularly within the fields of regional studies, security studies, and international relations (IR).

The SCO in Regional Studies

The SCO is commonly recognized as a "regional organization", a classification that reflects its foundation in the specific geopolitical context of Eurasia. This categorization aligns with Hurrell's (1995) definition, which outlines the main characteristics of regional organizations as entities with defined membership, legal personality, and prescribed decision-making procedures. Alongside the concept of a "regional organization," the notion of "region" itself has long been debated within academic literature. Although there is no universally accepted definition of a "region", contemporary scholars, such as Fawcett (2004), argue that regions are defined not just by geographical proximity but by elements of commonality, interaction, identity, culture, and institutionalization. In this context, the SCO is more than a mere alliance of neighboring states; it embodies a region-specific identity that is rooted in shared historical and cultural experiences, particularly within the Eurasian landscape. The SCO's evolution from the "Shanghai Five" to a formal organization in 2001 reflects a transition from "regionalization", the process of increasing interaction and integration among states in a region, to "regionalism," where these interactions become institutionalized and policy driven. In the case of the SCO, the organization's development aligns with theories of "new regionalism", which focus on the multifaceted nature of regional integration beyond traditional security concerns. Gupta (2016) highlights that, while the SCO initially resembled "old regionalism" due to its state-centric and security-focused nature, it has gradually incorporated broader issues such as economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and social policies, positioning it within the "new regionalism" paradigm.

The SCO in Security Studies

Security has been a central theme in the analysis of the SCO, with scholars examining its innovative approach to regional security cooperation. Unlike traditional security alliances that focus primarily on inter-state military threats, the SCO has emphasized addressing non-traditional, transnational security challenges such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism, often referred to as the "three evils". In his work, Aris (2009) has argued that the SCO represents a novel security framework that transcends traditional territorial divisions by fostering collaborative approaches among its member states. This focus on non-state transnational threats marks a significant departure from conventional security paradigms, positioning the SCO as a pioneering entity in regional security cooperation. Lanteigne (2006) has explored the potential of the SCO to evolve into a "security community", a concept wherein member states collectively manage security threats through cooperative mechanisms rather than unilateral or bilateral actions. He notes that the SCO's effectiveness as a security community hinges on its ability to address persistent regional tensions, such as cross-border smuggling and secessionist movements, which individual states are often ill-equipped to handle independently. Furthermore, the concept of "security regionalization" has been applied to the SCO by Safiullin (2010), who highlights the SCO's significance in creating a regional security architecture that is responsive to the unique challenges of Central Asia and the broader Eurasian region. In addition, the Copenhagen School's Securitization Theory offers an alternative interpretation of the SCO's security-centric focus. This theory emphasizes the role of discourse in framing certain issues as existential threats, thereby justifying exceptional measures to address them. Cui & Li (2011) argue that the SCO has played a critical role in securitizing the "three evils", even before the global focus on terrorism post-9/11, by framing these issues as central threats to regional stability and security.

The SCO in International Relations (IR) Theories

Beyond regional and security studies, the SCO can be effectively analyzed through the lens of IR theories. These theoretical approaches offer a deeper understanding of the SCO's dynamics, functions, and rationale, as well as the complex interactions and relationships among its member states.

One of the primary IR theories applied to the study of the SCO is realism, which remains the dominant theoretical framework in the literature. Realism offers a lens through which the international arena is understood as a power-driven environment where states, acting in a system marked by anarchy, prioritize their security and self-interest. The anarchic nature of this system, characterized by the absence of a central governing authority, compels states to rely on their own capabilities to ensure their survival and protect their national interests. Realism's focus on power dynamics and state behavior allows for an exploration of the SCO that goes beyond its formal structure, delving into the organization's actual role in the international system and the underlying interests and ambitions of its member states. This perspective is especially pertinent in the context of the SCO, where major powers like Russia and China are seen not merely as cooperative partners but as strategic rivals, each seeking to assert influence and secure dominance within the Eurasian region. Scholars have widely employed realism to interpret the SCO as a platform for power struggles within Eurasia. For example, Blank (2013) and Nicharapova (2019) argue that Moscow and Beijing engage in a form of strategic cooperation within the SCO that is both pragmatic and competitive. This cooperation is not merely about mutual benefit but is also a calculated effort by each power to exert influence over the other's activities and decisions within the organization. This strategic and sometimes uneasy cooperation is viewed as a mechanism to maintain a balance of power in the region, ensuring that neither Russia nor China gains an upper hand that could disrupt the existing power dynamics. Moreover, realism provides a lens to understand the SCO's broader geopolitical role, particularly in relation to external powers. Analysts like Kocamaz (2019) suggest that one of the SCO's foundational purposes was to counterbalance the influence of the United States in Eurasia. This perspective gained traction in the

aftermath of the War on Terror, when the U.S. military established a significant presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. From a realist viewpoint, the SCO can be seen as a strategic tool employed by Russia and China to push back against American hegemony and challenge the prevailing international status quo. The organization, therefore, is not just a regional alliance but a critical component of a larger geopolitical strategy aimed at reshaping the global power structure in favor of its leading members. This realist interpretation of the SCO highlights the complex interplay of cooperation and competition among its members, particularly between Russia and China. It underscores the idea that the SCO is not simply a forum for multilateral dialogue but a battleground for influence, where member states pursue their own strategic interests while navigating the broader contours of international power politics. Through the lens of realism, the SCO emerges as a dynamic and often contested space, reflecting the broader realities of the international system where power, security, and self-interest continue to reign supreme.

In stark contrast to realism, liberalism offers a fundamentally different lens through which to understand global dynamics. While realism focuses on power struggles and the inevitability of conflict in an anarchic world, liberalism emphasizes cooperation, dialogue, and interdependence as essential means of resolving conflicts and fostering peaceful relations between states. Liberalism posits that states can work together based on mutual interests, economic ties, and the establishment of international institutions. This theoretical approach presents a more positive and optimistic view of international affairs, where cooperation among states is not only possible but also desirable and attainable. Applying liberalism to the SCO involves recognizing the organization's commitment to fostering cooperation, peace, and stability across Eurasia through collaborative efforts and multilateral solutions. For instance, Safiullin (2010) highlights the SCO's initiatives to enhance regional security cooperation through confidence-building measures and increased engagement among its member states, showcasing an innovative approach to addressing shared security threats. Similarly, Pratama (2013) utilizes liberalism to explain the SCO's origins through the concept of

"security interdependence" among Eurasian states. This interdependence stems from shared domestic security concerns, which encourage member states to adopt cooperative, rather than adversarial, strategies to address mutual security challenges. In this sense, the SCO's efforts can be seen as a practical application of liberal principles, where the focus is on collaboration and collective action to achieve common security goals. One could even argue that the SCO is fundamentally rooted in liberal values. As noted by Yang (2015), the "Shanghai Spirit", the set of norms and principles that guide the SCO, embodies liberal ideals such as diplomatic negotiations, mutual trust, and a commitment to common development. These principles underscore the organization's dedication to fostering a cooperative environment where states work together to achieve shared objectives. However, despite the relevance of liberalism in analyzing the SCO, it is important to note that liberal theories remain underexplored in existing scholarly discussions on the organization. Realism continues to dominate the theoretical landscape, particularly in the Western academic world, where the SCO is often viewed through the lens of power politics and influence. Many scholars still perceive the SCO as a strategic tool used by its most powerful members, Russia and China, to assert their influence in the region rather than as a genuine platform for cooperation and peace. This prevailing realist perspective has somewhat overshadowed the potential contributions of liberalism in understanding the SCO's role in promoting regional stability and cooperation.

Furthermore, Aksu (2015) offers an innovative analysis of China's role in the SCO through the lens of institutional realism, a theory combining neorealist and neoliberal elements as developed by He (2007). This approach highlights the strategy of "institutional balancing", where states prefer to secure their position within the international system through institutions rather than traditional military balancing, particularly in conditions of high economic interdependence. Aksu argues that China's involvement in the SCO reflects this strategy, suggesting that the PRC, in response to the unipolar world order dominated by the U.S., adopted a policy of exclusive institutional balancing after the

Cold War. By promoting economic and strategic cooperation within the SCO, China thereby seeks to enhance its regional power while challenging U.S. dominance.

The third prominent IR theory that can be applied to the SCO is constructivism. This theoretical approach offers a lens that centers on social constructs, shared identities, and the role of norms, ideas, and discourse in shaping state behavior. When applied to the SCO, constructivism provides valuable insights into the social and identity-based dimensions of the organization. For instance, Qureshi & Hashmi (2020) emphasize the importance of historical, cultural, and social ties among SCO member states, arguing that the organization's formation is deeply intertwined with shared historical processes and regional contexts. This perspective highlights how the SCO is not merely a strategic alliance but also a manifestation of a shared identity among its members, rooted in common historical experiences and cultural connections. Constructivism also sheds light on the role of norms and discourse within the SCO. Pratama (2013), for example, employs constructivist principles to explore how security discourse within the SCO influences the perceptions and actions of its member states. By examining the language and narratives used within the organization, she demonstrates how the SCO shapes the way member states understand and approach security issues, thus guiding their behavior in a way that aligns with the collective identity and norms of the group. Similarly, Dadabaev (2014) utilizes constructivism to analyze how the SCO contributes to the shaping of a regional identity in Central Asia. He argues that the SCO serves as a platform for reinforcing themes of anti-colonialism and resistance to external domination, which are central to the regional identity of its member states. This analysis underscores the role of the SCO in fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose among its members, based on a common historical narrative of resisting external interference. Moreover, Kavalski (2010) examines how China has "socialized" Central Asia within the SCO framework. He argues that through its regional cooperation initiatives, China has shaped Central Asia's perspectives in alignment with its own worldview, thereby enhancing its normative power within the region.

However, despite the rich insights that constructivism can offer, comprehensive studies of the SCO from a constructivist perspective remain relatively underdeveloped in the existing literature.

Two Opposite but Complementary Theoretical Perspectives: Realism and Neoliberal Institutionalism

This study leverages a diverse and comprehensive theoretical framework to explore the dynamics of the SCO, acknowledging the effectiveness of multiple perspectives in understanding this regional organization. However, it places particular emphasis on IR theories, recognizing their ability to unravel the complexities of China's involvement in the SCO. These theories provide deep and nuanced insights into the intricacies of global politics, making them essential tools for analyzing phenomena such as China's behavior within the SCO.

This study employs a balanced theoretical framework that incorporates both realism and neoliberal institutionalism to investigate the subject matter. This dual approach is chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of Beijing's motivations and actions, encompassing both the power dynamics and strategic interests emphasized by realism, as well as the cooperative and institutional aspects highlighted by neoliberal institutionalism.

Realism, with its focus on power dynamics and national interests, is particularly useful in examining the power-driven aspects of China's engagement with the SCO, focusing on Beijing's national interests, strategic aspirations and material considerations. This theoretical approach is widely adopted by scholars both in the West and within Chinese academic circles. From a realist perspective, the SCO is seen as a crucial instrument for the PRC to advance its domestic interests, enhance its power, and assert dominance in Eurasia and beyond. By playing a leading role within the SCO, China challenges the existing order rooted in liberal values and uses the organization as a strategic tool to counterbalance the influence of major powers, especially Russia and the United States. This thesis recognizes the importance of realism in explaining China's actions, particularly in relation to

Beijing's ambitions for superpower status and its emergence as a major global player. Realism effectively underscores the competitive and strategic dimensions of China's behavior, emphasizing the pragmatism at the core of its foreign policy. However, its narrow, state-centered focus may not fully capture the comprehensive nature of China's engagement with the SCO. Specifically, realism might overlook the cooperative aspects of China's involvement in the organization. It can be argued that China's participation in the SCO is driven by a range of factors beyond immediate material and strategic interests, encompassing broader and more nuanced considerations that realism alone may not fully address. Therefore, while realism offers valuable insights into the competitive elements of China's actions, it may fall short in accounting for the complexity of Beijing's motivations and its genuine cooperative strategies within the SCO. Hence, this thesis advocates for a more comprehensive and balanced perspective on China's SCO policy, addressing the limitations of realism and providing a deeper exploration of the multifaceted factors that shape Beijing's involvement in the organization. To achieve this, the thesis integrates realism with neoliberal institutionalism, aiming for a more nuanced understanding of China's actions.

As outlined by Grieco (1988), neoliberal institutionalism emerged as a distinct branch of the liberal IR theory during the late 1970s and 1980s. This approach aligns with realism in viewing states as rational, unitary actors pursuing their interests in an anarchic international system. It also acknowledges the realist notion that anarchy constrains states' willingness to cooperate. However, it diverges from realism by challenging the assumption that anarchy inevitably leads to conflict and power struggles. Instead, it posits that states can cooperate even within an anarchic system, particularly through regional or international institutions. At its core, neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes the role of institutions in mitigating the effects of anarchy and fostering cooperation among states. These institutions, which include international regimes, laws, and organizations, can shape state behavior by establishing norms, principles, and codified patterns of behavior, and monitoring compliance. They facilitate dialogue, cooperation, and dispute resolution, while also

enhancing transparency, accountability, and predictability among states, thereby reducing the risk of misunderstandings and conflicts (Grieco, 1988, pp. 493-495).

By integrating neoliberal institutionalism with the realist perspective, this thesis aims to provide a more balanced and comprehensive analysis of China's SCO policy, uncovering the diverse factors that shape Beijing's actions and strategies. This broader theoretical framework not only highlights the pragmatic aspects of China's behavior but also illuminates the deeper motivations driving its engagement with the SCO. The combination of strategic and sincere objectives influences China's regional policy and its interactions with other member states, emphasizing the SCO's importance in China's long-term goals and its commitment to advancing the organization.

The decision to combine realism and neoliberal institutionalism in this study stems from the recognition that China's role in the SCO cannot be fully understood through a single theoretical lens. Realism offers critical insights into the power dynamics at play, particularly in the context of China's competition with other major powers and its rising global influence. However, neoliberal institutionalism provides a more nuanced understanding of how China leverages the SCO as a platform for regional cooperation, which is essential for maintaining a stable environment conducive to its development and national interests. By employing this theoretical lens, it is possible to highlight Beijing's sincere efforts to create and nurture the SCO as a solid regional institution. Furthermore, this theory provides valuable insights into how regional multilateral cooperation is fostered and sustained, including China's significant contribution to this process. While realism underscores the pragmatism of China's actions, neoliberal institutionalism thereby reveals its genuine commitment to multilateralism and regional cooperation, which has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy for the past three decades. Ultimately, this balanced and innovative approach allows for a more thorough exploration of how the PRC navigates its dual objectives of securing its national interests while promoting regional cooperation and multilateral solutions through the SCO.

Adopting this dual-theoretical approach also addresses a gap in existing literature, where realist perspectives often dominate analyses of China's behavior in the SCO, particularly in Western scholarship. The SCO is frequently viewed as a mere tool for the PRC to assert its power, without considering the deeper, more profound motivations behind its leadership role. By incorporating neoliberal institutionalism, this study broadens the understanding of China's engagement with the SCO and contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate on the role of institutions in international relations. It also promotes a more balanced and less biased view of China's actions, which are often perceived as threatening by Western observers, hindering constructive dialogue between China and the West. The decision to incorporate neoliberal institutionalism is also motivated by its limited representation in existing literature on the subject. While most analyses have relied on realist principles, viewing China's motivations as driven solely by power and security concerns, there has been relatively little application of liberal theories, including neoliberal institutionalism. Despite its underutilization, this theory offers important perspectives on multilateral cooperation and international relations, explaining why states collaborate through regional and international institutions. By adopting this theoretical approach, this study seeks to enrich scholarly discourse and encourage the use of neoliberal institutionalism in analyzing China's conduct within the SCO. It also aims to contribute to the broader academic debate on China's interactions with regional and international organizations, offering a fresh perspective.

In summary, the integration of realism and neoliberal institutionalism in this analysis provides a robust framework for understanding China's complex and multifaceted role within the SCO, highlighting how China, while driven by traditional power concerns, also recognizes the value of multilateral cooperation in achieving its broader strategic goals in the Eurasian region.

Methodology

To address the central research question: “*Why has China actively contributed to the establishment and development of the SCO?*”, this study employs a qualitative, multifaceted methodology. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring complex phenomena like China’s role in the SCO, as it allows for in-depth analysis of motivations and behaviors.

The methodology begins with an extensive literature review, which forms the foundation of the research. This review incorporates academic articles, books, and reports to provide necessary background and context. Additionally, an in-depth theoretical framework is developed to explore key theories relevant to the topic. This framework sets the stage for understanding the dynamics of China’s involvement in the SCO, particularly through the lenses of realism and neoliberal institutionalism.

A historical analysis, primarily conducted in Chapter 1, traces the evolution of the SCO from its origins as the "Shanghai Five" (1996-2001) to its establishment as the SCO in 2001 and beyond. This periodization helps in identifying critical phases in the organization's development, framing China's participation in a broader regional and global context. By situating the analysis within this historical context, the study captures how pivotal events influenced China’s strategy and priorities within the SCO.

The thesis is structured around two descriptive chapters (Chapters 2 and 4) and two theoretical chapters (Chapters 3 and 5). Chapters 2 and 4 provide detailed descriptions of the factors motivating China’s support for the SCO and its key contributions to the organization. These sections use systemic analysis to examine the political, economic, ideological, cultural, and security dimensions of China's engagement, offering a comprehensive, factual account of China’s actions within the SCO. Chapters 3 and 5 complement these descriptive sections by applying a theoretical lens to the findings. These chapters deepen the analysis by integrating the insights gleaned from the descriptive chapters into

broader theoretical discussions, thus strengthening the research. In international relations, the use of theory is critical for interpreting state behavior and generating hypotheses, making these theoretical chapters essential for framing China's actions in a larger context.

The study also employs content analysis to examine various forms of communication, including official documents, speeches, and media statements. Primary data sources include official SCO documents, such as final declarations and policy statements, as well as official Chinese documents like White Papers, and speeches from key Chinese leaders. This content analysis enables the identification of recurring themes, strategic priorities, and policy goals that provide insight into China's official stance and motivations regarding the SCO. By analyzing these primary sources, the research captures the rationale behind China's policies, its diplomatic goals, and its broader strategic objectives within the framework of the SCO.

This multifaceted approach, combining literature review, historical context, systemic and theoretical analysis, and content analysis, ensures a comprehensive exploration of the topic, enabling a well-rounded understanding of China's motivations and contributions to the SCO.

Chapter 1: An Overview of the SCO

This initial chapter offers a detailed overview of the SCO. It begins by tracing the historical trajectory of the initiative, starting from its origins as the "Shanghai Five" in 1996 to its formal establishment as a regional organization in 2001. It also highlights the SCO's enlargement, which has increased its membership from the initial six to the current ten permanent members. The chapter then explores the core principles of the SCO, collectively known as the "Shanghai Spirit", which represents the theoretical foundation of the organization. Furthermore, it examines the SCO's institutional framework, including its organizational structure, decision-making processes, and mechanisms of cooperation. Lastly, the chapter delves into the SCO's security focus, discussing its security framework and its efforts to address regional security threats.

In essence, this chapter provides a contextual background for the subsequent sections of the thesis. By offering a general understanding of the SCO, it prepares readers for the analyses conducted in the following chapters, which will delve specifically into China's contributions and strategies.

1.1 From the “Shanghai Five” to the SCO

The launch of the “Shanghai initiative” was propelled by the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, resulting in the emergence of the Russian Federation and five independent Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 led to the creation of new international borders between China and four of the newly formed countries, excluding Uzbekistan.

In 1996, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan jointly declared the establishment of a new framework called the "Shanghai Five" (also referred to as “S5”), conceived as a security mechanism specifically designed to address border problems. On April 26, 1996, the "Agreement on Strengthening Military Trust in Border Areas" was signed during the initial S5 summit in Shanghai, marking the first joint border agreement among these nations. Its objectives were twofold: to prevent

armed forces in border areas from engaging in activities that could undermine peace and stability, and to enhance mutual trust through the exchange of information. Similarly, the "Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in Border Areas", signed in Moscow in April 1997, aimed at reducing military forces in the border areas to a minimum level compatible with friendly relations, with specific geographical limits and provisions for information exchange among signatory parties (Fei, 2010, p. 5). Collectively, these two agreements, termed "Mutual Military Confidence-Building Measures" (MMCBM), committed the five countries to implement confidence-building measures in military cooperation along their shared borders (Misra, 2001, p. 305). By fostering confidence and trust among the five countries, they contributed to build peaceful diplomatic ties between them.

The focus of the "Shanghai Five" swiftly evolved from border issues and military disarmament to encompass regional trade cooperation and security (Gleason, 2001, p. 108). At the 1998 Almaty summit, the group expanded its agenda to address emerging threats such as religious extremism, ethnic separatism, and terrorism, collectively termed as the "three evils". Similarly, the 1999 Bishkek meeting, recognizing the danger of "Islamic fundamentalism", endorsed the establishment of an anti-terrorism center. Notably, the 2000 Dushanbe summit, through the Dushanbe Declaration, emphasized the importance of opposing interference in other countries' internal affairs and safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity. During this summit, Uzbekistan was accepted as an observer, and it was decided to establish a formal regional organization (Fredholm, 2013, p. 3).

A milestone event occurred on June 15, 2001, during the summit in Shanghai, when the member states of the "Shanghai Five", along with Uzbekistan, signed the "Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (hereinafter "2001 Declaration"), marking the SCO's inception. The 2001 Declaration delineated the SCO's objectives, which encompass: strengthening mutual trust, friendship, and good neighborliness among member states; promoting effective cooperation across various domains; joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security, and stability

in the region; and constructing a new democratic, just, and rational political and economic international order. The 2001 Declaration stipulated that the SCO would hold annual official meetings of heads of state and regular meetings of heads of government alternately in each member state. It affirmed members' commitment to upholding the principles of the UN Charter, emphasizing mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, equality, and mutual benefit. Moreover, the SCO was grounded in principles such as resolving issues through mutual consultations, non-interference in internal affairs, refraining from using or threatening military force, and renouncing unilateral military superiority in neighboring areas.

The affirmation of the SCO reached another significant milestone when its Charter was adopted in St. Petersburg in June 2002 and officially enforced in September 2003. The “Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” (hereinafter “SCO Charter”) serves as the fundamental document outlining the organization's objectives, principles, structure, and core activities. It contains specific provisions essential for understanding the SCO's nature. Importantly, it explicitly states that the SCO is not aimed against any specific country or international organization, challenging the Western perception that sees it as an authoritarian entity driven by “realpolitik” and positioned against the U.S. Instead, it emphasizes the organization's openness to dialogue and cooperation with other states and international organizations, granting them the status of dialogue partner or observer. Additionally, it addresses key aspects such as the organization's budget formulation and execution and the process for admitting new members. It also outlines decision-making procedures, emphasizing consensus as the primary approach for most decisions.

In 2004, the SCO marked two landmark events in its development. Firstly, the UN General Assembly granted it observer status, signifying international affirmation and recognition. The UN’s recognition offered the SCO an effective platform for engaging in global governance (Hao, 2020, p. 151). Secondly, embracing the possibility of expansion for the first time, SCO member states decided to grant observer status to India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan. In July 2005, representatives from these

four countries participated in the SCO's Astana Summit, marking a historic occasion. President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan welcomed the attendees by highlighting that the leaders present represented "half of humanity" (Fredholm, 2013, p. 17). In June 2012, Afghanistan was granted observer status, while Sri Lanka and Belarus became the SCO's first dialogue partners in June 2009, followed by Turkey in June 2012. A crucial turning point in the SCO's process of expansion occurred during the 2017 Astana Summit, with the admission of Pakistan and India as full members, marking the creation of a new "Big Shanghai Eight" (Yussupzhanovich & Tulkunovna, 2019, p. 43). With their inclusion, the SCO collectively accounts for approximately 20% of the world's GDP, about 42% of the global population, and include four declared nuclear powers (Rowden, 2018, p. 2). The SCO's regional and global relevance received further validation with Iran's full membership in July 2023, underscoring the organization's attractiveness and significance in the current international order. With the acceptance of Iran as a full member, the SCO enlarged its membership to nine permanent member states, three observer states interested in acceding to full membership (Afghanistan, Belarus, and Mongolia), and nine dialogue partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Egypt, Nepal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, and Turkey). Consequently, almost twenty-three years after its establishment, the SCO has become the largest and most populous regional organization in the world (Hao, 2018, p. 26), covering almost three-fifths of the Eurasian continent and with a population of over three billion. At the 2024 Astana summit, Belarus was formally accepted as a permanent member state, expanding the SCO's membership to ten permanent members (Putz, 2024). Belarus' full membership does not only reaffirms the SCO's commitment to openness and inclusivity but also extends its geographical reach into Europe, as Minsk becomes the first European country to officially join the organization (Sciorati, 2024).

1.2 The Essence of the SCO: The “Shanghai Spirit”

The essence of the SCO lies in the “Shanghai Spirit”, articulated in the 2001 Declaration and the SCO Charter. It embodies the core ethos guiding the organization's actions and development, constituting a new model of inter-state relations and regional cooperation (Zhao, 2006). The “Shanghai Spirit” is based on the principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, openness to the rest of the world, mutual trust and benefits, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations, and pursuit of common development. The SCO conducts its foreign policy in accordance with these principles, alongside those of equality, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, and universality. Diverging from the ideologies of Western-led international organizations, the "Shanghai Spirit" prioritizes partnership and cooperation over confrontation. It explicitly rejects international relations' traditional theories, such as the zero-sum game, the Cold War mentality, and the clash of civilizations. Therefore, the "Shanghai Spirit" introduces an innovative idea to global governance, striving to establish a fairer and more equitable international order (Yang, 2015). According to Yang (2013, p. 205), the SCO, driven by the "Shanghai Spirit", has significantly enriched international relations by introducing a new diplomatic philosophy. This concept, described as a "multidimensional chessboard with a profound essence", serves as a framework for fostering common regional goals across various domains (Yang, 2013, p. 207). These goals include constructing a regional identity, fostering lasting peace, and achieving mutual development. Moreover, the "Shanghai Spirit" enhances the SCO's legitimacy and vitality, setting it apart from other organizations. It signifies a practical shift towards greater cooperation and consensus-based decision-making among member states, irrespective of their size, influence, and level of development. It exemplifies how nations with diverse cultures and national traditions can peacefully coexist, building their relationships on principles of mutual development and benefit (Zakharov, 2023, p. 42). This signifies a departure from traditional paradigms, where only great powers matter in shaping international affairs. Hence, the "Shanghai Spirit" embodies the SCO's unifying and underlying concept, driving its medium and long-term development (Yang, 2013, pp. 207-210).

1.3 The SCO's Institutional Architecture

The SCO Charter establishes the institutional framework governing the SCO, with dedicated articles from 4 to 11 outlining its structure. From an institutional standpoint, the SCO operates through various cooperation mechanisms, with key bodies including the Council of Heads of States (CHS) and the Council of Heads of Government (CHG), both convening regular annual meetings. The CHS, acting as the supreme decision-making body, involves member state leaders making decisions across the organization's spectrum. It determines priorities, defines major areas of activity, decides on internal arrangements, oversees interactions with other states and international organizations, and addresses topical international issues (Article 5). The CHG, as the second-highest body, formulates strategies for multilateral cooperation, addresses crucial issues, and approves the organization's annual budget (Article 6). Additionally, the SCO's structure includes other organs. The Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (CMFA) addresses day-to-day organizational activities, prepares meetings of the CHS, and holds consultations on international problems within the organization (Article 7). Article 8 covers meetings of Heads of Ministries and/or Agencies, convened when decided by the CHS or the CHG. The Council of National Coordinators (Article 9) coordinates day-to-day activities, preparing for meetings of the CHS, the CHG, and the CMFA.

Article 4 of the SCO Charter outlines two permanent bodies: the Secretariat and the Regional Counter-Terror Structure (RATS). Situated in Beijing, the Secretariat is tasked with executive, administrative, and technical functions. The RATS, based in Tashkent, though referenced in Article 11 of the Charter, was officially established only in 2004. This body is entrusted with countering terrorism, preventing cross-border drug smuggling, and promoting collaboration among member states in various security-related activities. The creation of the two permanent bodies solidified the SCO's institutional framework, providing a stable foundation and enhancing the organization's capabilities (Zhao, 2006, p. 110).

1.4 The SCO as a Security-Oriented Organization

While the SCO's activities have broadened to include various areas of cooperation such as economy, education, culture, science and technology, environmental protection, and others, its primary emphasis has consistently been on non-traditional security concerns. These issues, which were the driving force behind the SCO's establishment, have remained central to its mission. Since its inception in 2001, the SCO has been focused on addressing security-related matters, emerging as a crucial collective security mechanism in the post-Cold War Eurasian region (Safiullin, 2010, p. 42). The SCO has prioritized addressing cross-border and transnational threats, particularly the "three evils". These persistent challenges have posed significant threats to stability in the Eurasian space, necessitating collaborative efforts among nations. As Zhao (2012, p. 5) correctly pointed out, the SCO has been instrumental in safeguarding the territorial integrity, security, and stability of its member states, along with their political, economic, and social well-being.

The security endeavors of the organization align with the "Shanghai Spirit", the theoretical guideline of the organization. Hence, the SCO emphasizes collaborative initiatives, reciprocity, equality, dialogue, and the exchange of best practices among member states to effectively address security menaces. Embracing an innovative security concept, the SCO's approach transcends traditional territorial divisions, prioritizing cooperative strategies against non-state transnational security threats over inter-state military concerns (Aris, 2009).

The commitment of the SCO to safeguarding security and stability in Eurasia is evident in its founding documents. The 2001 Declaration underscored joint efforts to uphold peace, security, and stability in the region. Similarly, the SCO Charter highlighted the importance of maintaining and strengthening regional peace, security, and stability, emphasizing the necessity of joint action against the "three evils" in all their forms. Moreover, the SCO charter addressed diverse transnational menaces, including narcotics, arms trafficking, illegal migration, cyber threats, and elements of weapons of mass destruction, reflecting the SCO's comprehensive approach to security. The SCO's security-

related objectives and its commitment to combat the "three evils" are further reflected in its extensive legal framework. Notably, the "Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism" ("2001 Convention"), adopted on June 15, 2001, provided legal definitions for these concepts. The convention also outlined the forms, mechanisms, main goals, and principles of cooperation among SCO member states in countering these common security threats. This document was reinforced by the adoption of the "Convention of the SCO Against Terrorism" (2009), which aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of the 2001 Convention. The 2009 Convention provided legal definitions of the terms "terrorist act" and "terrorist organization" and enlisted a series of anti-terrorist measures, including dialogue with other international and regional organizations, member states' cooperation in intelligence exchange, preventive measures, and disruption of financial flows to terrorist groups. Furthermore, the significance of the SCO's efforts against extremism was underscored by the signing of the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Convention on Countering Extremism" at the 2017 Astana summit. This document aimed to enhance cooperation among member states in countering extremist ideologies and practices, underscoring the strict connection between extremism and terrorism. It provided a unified legal definition of concepts such as "extremism", "extremist act", and "extremist organization" and outlined measures for combating extremism effectively (Fan, 2021).

1.5 The' SCO's Counterterrorism Efforts

Although terrorism in the Eurasian region traces its origins back to the 1970s, its impact notably surged after the Soviet Union's dissolution, especially with the rise of extremist Islamic group (Wang & Kong, 2019, p. 67). This influence grew significantly with the Taliban's emergence in Afghanistan and further escalated post-9/11, prompting American-led military interventions aimed at dismantling Al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban government in Kabul (Lanteigne, 2006, p. 610).

Since its establishment, the SCO's core purpose has revolved around combating the menaces of terrorism. The SCO's proactive stance on counterterrorism is exemplified by the 2001 Convention,

which was ratified three months prior to the September 11th terrorist attacks. Similarly, the SCO swiftly responded to the tragic events of 9/11. Just three days later, at the Almaty summit, the organization promptly declared its willingness to cooperate with any state and international body in the global fight against terrorism. This declaration not only underscored the SCO's dedication to countering terrorism but also signaled its openness to international cooperation, recognizing terrorism as a global threat.

The SCO employs two primary mechanisms for counterterrorism operations: the RATS and joint military exercises. The RATS, operational since 2003, serves as the core security cooperation branch of the SCO, coordinating non-military actions against the "three evils" (Allison, 2004). Its main activities encompass coordinating anti-terrorism information with member states and international bodies, organizing conferences, formulating legal documents, contributing to command and tactical training, and facilitating operational activities, such as planning a shared databank on terrorist organizations.

Additionally, the SCO has established practical mechanisms for collaborative counterterrorism efforts, conducting joint anti-terror exercises in both bilateral and multilateral formats. As clarified by Lanteigne (2006, p. 611), the series of exercises began in 2002, with the China-Kyrgyzstan joint anti-terror military exercises, often referred to as "Exercise-01". This exercise marked the formal launch of the SCO's anti-terror mission and set a precedent for bilateral joint military exercises within the organization. Subsequently, in 2003, "Union-2003" saw the first multilateral anti-terrorist exercises within the SCO, involving China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Among the SCO's most significant anti-terror exercises are the "Peace Mission" joint exercises, held annually or biennially in either a bilateral format between China and Russia or multilaterally. The inaugural "Peace Mission 2005", held in Vladivostok (Russia) and Shandong (China), marked the first joint military exercise in the bilateral relations between Russia and China. In 2007, all SCO member states participated in the "Peace Mission 2007", hosted by China (Urumqi) and Russia (Chelyabinsk region).

This large-scale exercise was the first joint military exercise involving the armed forces of all six SCO members. Furthermore, during the "Peace Mission 2018", held in Russia, India and Pakistan, who officially became SCO members in 2017, participated by sending their troops to engage in SCO military exercises for the first time, marking an historic occasion (Fan, 2021).

Summary

This chapter has provided a detailed overview of the SCO, serving as a contextual background. Firstly, it traced the historical trajectory of the SCO, starting from its origins as the "Shanghai Five", established in 1996 to foster confidence and trust among China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. The chapter then highlighted the transformation of this platform into the SCO, formally launched in 2001. It also underscored the process of enlargement, with the admission of India, Pakistan, Iran, and Belarus expanding the organization's membership to ten countries. Furthermore, attention was devoted to the "Shanghai Spirit", which encapsulates the core principles guiding the SCO. Subsequently, the chapter delved into the institutional framework of the organization, shedding light on its organizational structure, operational mechanisms, and decision-making processes. In another section, the chapter examined the SCO's emphasis on security matters, particularly in response to the post-9/11 security landscape. It elucidated the organization's security framework and its practical endeavors in counterterrorism.

To sum up, this chapter meticulously scrutinized the historical evolution, guiding principles, institutional architecture, and security orientation of the SCO. By offering a comprehensive understanding of the organization, it equips readers with the foundational knowledge necessary to comprehend the analyses presented in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2: China's Endorsement of the SCO

The initial chapter of the thesis provided a general description of the SCO, examining its historical evolution, the foundational principles contained in the "Shanghai Spirit", its institutional framework, and its security-centered focus.

Now, the second chapter explores the motivations propelling the PRC to advocate for the establishment of the SCO, aiming to illuminate the factors behind its commitment to this initiative. The chapter opens with an exploration of China's developments throughout the 1980s and 1990s, highlighting the impact of economic and social reforms alongside the country's evolving foreign policy. It then examines China's post-Cold War engagement with Central Asia, emphasizing how this strategic focus significantly influenced Beijing's stance. Additionally, a dedicated section explores China's relatively recent embrace of multilateralism. This segment offers a theoretical explanation of multilateralism and traces the evolution of Chinese foreign policy from a predominantly bilateral approach to a more active role in multilateral frameworks. Using the SCO as a case study, the section demonstrates how China's multilateralism aligns with its broader foreign policy objectives, including the promotion of a "New Security Concept" (NSC) and "New Regionalism," both integral to China's pursuit of a "Peaceful Rise".

This detailed analysis sets the stage for Chapter 3, which will present a theoretical examination of China's motivations. Drawing on the key arguments discussed in this chapter, the subsequent analysis will apply the theoretical lenses of realism and neoliberal institutionalism to scrutinize China's decision to promote the launch of the "Shanghai initiative".

2.1 China's Development in the 1980s and 1990s

The period spanning the 1980s and 1990s was transformative for the PRC, marked by significant domestic development and increased engagement with the international community. This era significantly bolstered China's regional and global image, laying the foundation for its emergence as a global superpower.

During the 1980s, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership (1978-1992), China embarked on a path of significant economic reforms and modernization, known as the "Reform and Opening Up" policy. This initiative aimed to liberalize China's economy, attract foreign investment, and integrate the country into the global economy. As a result, China experienced rapid economic growth, industrial expansion, and urban development, transforming it into one of the world's largest economies. This economic transformation also reshaped China's foreign policy and diplomatic strategies. Beijing moved from being a relatively passive participant in global affairs to a more assertive actor, increasingly engaging with the international community. China's growing influence was reflected in its active participation in regional and international organizations, signaling its rising stature on the global stage. Following Deng, Jiang Zemin took over as China's paramount leader, continuing and deepening the trajectory of international engagement. During his tenure (1993-2003), the PRC solidified its position as a significant global player.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 marked a profound shift in international power dynamics, transitioning from a bipolar to a unipolar world dominated by the United States. However, there was a growing perception, particularly among developing countries, that a multipolar world order was on the horizon. Chinese leaders anticipated this shift, prompting them to adopt a more assertive foreign policy to secure China's place in the evolving geopolitical landscape. During this period, Beijing became an advocate for a multipolar system, aiming to expand its global leadership and influence. Simultaneously, China began prioritizing its regional relationships, emphasizing the development of

a “harmonious Asia.” This regional focus was driven by increasing confidence and patriotism among the Chinese public, fueled by the country's rapid economic growth (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Within this context, the PRC envisioned the "Shanghai Five" as a platform to enhance its regional standing, facilitate economic growth, and promote stability and development in its neighborhood. The launch of the “Shanghai initiative” thereby symbolizes the transformation of the PRC throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These decades of development not only reshaped China's foreign policy objectives but also marked its evolution into a more assertive international player, increasingly inclined to shape regional dynamics through collaborative efforts.

2.2 The Fall of the USSR and China’s Engagement with Central Asia

A crucial international event that prompted China to lay the foundation of the "Shanghai Five" was the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. This event not only marked the end of the Cold War, ending decades of tension between the East and West, but also held significant implications for China's regional dynamics. Instead of contending with a singular Soviet giant, China suddenly found itself sharing borders with several newly independent states, reshaping its geopolitical landscape.

Since its establishment in 1949, the PRC lacked a coherent Central Asian policy (Sheives, 2006). Despite the region's strategic and geopolitical significance, China has historically been excluded from its power dynamics, due to the long Soviet dominance. However, the post-Soviet era opened new avenues for Beijing to engage with Central Asia, allowing it to become a significant player in the region (Tukmadiyeva, 2013). In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, Beijing formulated its first Central Asian strategy, which focused on resolving border disputes, establishing diplomatic relations, safeguarding domestic stability and territorial integrity, and enhancing economic and energy cooperation.

The SCO and its predecessor, the S5, were key components of China's post-Cold War Central Asian strategy. This multilateral framework enabled Beijing to effectively address border disputes and

strengthen diplomatic ties with the newly independent post-Soviet republics, fostering mutual confidence and trust. It also provided a platform for China to promote economic and energy cooperation in the region, supporting its own economic growth and energy needs. More importantly, it served as a critical mechanism for the PRC to address security threats, ensuring both domestic stability and regional security.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the post-Soviet republics were significant factors motivating the PRC to launch the "Shanghai initiative". In response to this new regional and international context, China envisioned the S5, and later the SCO, as vehicles for proactive engagement in the Eurasian space, allowing it to strengthen its influence in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

2.2.1 The Resolution of Border Disputes

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the PRC suddenly faced new neighbors along its borders, reshaped by the geopolitical changes that followed the USSR's dissolution. Consequently, China prioritized resolving border disputes with these countries as the first milestone of its Central Asian strategy. This was essential not only for maintaining domestic stability and territorial integrity but also for establishing diplomatic relations. By addressing these disputes, the PRC thereby aimed to lay the groundwork for fostering cooperation and building trust with its new neighbors.

Border disputes between China and Central Asia have deep historical roots, with conflicts dating back centuries. These disputes, deeply intertwined with complex historical, geopolitical, and ethnic factors, involved China's borders with three post-Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, totaling around 3500 kilometers. In the case of the Sino-Kazakh border, contention centered around the Ili River valley, historically inhabited by a substantial Kazakh population. Similarly, border issues with Kyrgyzstan stemmed from territorial disputes in the Pamir and Tien Shan Mountain ranges. The China-Tajikistan border disputes revolved around territorial claims in the Pamir Mountains,

particularly the eastern section known as the Wakhan Corridor. Additionally, the Fergana Valley, which lies between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, posed challenges for border delineation due to its complex geography.

The first significant attempt to address the border issue occurred with the renowned "Vladivostok speech" delivered by Mikhail S. Gorbachev during Deng Xiaoping's visit to the USSR in July 1986. This speech marked a crucial milestone in Sino-Soviet relations, as Gorbachev outlined his vision for improved ties, stressing dialogue, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. Despite the optimism generated by the "Vladivostok Initiative", which led to talks aimed at resolving the Sino-Soviet border dispute, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ultimately left the issue unresolved (Dwivedi, 2006). After the USSR's collapse, China found itself with three new neighbors: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In response, it launched a diplomatic initiative to address border disputes. Negotiations involving China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan began in late 1991. This diplomatic strategy yielded results, as China signed protocols with Kyrgyzstan in 1996 and 1999, as well as a similar agreement with Tajikistan in 2002, to settle boundary disputes. Additionally, a border agreement was signed with Kazakhstan in 1994, reinforced by the "Protocol on the Demarcation of the State Line" in 2002, clarifying the boundary between the two countries. Diplomatic ties were further strengthened by the signing of "Treaties of Good Neighborliness and Friendship" with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, along with a "Strategic Partnership" with Kazakhstan in 2005. China also aimed to build peaceful relations with Russia, leading to the signing of the "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation" in 2001. This treaty replaced the 1950 "Friendship Treaty" signed by Mao Zedong and Josef Stalin, marking a shift towards a more modern, close, and adaptable partnership. This agreement was the result of a gradual reconciliation process that began in April 1996, when Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin established a "Strategic Partnership" between their respective countries in Beijing.

China's commitment to resolving border issues was not limited to bilateral agreements but rather extended to multilateral efforts within the framework of the "Shanghai Five". Treaties such as the "Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions" (April 1996) and the "Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions" (April 1997) were signed, fostering dialogue and cooperation between China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. By stimulating the creation of the "S5", Beijing aimed not only to demarcate but also to demilitarize the borders and build confidence measures among member states. This multilevel approach underscored China's new Central Asian strategy, highlighting the cooperative resolution of border disputes as a critical milestone in its broader engagement with the post-Soviet republics.

2.2.2 Building Diplomatic Relations

In addition to resolving border disputes, a crucial aspect of China's post-Cold War Central Asian policy was the establishment of diplomatic ties. The dissolution of the USSR presented Beijing with the opportunity to launch a diplomatic initiative aimed at fostering friendly relations with the newly independent post-Soviet republics. This effort was essential for Beijing to engage constructively with its neighbors and create a solid cooperative framework in Eurasia. By prioritizing diplomatic engagement, China thus sought to cultivate trust and partnership with these countries, paving the way for deeper collaboration in various sectors.

Displaying goodwill, Beijing swiftly recognized the Russian Federation and the five former soviet Central Asian republics in December 1991, marking a significant step in establishing bilateral diplomatic relations. By January 1992, China had officially established diplomatic ties with these Central Asian states, signaling the start of its active engagement in the region (Hao, 2022, p. 16). Embracing the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", China advocated for mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence in its dealings with the Central Asian states (Walsh, 1993, p. 274). During a tour of the region in 1994, Chinese Premier Li Peng articulated

a vision for a "new era" in Sino-Central Asian relations, emphasizing principles of peaceful coexistence, mutually beneficial cooperation, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty and independence (Yuan, 2010, p. 857). This diplomatic initiative bore fruit, resulting in the signing of "Treaties of Good Neighborliness and Friendship" with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the establishment of a "Strategic Partnership" with Kazakhstan in 2005 (Dwivedi, 2006, p. 149). Simultaneously, China sought peaceful relations with the Russian Federation, culminating in a "Strategic Partnership" in 1996 and the signing of the "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation" in 2001, which still nowadays represent the foundation of the Sino-Russian relation.

In the wake of the USSR's collapse, China swiftly expanded its diplomatic approach from bilateral agreements to multilateral endeavors. Recognizing the progress made since the launch of diplomatic negotiations in 1991, the PRC saw an opportunity to elevate dialogue and interaction to a higher level. In 1996, Beijing took the lead in initiating the "Shanghai Five", which represented the first multilateral framework for its engagement with Central Asia. This initiative immediately proved highly successful, as it facilitated the establishment of CBMs among the five participating countries within just one year. Thus, the launch of the "Shanghai Five" was instrumental in China's efforts to build robust diplomatic relations with the post-Soviet states, solidifying its role as an emerging key player in Eurasia.

2.2.3 Xinjiang: A Strategic Region

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), located in northwestern China, is the country's largest region, covering one-sixth of its total land area. Incorporated into the PRC in 1949 and granted autonomous status on October 1, 1955, Xinjiang is unique in China as it features all four levels of ethnic autonomy: an autonomous region for the Uyghur ethnic group, five autonomous prefectures for other ethnic groups, six autonomous counties, and 43 ethnic townships (Yufan & Weihua, 2012, p. 206). This complex administrative structure reflects the region's diverse population, which includes

Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Hui, Kyrgyz, and Mongolians, with Uyghurs being the most prominent Muslim minority of Turkic origin.

Xinjiang's strategic significance to China is multifaceted, stemming from its vast size, pivotal location at the heart of the Eurasian continent, and rich natural resources. This region serves as a crucial gateway linking China to Central Asia, the broader Muslim world, and Europe (Clarke, 2012). Xinjiang's 5,600-kilometer international border, which is the longest of any Chinese province or autonomous region, shares extensive frontiers with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as with Russia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These borders underscore Xinjiang's historical, cultural, religious, and ethnic connections to the Eurasian space.

Historically tied to Central Asia and home to a Muslim-majority population, Xinjiang has grappled with ethnic unrest and separatist movements since its integration into the PRC in 1949. These movements have consistently sought independence or greater autonomy, challenging China's control over the region (Walsh, 1993). The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 exacerbated these tensions, as newly independent Central Asian states rekindled Uyghur aspirations for an independent East Turkistan, raising Chinese concerns about separatism and terrorism. This geopolitical shift forced Beijing to address the potential spread of Islamic and Pan-Turkic revivalist movements into Xinjiang and manage increasingly unstable regional dynamics. The post-Cold War period brought heightened opposition to Chinese rule in Xinjiang, with significant unrest. These events intensified Beijing's security concerns, leading Vice-Premier Wang Zhen to call for strong defensive measures against perceived threats, advocating for a "great wall of steel" to protect against both internal and external dangers (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p. 91). The rise of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in the 1990s further escalated tensions, as the group has carried out numerous terrorist attacks that spurred Chinese counterterrorism operations. Among these, the most devastating was the 2009 ethnic clashes in Urumqi, where over 200 people lost their lives, marking a pivotal moment in the region's ongoing ethnic unrest (Yufan & Weihua, 2012, p. 208). These incidents highlight the deep-

seated ethnic tensions and underscore the pressing need for socio-economic development and more effective governance in Xinjiang. Since the fall of the USSR, China has invested substantial resources in its western regions, particularly in the XUAR, yet the unrest persists, indicating the complex interplay between ethnic grievances, separatist ambitions, and Beijing's security strategies in this strategically vital region. Despite these efforts, the ongoing unrest in Xinjiang remains a challenge that China has not been able to fully eradicate. This continuing instability underscores the intricate and unresolved issues in the region, where ethnic tensions and security concerns intertwine with Beijing's broader domestic strategies.

Internationally, China's approach, especially its assimilation policies toward the Uyghur minority, has sparked widespread criticism. Beijing has faced global condemnation for alleged human rights violations, with accusations of genocide coming from various countries and human rights organizations (BBC, 2022). These policies, aimed at integrating ethnic minorities into the broader Chinese cultural and political framework, have not only intensified the unrest but also reinforced China's image as an authoritarian state with a troubling human rights record.

2.2.3.1 Ensuring Stability in Xinjiang: China's Paramount Motivation

Since 1949, maintaining peace and stability in Xinjiang has been a top priority for the PRC, as it is seen as essential to the country's overall security and symbolic of national integrity, with profound psychological significance for China's national identity. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing intensified efforts to secure stability in Xinjiang, fearing that the instability in the former Soviet republics could spill over into the region and exacerbate ethnic unrest issues elsewhere, such as in Tibet. The vacuum left by the USSR's dissolution raised concerns that these destabilizing factors could threaten China's western border, leading Beijing to focus on security in Xinjiang as a critical component of its post-Cold War strategy.

In response to these challenges, China prioritized collaboration with the newly independent Central Asian republics and Russia to bolster security along its western border. This strategic shift aimed to

secure the commitment of these states to the "One China" policy and their support in combating the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The "Shanghai Five" framework, initially established to resolve border disputes, quickly evolved into a platform for China to enhance regional stability in Xinjiang by addressing these shared security challenges. The S5 thus provided China with vital support from neighboring states, reinforcing its efforts to ensure both internal security and broader stability across the Eurasian region. This multilateral endeavor culminated in the formal establishment of the SCO in 2001. The SCO's founding marked a significant step toward regional cooperation against the "three evils," supported by legal frameworks and the creation of the RATS. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, provided China with a strategic opportunity to align its efforts against Uyghur separatism within the broader international context of the War on Terror. By framing its policies as part of global counterterrorism efforts, the PRC gained increased international legitimacy and support. The aftermath of 9/11 allowed China to reposition its approach to Uyghur separatism, leveraging global solidarity against terrorism to justify its stringent measures within the SCO framework (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p. 104). This diplomatic strategy enabled China to portray its actions as necessary for containing separatist sentiments and ensuring stability in Xinjiang and in the whole Eurasian space.

Therefore, security issues were central to China's support for this regional initiative. Fearing ethnic unrest and the emergence of security threats along its western borders, Beijing recognized that a multilateral forum would be crucial in addressing these challenges and ensuring internal stability. China's decision to endorse the SCO was driven primarily by these security considerations. This endorsement not only allowed China to tackle its immediate security issues but also demonstrated its commitment to regional security and stability, positioning Xinjiang as a focal point in its broader efforts to promote peace and prosperity across Eurasia.

2.2.3.2 The Economic and Energy Factor in China's Strategy

Beyond security concerns, China's endorsement of the SCO in 2001 was driven by a blend of economic and energy considerations, with Xinjiang at the core of this strategy. The collapse of the USSR prompted the PRC to view Xinjiang not only as a buffer against potential instability but also as a key hub for energy security and economic development and a crucial gateway for China's economic expansion into Central Asia.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, China quickly recognized the economic potential of the newly independent Central Asian states. These countries, rich in resources, were essential for China's economic outreach. This recognition led to China becoming a major trade partner and investor in the region. By 2011, trade between China and Central Asia had surged to over USD 30 billion, making China the region's second-largest trading partner after Russia (Tukmadiyeva, 2013, p. 87). This economic engagement was driven by China's strategic aim to diversify its markets and reduce dependence on traditional partners.

Xinjiang quickly became a focal point of China's economic policies due to its strategic location and abundant natural resources. The launch of the "Go West" campaign in 2000, officially known as the "Great Western Development Strategy", aimed to reduce regional inequalities by promoting economic development in China's western regions, including Xinjiang. This campaign sought to integrate these less-developed areas into the broader national economy (Clarke, 2007). By linking Xinjiang more tightly with Central Asia, the PRC aimed to uplift the region economically, which was seen as essential for improving living conditions, reducing the probability of ethnic unrest, and thus maintaining regional stability.

In this economic strategy, the launch of the SCO represented a significant opportunity for China. By endorsing the SCO, Beijing gained a multilateral framework that allowed it to deepen its economic ties with Central Asia, fostering trade, investment, and regional connectivity, key elements essential for sustaining its economic growth. The SCO was also perceived by Beijing as a means to enhance

infrastructure connections with the post-Soviet republics. Consequently, China invested heavily in Central Asian infrastructure, including railways, roads, telecommunications, and energy facilities. This approach further solidified Xinjiang's position as a vital economic hub in the region.

Energy considerations were equally critical in shaping China's decision to support the SCO. Xinjiang, rich in natural resources, holds about 25% of China's oil and gas reserves and 38% of its coal reserves. However, China's rapid industrialization and growing energy demands required diversified supply lines beyond domestic resources. Central Asia, with its abundant energy reserves, offered an attractive alternative to Middle Eastern oil, which had traditionally dominated China's energy imports (Tukmadiyeva, 2013). By supporting the SCO, the PRC could strengthen its ties with Central Asian nations, facilitating the construction of energy transportation networks linking Central Asia through Xinjiang to the heart of China. These networks were crucial for ensuring a stable energy supply, especially as China transitioned to becoming a net energy importer in the early 2000s.

In conclusion, China's endorsement of the SCO in 2001 was a strategic initiative aimed at securing and developing Xinjiang as a crucial economic and energy corridor. The SCO enabled China to advance its economic and energy objectives while fostering the development of Xinjiang and enhancing its interaction with Central Asian states. Through this platform, China could pursue its ambitions for economic growth and regional integration, with Xinjiang playing a pivotal role in its broader geopolitical strategy. This endorsement was closely linked to China's security concerns, particularly the need to prevent instability in Xinjiang. By improving the region's economic conditions, Beijing sought to mitigate the risk of unrest and maintain social harmony. Thus, the SCO served as an effective mechanism for Beijing to align its security, energy, and economic interests, reinforcing its influence across Central Asia and enhancing its image as a cooperative partner committed to promoting stability and prosperity throughout Eurasia.

2.3 China's Multilateralism and the Example of the SCO

2.3.1 Multilateralism in Academic Discourse

Multilateralism refers to a diplomatic mechanism where multiple nations or entities engage in cooperation, negotiation, dialogue, and decision-making to address common challenges, achieve mutual objectives, and resolve conflicts peacefully. Robert Keohane (1990, p. 731), a leading scholar in neoliberal institutionalism, described multilateralism as "the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states". This definition has been widely recognized in academic literature, but it has also sparked a debate regarding the distinction between nominal and qualitative multilateralism. According to Ruggie (1992), Keohane's definition ignores the qualitative dimension of multilateralism. In his work, Ruggie argued that qualitative multilateralism embodies an institutional framework that regulates behavior among three or more states through "generalized principles of conduct". These principles prescribe a class of actions, without considering the interests or strategic needs of individual parties. In this view, qualitative multilateralism emphasizes a shared dedication to common principles rather than a mere coordination of national policies. Consequently, the qualitative notion of multilateralism rests on the foundation of diffuse reciprocity and indivisibility, implying an enduring socially shared notion of obligations. Multilateralism necessitates the involvement of at least three countries, typically through platforms, forums, or organizations at both global (such as the UN) and regional (like the SCO) levels. Following World War II, multilateral organizations began to emerge, exemplified by prominent institutions such as the United Nations and the European Communities. However, the proliferation of multilateral regional organizations surged after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. The formation of the "Shanghai Five" in 1996, which later evolved into the SCO in 2001, is a testament to this post-Cold War trend.

2.3.2 Embracing Multilateralism: China's Foreign Policy Evolution

In Chinese foreign policy and diplomacy, the adoption of multilateralism is a relatively modern development, emerging prominently during the last three decades. Historically, China's approach to international relations has been focused on safeguarding sovereignty, promoting national interests, and defending territorial integrity, with a preference for bilateral engagements over multilateral endeavors. As Wang (2000, p. 478) correctly pointed out, until the late 1950s, the PRC's global interactions were shaped by the "two camps" theory, evidenced by its alignment with the Soviet Union against the United States. Suspicious of multilateral forums, China viewed them as tools controlled by major powers like the USSR and the U.S. By the 1960s, China shifted its foreign policy to oppose both Soviet revisionism and American imperialism. Despite this shift, Beijing still viewed multilateral organizations as tools of imperialism and thus avoided active participation in them. Therefore, throughout its early decades, the PRC's involvement in international organizations remained restrained, influenced by Chairman Mao's "three worlds" theory, which categorized nations into three distinct groups: the superpowers (first world), the developing countries (third world) and those in between (second world). China's positioning within the third world allowed selective and symbolic engagement with international organizations, notably the United Nations, where it secured a permanent seat in the Security Council in 1971 (Wang, 2000, p. 478).

The last three decades of the 20th century witnessed a gradual shift in China's approach, with increased engagement in international and regional platforms. Starting from the late 1970s, the PRC assumed a more active role in global institutions, marking a significant departure in its foreign policy. This trend continued into the 1980s, with China's deeper involvement in international economic organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This period coincided with Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and opening policies, which aimed to modernize China's economy. Deng's strategic vision emphasized the importance of a stable international

environment for China's domestic development, leading to a more multilateralist approach in its foreign policy.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a breakthrough for China's approach to multilateralism. In the post-Cold War era, under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, China's engagement with multilateral platforms experienced a remarkable expansion, transitioning from suspicion to assertiveness. Chinese policymakers recognized the necessity to adopt a more proactive role in both regional and global affairs to foster a peaceful environment conducive to domestic political stability and economic development.

On the global stage, China assumed a less passive role at the UN Security Council, began actively participating in peacekeeping operations, and joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Likewise, China's regional multilateral engagement intensified during the 1990s, marked by its endeavors to establish multilateral forums and platforms in its neighborhood (Song, 2020). As noted by Chung (2010, p. 2), the PRC's attitude towards regional multilateral organization evolved from suspicion (before 1996) to cautiousness (from 1996 to 2000), and to supportiveness (after 2000). During the late 1990s and early 2000s, China's support for regional multilateral organizations also extended beyond mere participation in existing institutions to the initiation of new ones (Samson, 2012, p. 59).

China's embrace of regional multilateralism encompassed both economic and security dimensions. The PRC joined some key multilateral economic forums, asserting its central role in Asian economic cooperation. In 1991, China joined the APEC, created two years earlier as an intergovernmental forum aimed at promoting free trade across the Asia-Pacific region. Additionally, Beijing strengthened its ties with the ASEAN, establishing official relations in 1991 and later becoming a dialogue partner in 1996. The 1997 Asian financial crisis underscored the necessity for stronger economic cooperation in Asia, further facilitating the rapprochement between China and ASEAN (Cheng, 2018, p. 14). This process led to the launch of initiatives like ASEAN+3 (ASEAN, China,

Japan, and South Korea) and ASEAN+1 (ASEAN and China) in 1997, crucial steps in strengthening China-ASEAN relations. Subsequently, the establishment of the China-ASEAN FTA in 2002 and the signing of a "strategic partnership" between the two in 2003 further solidified their relations. Similarly, in 2002, China initiated the Boao Forum, an annual conference held in Boao, Hainan province, where leaders from politics, government, business, and academia convene to discuss pressing economic issues, explore collaboration opportunities, and promote development in the Asia-Pacific region. Interestingly, China's participation in regional economic multilateral groups reflected a combination of nominal and qualitative multilateralism (Wang, 2000, p. 481). Beyond merely joining these groups, China has actively supported their core principles, such as equality among members, open and free trade, and non-discriminatory treatment. Beijing has consistently emphasized that free trade and investment are means to achieve shared development and prosperity, rather than ends in themselves. Consequently, since the mid-1990s, the PRC has been perceiving economic multilateralism as a means to cultivate a more equitable regional and international political and economic order (Li, 2011, p. 335).

Between 1997 and 2001, China's engagement in multilateralism expanded from economic to security realms. Initially cautious, China gradually transitioned to a supportive stance on security-centered organizations, viewing them as alternatives to Cold War-era military alliances (Shambaugh, 2004, p. 69). With the Cold War's end, the PRC sought to replace traditional collective security principles with comprehensive and cooperative security frameworks (Kondapalli, 2020, p. 314). During this period, Beijing played a key role in establishing various security-focused platforms, including the CSCAP in 1993, the NEACD in 1993, and the CICA in 1999. Moreover, China collaborated with ASEAN in founding the ARF in 1994, aimed at fostering dialogue and cooperation on political and security matters in the Asia-Pacific region. Concurrently, the PRC engaged diplomatically on the Korean Peninsula, particularly regarding North Korea's nuclear disarmament. Its involvement began with the 1997/1998 Four-Party Talks involving the U.S and both Koreas. By actively participating in this

diplomatic endeavor, China could present itself as a constructive regional partner. Subsequently, these talks evolved into the 6PT, initiated in response to North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003 (Cheng, 2018, p. 16). Despite these efforts, North Korea's subsequent withdrawal from the 6PT in 2009 underscores the complex and ongoing challenges in the region.

2.3.3 The SCO: A Concrete Embodiment of Chinese Multilateralism

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, China actively engaged in various security-focused multilateral mechanisms, demonstrating a newfound commitment to institution-building. Perhaps a concrete manifestation of China's evolving approach towards multilateral interactions is the SCO. As the first and only multilateral organization initiated and sponsored by China, the SCO marked a breakthrough in its multilateral security diplomacy (Cheng, 2011). For the first time in its history, the PRC assumed a leading role in establishing a multilateral platform. This significant development not only enabled Beijing to promote its vision of multilateral cooperation and engagement, but also allowed the Chinese government to strengthen its expertise in multilateral diplomacy (Jia, 2007). The relevance of SCO in China's multilateral diplomacy was underscored by Fu Ying, the former director general of the Department of Asian Affairs in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2003, she highlighted that China, through the two "focal points" of ASEAN+3 and the SCO, aimed to lead the establishment of regional cooperation frameworks that align with the diverse characteristics of the Asian region (Fu, 2003).

As previously mentioned, Beijing's multilateralism was not just about mere participation but also represented a qualitative change in approach, with China actively seeking to shape the norms and principles governing interactions among member states. In this view, the creation of the SCO provided the PRC with an avenue to advocate new security ideas, most notably the NSC, which later found expression in the 2001 Declaration and the SCO Charter. Developed during Jiang Zemin's era in the late 1990s, the NSC aimed to address post-Cold War international challenges, shifting from traditional military-centric security doctrines to a comprehensive approach encompassing economic,

political, social, environmental, and military dimensions. As articulated in China's 1998 Defense White Paper, "to obtain lasting peace, it is imperative to abandon the cold war mentality, cultivate a new concept of security and seek a new way to safeguard peace". In the post-Cold War context, security was no longer to be guaranteed by "military alliances" but through "mutual trust and common interests", promoting trust through dialogue, security through cooperation, and conflict resolution through peaceful means. This approach was seen as fundamental in establishing a fair and reasonable new international order to ensure world peace and security. By emphasizing principles such as mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, dialogue, cooperation, and peaceful resolution of disputes, the NSC aligned with China's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence": mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. First enshrined in the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement ("Panchsheel Agreement") and later envisioned by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during the 1955 Bandung Conference, the Five Principles have been a cornerstone of the PRC's foreign policy since its early years. Chinese leaders viewed security multilateral cooperation as crucial, seeing it as a means to achieve "mutual security through cooperative means" (Chung, 2006, p. 5). Hence, China aimed to extend the principles of the NSC from domestic to multilateral contexts, establishing them as the foundation for its interactions with regional and international partners. This effort was evident in China's promotion of the NSC in various diplomatic settings, such as the annual ARF meetings, President Jiang Zemin's address at the UN Conference on Disarmament in 1999, and President Hu Jintao's speech at the 2004 Boao Forum (Shambaugh, 2004, p. 69).

In this perspective, the SCO served as a platform for China to actively advocate for the NSC, whose core principles were later reflected in the organization's founding documents. China expressed its satisfaction with the SCO's establishment in the 2002 National Defense White Paper, highlighting that it had "initiated a new security concept" by enhancing trust and cooperation in the military field and promoting substantive collaboration in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The

embodiment of the NSC within the SCO demonstrates China's commitment to promoting regional security through cooperation rather than confrontation, marking a qualitative shift in its multilateral engagement. Notably, the SCO's focus on security issues makes China's support for it particularly significant, as Beijing traditionally avoided such engagements in multilateral form (Clarke, 2010, p. 3).

By serving as a platform for China to cooperate with its Eurasian neighbors, the SCO also exemplifies China's "New Regionalism" and evolving neighborhood diplomacy, which have been developed over the past three decades. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Chinese leaders initiated a "Good Neighborly Policy", aimed at fostering open, functional, and mutually beneficial cooperation among contiguous states (Chung, 2004). This proactive neighborhood policy was underscored by the motto "good neighbor, good friend, good partner" (Song, 2014, p. 88). In the 1995 National Defense White Paper, the importance of building "friendly, good-neighborly relations with adjacent countries" was emphasized. Central to China's "new regionalism" was the recognition of the importance of its regional neighbors in safeguarding its sovereignty, promoting its development and prosperity, and ensuring its security (Song, 2014, p. 88). As highlighted by Shambaugh (2004), this approach involved active participation in regional organizations, establishment of strategic partnerships, deepening of bilateral ties, and expansion of regional economic ties. Additionally, the PRC aimed at dispelling concerns about its intentions and conveying an image as a supportive neighbor, a constructive partner, and a responsible actor committed to enhancing stability and cooperation in the region. To underscore the relevance the PRC placed on its regional relationships, the term "Neighborhood Diplomacy" was officially incorporated into the resolution of the 16th CCP Congress in November 2002 (Song, 2014, p. 88). At the same Congress, President Jiang Zemin reaffirmed China's dedication to active participation in multilateral diplomatic activities and regional organizations (Jiang, 2002). Similarly, during the 17th National Congress of the CCP in 2007, President Hu Jintao expressed China's commitment to "energetically" engaging in regional

cooperation to collectively establish a “peaceful, stable regional environment featuring equality, mutual trust, and win-win cooperation” (Hu, 2007).

When it was launched in 2001, the SCO represented a historical breakthrough in China’s regionalism. Being the first regional organization created on China’s initiative, it signaled a significant shift towards proactive institution-building in its neighborhood diplomacy. Through its advocacy and leadership, Beijing played a crucial role in establishing a framework fostering a "new pattern for regional cooperation", as envisioned in the 2002 National Defense White Paper. Consequently, while the PRC has been actively involved in various regional initiatives, the SCO stands out as its first proactive endeavor in the region.

By incorporating aspects of the NSC and the "Good Neighbor Policy", the SCO also aligns with Beijing's broader strategy of "Peaceful Rise". First introduced by Zheng Bijian at the 2003 Boao Forum, this concept underscored China's commitment to achieving economic growth and global influence through peaceful means, assuring other nations that China's development and growing power would contribute to global peace and prosperity rather than pose a threat (Glaser & Medeiros, 2007). Through its role as a platform for equitable dialogue and cooperation, the SCO embodies China's effort to realize its "Peaceful Rise", aiming to fortify its regional and international influence, ensure its security, and promote its economic growth while ensuring a peaceful and prosperous regional development.

Summary

This chapter clarified the motivations behind China's advocacy for the SCO. It began by tracing China's economic and foreign policy evolution during the 1980s and 1990s, highlighting the country's increasing global engagement. It then explored China's post-Soviet engagement with Central Asia, detailing its initial strategies in the region. The chapter argued that China championed the formation of the "Shanghai Five" as a strategic tool, enabling it to resolve border disputes, build diplomatic trust with post-Soviet states, manage security issues in Xinjiang, and advance its economic and energy interests. Subsequently, the chapter delved into China's multilateralism, asserting it as a significant factor driving Beijing's support for the SCO. It discussed the academic discourse surrounding the concept and highlighted the proliferation of multilateral organizations in the post-Cold War era. It then proceeded to trace China's foreign policy evolution from prioritizing bilateral agreements to embracing multilateralism, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. The chapter concluded by asserting the SCO as a significant example of China's multilateralism, reflecting a qualitative shift in its multilateral diplomacy. This is exemplified by the introduction of the NSC within the SCO's framework, along with Beijing's pursuit of "New Regionalism", aimed at enhancing relations with neighboring countries.

In essence, this chapter provided a comprehensive examination of the factors motivating China's support for the SCO, highlighting their interconnectedness and impact on Beijing's decision-making. This analysis sets the stage for the next chapter, which will scrutinize China's motives through the theoretical lenses of realism and neoliberal institutionalism. Additionally, by elucidating what motivated China to advocate for the SCO, it lays the groundwork for Chapter 4, which will focus on Beijing's efforts to advance the SCO.

Chapter 3: China's Endorsement Between Realism and Neoliberal Institutionalism

The preceding chapter offered a detailed exploration of the main drivers behind China's advocacy for the SCO. It encompassed various aspects, including China's economic and political evolution in the 1980s and 1990s, the dynamics of China's post-Cold War Eurasian policy, and Beijing's embrace of multilateralism in the 1990s. This period saw China actively engaging in multilateral endeavors, with the SCO standing out as a prime example. The chapter concluded by arguing that a combination of these interconnected factors motivated China to support the establishment of the SCO.

Now, the current chapter will provide a theoretical analysis of the key points covered in the previous chapter. This theoretical exploration is essential to elucidate and strengthen the research conducted in Chapter 2, grounding it in a solid theoretical framework. In scrutinizing China's backing of the SCO, two prominent international relations theories, realism and liberalism, offer contrasting insights. This chapter will consider them both, providing a balance analytical and theoretical backdrop to the analysis of the topic.

3.1 Explaining China's Strategic Needs Through Realism

In the realm of international relations, realism stands as the oldest and most influential theoretical framework, focusing on state behavior from a pragmatic and state-centered viewpoint. Realism provides a compelling lens through which to examine China's support for the "Shanghai initiative" in the late 1990s, which culminated in the creation of the SCO in 2001.

A core tenet of realism is that, in an anarchic international system, states strive to preserve and enhance their own power and influence. During the 1990s, China, through modernization and increased openness, set its sights on achieving superpower status, viewing multilateral regional initiatives as strategies to project its influence in its immediate neighborhood.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Central Asian space has consistently been significant for Beijing due to its strategic importance in security, energy, and economic terms. The region's importance grew exponentially in the 1990s, when the dissolution of the USSR led China to capitalize on the power vacuum to expand its influence in this critical region. From a realist perspective, the creation of the SCO can thus be seen as a strategic move by China to advance its own security, economic, and geopolitical interests in Central Asia. Realist analyses suggest that China's strategy towards Central Asia aimed to assimilate the region into its sphere of influence, thereby challenging Russia's dominant position and exploiting the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Beijing's goal, from this perspective, was to leverage its geographic position, economic status, and diplomatic skills to become a key player in Central Asia, reshaping the regional status quo in its favor (Swanström, 2005).

China's support for the S5 and the SCO was driven primarily by pragmatic economic interests. With its swift economic growth and ongoing openness, the PRC was continually seeking new markets. In this context, the newly independent Central Asian republics presented a promising opportunity for expanding its economic footprint. Beijing aimed to establish new trade routes with Central Asia and boost the development of its western regions, particularly Xinjiang. Energy considerations were also a significant factor in Beijing's stance. As China's economy expanded rapidly, it required substantial resources to sustain its growth. Consequently, the PRC viewed the SCO as a strategic platform to advance its energy policy in Central Asia, seeking to secure a steady supply of oil and natural gas while diversifying its energy sources (Sheives, 2006; Marketos, 2010).

In addition to economic and energy considerations, security concerns were a crucial factor behind China's strong support for the regional initiative. Following the collapse of the USSR, Beijing faced intensified ethnic and religious tensions in Xinjiang, driven by secessionist Uyghur groups. Pragmatically, China backed the creation of the SCO as a strategic tool to monitor its Central Asian neighbors, mitigate potential support for unrest in Xinjiang, and gain their cooperation in combating

the "three evils" of extremism, separatism, and terrorism. By establishing this regional framework, the PRC thus aimed to minimize external threats to its western borders and safeguard its security, sovereignty, and national integrity (Dwivedi, 2006).

One of the core tenets of realism is the constant attempt by states to maintain the balance of power within the international system. Being the international arena inherently anarchic, with no central authority to enforce rules or norms, states are primarily concerned with their own survival and security. To achieve this, they seek to ensure that no single state becomes overwhelmingly powerful, as such a development could threaten their own independence and security. Viewed through this lens, China's support for the creation of the SCO is evident. Not only this organization matched Beijing's strategic needs and aspirations, and not only allowed it to strengthen its influence in Central Asia, but also allowed it to manage the distribution of power and influence in the Eurasian space. By fostering regional cooperation and integration through the SCO, China aimed to create a counterweight to the previous major regional actor, namely Russia. The SCO provided a platform for China to strengthen its influence in Central Asia, an area of strategic importance, while also ensuring that no single power could dominate the region. Moreover, the balance of power concept explains China's strategic partnerships and collaborations within the SCO framework. By engaging with Central Asian republics, China not only sought to expand its economic and security influence but also aimed to prevent these countries from aligning too closely with rival powers. This approach helped China to maintain a favorable balance of power in the region, bolstering its own security and regional standing.

Realism takes a critical and pessimistic view of China's multilateral policy. Beijing's shift towards multilateralism is seen as a calculated strategy to strengthen its strategic position. Realists argue that a state's embrace of multilateralism is motivated solely by a rational evaluation of costs and benefits. From this perspective, China's turn to multilateralism in the 1990s was primarily driven by instrumental goals, particularly the pursuit of regional power maximization. Thus, Beijing's

multilateralism did not represent a fundamental shift in its foreign policy but rather a pragmatic choice to enhance its influence and capabilities in pursuit of global dominance (Hughes, 2005).

In summary, the realist perspective, which views international relations as an ongoing struggle for power and security, provides a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing China's strong and unprecedented support for the establishment of the SCO. By focusing on the PRC's strategic and pragmatic needs, as well as its ambitions to become a key player in Eurasia, realist theory helps to contextualize China's actions within a pragmatic, state-centric, and power-driven framework. This perspective illustrates how Beijing sought to create a regional order that balances the interests of various powers while enhancing its own strategic position.

3.2 “Challenging” Realism: Neoliberal Institutionalism

When analyzing China's support for the SCO, realism provides valuable insights, aligning with the PRC's quest for superpower status over the past three decades. However, relying solely on realism risks oversimplifying China's motivations by focusing narrowly on material interests and power dynamics. To avoid such biases and provide a more comprehensive analysis, this work balances the realist perspective with the insights offered by neoliberal institutionalism.

While strategic and pragmatic considerations were indeed central to China's stance, especially given Beijing's geopolitical aspirations during the mid-1990s, other factors likely played a significant role in shaping its behavior. Neoliberal institutionalism, which posits that institutions can facilitate state cooperation within an anarchic system, offers an effective complementary approach. When applied to China's support for the SCO, it provides a broader perspective than realism, which tends to concentrate solely on national interests and power dynamics.

Neoliberal institutionalism acknowledges that China, as a rational actor in an anarchic system, pursues its national interests. However, it also emphasizes that while security, economic, energy, and power balance factors certainly influenced China's decisions, these were not the sole determinants.

This theory integrates these considerations with a deeper analysis of the underlying reasons behind China's position. By applying neoliberal institutionalism, we gain a more nuanced understanding of China's endorsement of the SCO, revealing that Beijing's motives extended beyond mere power calculations.

This perspective sheds light on Beijing's transition towards multilateralism, which culminated in the creation of the SCO. While realism might interpret this shift as a mere strategic calculation, neoliberal institutionalism highlights Beijing's recognition of the growing importance of multilateral frameworks in today's global landscape. In an interconnected world, states increasingly recognize the necessity of collaboration with others to address shared challenges, even as they continue to prioritize their national interests. China's support for the SCO reflects this understanding, underscoring its dedication to proactive engagement and cooperation in the international arena. Through the SCO, the PRC signaled its willingness to cooperate with other nations, coordinate national policies, foster peaceful relations, and collectively address regional challenges. Unlike realism, which views multilateralism primarily as a strategic tool for advancing national interests, neoliberal institutionalism sees it as a mechanism for conflict prevention and peaceful dispute resolution. Therefore, China's advocacy for the SCO can also be interpreted as an expression of its commitment to these broader principles, suggesting that its embrace of multilateralism transcended mere power considerations and included a desire to uphold regional peace and stability.

Moreover, neoliberal institutionalism offers insights into China's concept of "New Regionalism" and its increasing coordination with neighboring nations through initiatives like the SCO. This theoretical perspective highlights Beijing's positive attitude towards regional cooperation, viewing the SCO as a vehicle for genuine engagement within its neighborhood. By endorsing the SCO, the PRC aimed to create a new framework for regional interaction, grounded in principles of dialogue, equality, reciprocity, mutual benefit, and common development. From this standpoint, China's backing of the

SCO was also intended to foster long-lasting peaceful relations with its neighbors, thereby cultivating a harmonious regional environment that would contribute to its own development and "Peaceful Rise".

Similarly, through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, the significance of the SCO for China's new vision of security becomes clear. The PRC viewed the SCO as a mechanism to address common challenges and interstate threats through cooperative means, thereby contributing to regional stability and security. In contrast to realist interpretations that liken the SCO to an Eastern NATO or a new Warsaw Pact, neoliberal institutionalism thus suggests that Beijing conceived the SCO as a new security framework based on partnership rather than alliance, aligning with the principles outlined in its NSC.

In essence, neoliberal institutionalism offers a more positive and optimistic perspective on China's endorsement of the SCO compared to realism. This approach transcends mere material calculations, illuminating the deeper motivations that guided China's decision. It emphasizes the significance of intangible factors in shaping China's foreign policy, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of its strategic engagement in multilateral institutions.

Summary

This chapter conducted a theoretical analysis to uncover the motives behind China's backing of the SCO. By grounding the analysis in both realist and liberal theoretical frameworks, the chapter aimed to provide a balanced and well-rounded perspective. The exploration began with the realist viewpoint, which interprets the creation of the SCO as a calculated maneuver by the PRC to advance its national interests, bolster its regional standing, and influence power dynamics. While recognizing the validity of this theory, the chapter also cautioned against its tendency to oversimplify the reality by focusing too narrowly on power dynamics and excluding the possibility of deeper motivations driving Beijing's actions. To provide a more comprehensive analysis, the chapter thereby considered neoliberal institutionalism alongside realism. Neoliberal institutionalism offers a broader analysis of China's motives, acknowledging the significance of material interests while also considering China's genuine recognition of multilateral efforts in the contemporary global order. It provides insights into China's "New Regionalism", portraying the SCO as a manifestation of Beijing's cooperative approach towards its neighbors. Additionally, it illustrates the SCO as China's effort to establish a platform for collaborative security actions, consistent with the principles of the NSC.

In conclusion, this chapter offered a nuanced insight into China's backing of the SCO, considered from two complementary theoretical perspectives. Through a balanced theoretical approach that integrates the main tenets of both realism and neoliberal institutionalism, it reveals the multifaceted motivations that drove Beijing to support this regional initiative.

Chapter 4: China's Efforts in Advancing the SCO

The preceding two chapters sought to clarify the motivations behind China's support for the SCO. Chapter 2 conducted a detailed examination, investigating China's development during the 1980s and 1990s, the dynamics of China's engagement with Central Asia after the USSR's fall, and China's embrace of multilateralism. It argued that these interconnected factors significantly motivated Beijing to assume a leading role in the SCO's creation. Building upon this exploration, Chapter 3 provided a theoretical analysis of China's motives, employing the double lens of realism and neoliberal institutionalism to offer a nuanced perspective on its engagement.

Chapter 4 now shifts focus to China's active involvement in the SCO, highlighting its substantial contributions to the organization's evolution. The chapter begins with an overview of China's behavior within the SCO, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of specific areas of influence. It then delves into China's normative impact, particularly through the promotion of the "Shanghai Spirit", which embodies the organization's guiding principles. Following this, the chapter examines Beijing's initiatives to institutionalize the SCO, a crucial process for reinforcing and enhancing the organization's structure and effectiveness. The analysis extends to China's efforts to bolster economic cooperation, which is central to its broader multilateral strategy and institution-building efforts. Additionally, the chapter explores China's initiatives in the security and cultural spheres, emphasizing its comprehensive approach to fostering cooperation within the SCO. Finally, the chapter discusses Beijing's supportive stance toward the SCO's expansion, highlighting its active role in welcoming new member states and shaping the organization's future.

Overall, this chapter sheds light on China's critical role in the SCO by analyzing its proactive measures to further strengthen and advance the organization. In doing so, it underscores the importance that the PRC places on the SCO in its regional and international strategies.

4.1 China's Role in the SCO: An Overview

Despite the principle of equal participation among member states enshrined in the SCO's founding documents, China undeniably serves as the primary driving force behind the organization. Since the SCO's establishment in 2001, the PRC has consistently prioritized the organization as a key diplomatic initiative (Yazdani, 2023). China's active involvement has been crucial in shaping the SCO into a significant entity with considerable influence at both regional and international levels. As the leading advocate for the organization, China has driven the SCO's development and advancement, viewing it as a natural duty to propel the organization forward (Zhao, 2013, p. 486). From this perspective, the SCO stands out as the only multilateral entity whose inception, enlargement, and functioning are primarily driven by China's initiatives, underscoring Beijing's heightened regional and global significance (Yazdani, 2021, p. 452).

Several key factors underscore China's centrality within the SCO. Firstly, the organization is named after a Chinese city. Secondly, this multilateral endeavor originated in China, with the inaugural meeting of the "Shanghai Five" held in Shanghai in 1996, highlighting China's willingness to engage in multilateral efforts within its own borders. China's commitment to this initiative is further showcased by its hosting of the Secretariat, one of the SCO's two permanent bodies, in its capital, Beijing. Additionally, Zhang Deguang, a former Chinese ambassador to Russia, served as the inaugural Secretary General of the SCO in 2003, exemplifying China's leadership within the organization. The SCO Charter further underscores Beijing's key role in the organization. Article 20 designates Chinese, alongside Russian, as one of the two official languages of the SCO, underscoring its significance in facilitating communication and cooperation within the organization. Moreover, Article 25 appoints the PRC as the depositary of the Charter, emphasizing its essential role in upholding the correct application of the organization's legal framework. As the depositary, Beijing assumes critical responsibilities, including overseeing the ratification and accession process for new member states, maintaining official records related to the charter, and facilitating any amendments or

modifications. Consequently, China holds a central position in ensuring the smooth administrative functioning of the SCO.

In summary, China not only serves as the primary promoter and supporter of the SCO but also acts as the main guarantor of its functioning and development. Through its multifaceted contributions and responsibilities, the PRC plays an essential role in shaping the SCO's trajectory and safeguarding its preservation over time.

4.2 China's Normative Power: Shaping the "Shanghai Spirit"

Normative power involves a state shaping its relations with other countries by appealing to shared values, norms, or identities. In recent times, especially since President Xi Jinping took office in 2013, the PRC has sought to shape regional and international dynamics through normative power. As an emerging superpower, China has made soft power and norm-building integral parts of its foreign policy and its pursuit of global preeminence.

Within the SCO framework, China's normative power is evident in its significant contribution to shaping the "Shanghai Spirit", the philosophical foundation of the organization. By endorsing, promoting, and shaping this set of norms, Beijing aims to steer the behavior of its fellow member states, thereby building a regional environment that aligns with its strategic objectives. While the success of these norms cannot be solely attributed to China, Beijing has wielded considerable influence in this regard (Song, 2020). The "Shanghai Spirit" closely mirrors China's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," embodying core aspects of Chinese foreign policy such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in domestic affairs. This alignment highlights a profound similarity, with the foundational principles of the SCO reflecting key elements of China's diplomatic strategy. Hence, the "Shanghai Spirit" is essentially the Five Principles applied in the context of Central Asia (Song, 2020, p. 243).

China has consistently emphasized the significance of the "Shanghai Spirit" within the SCO, aiming to elevate it as the theoretical underpinning of the organization. At the 2006 Shanghai summit, Chinese President Hu Jintao underscored the relevance of the "Shanghai Spirit" as the foundational inspiration and framework for building a "harmonious region of lasting peace and common prosperity" (Pan, 2007, p. 48). The PRC has consistently stressed that the "Shanghai Spirit" represents the cornerstone for establishing a less confrontational model of international governance, rooted in principles of dialogue and win-win cooperation. At the 2018 SCO summit in Qingdao, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated the significance of the "Shanghai Spirit", asserting that the SCO's robust vitality and cooperative momentum stem from this innovative vision of state-to-state relations (Hao, 2021, p. 43). Under China's impetus, the "Shanghai Spirit" has evolved to incorporate the concept of building a new type of international relations and a "community with a shared future for all mankind", as proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Qingdao Summit (Xi, 2018). This concept which, according to Zakharov (2023, p. 42), represents a "new model of human development", emphasizes five key views: innovative, coordinated, green, open, and sharing development; common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; open, inclusive, mutually beneficial, and win-win cooperation; equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusive civilization; and extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits global governance. The SCO community with a "shared future", based on the five views, thus envisions a five-in-one community comprising an economic community for common prosperity, a security community for universal security, a peace community for lasting peace, a civilization community for an open and inclusive world, and an ecological community for a beautiful world (Xue & Makengo, 2021, p. 88). Furthermore, President Xi emphasized the need for SCO member countries to promote extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits in global governance during his speech. He urged for reforms in the global governance system to establish a new framework aligned with the principles of the "Shanghai Spirit" (Hao, 2020, pp. 157-158).

In essence, China, as the SCO's primary driving force, has played a crucial role in shaping its quintessential principles, encapsulated in the "Shanghai Spirit." By shaping these norms, Beijing has established itself as the normative leader of the organization, aiming to influence the behavior of other member states and align it with its regional strategic interests. Beyond promoting the "Shanghai Spirit" within the SCO, the PRC has leveraged its normative power to advocate for a new approach to international relations. By integrating the "Shanghai Spirit" into its broader vision for regional and international cooperation, Beijing thus utilizes the SCO as a platform to project its normative influence.

4.3 Institutionalizing the SCO: One of China's Priorities

The process of institutionalization is crucial for ensuring coherence, consistency, and clarity in any organization, including the SCO. Through the establishment of mechanisms for decision-making, dispute resolution, and coordination among member states, institutionalization strengthens the organization over the long term.

In the context of the SCO, the PRC has prioritized achieving a high level of institutionalization to foster long-term cooperation and enhance the organization's effectiveness. As a key driver of this effort, China has taken proactive measures to promote gradual institutionalization within the SCO. Even before the formal establishment of the SCO, institutionalization was underway within the framework of the "Shanghai Five", with China championing the transformation of this endeavor from a loose dialogue forum into a robust and cohesive regional institution (Chung, 2006). For instance, during the fourth summit in Bishkek in 1999, member states agreed to hold regular government official meetings, strengthening formal cooperation mechanisms. Consequently, starting from 1999, the mechanism of meetings was institutionalized for ministers of foreign affairs, ministers of national defense, and heads of law enforcement agencies. The Dushanbe summit in 2000 furthered this process by establishing a Council of National Coordinators to facilitate coordinated organizational support (Chung, 2006, pp. 7-8). It was during this summit that Beijing began to emerge as a leading force

behind the institutionalization of the “Shanghai initiative”, with President Jiang Zemin proposing its transformation into a regular institutionalized mechanism for multilateral cooperation (Cheng, 2011, p. 637). This endeavor was instrumental in advancing the institutionalization process, which culminated in the 2001 with the formal establishment of the SCO as a regional organization.

To maintain momentum, at the SCO Almaty Summit on September 14th, 2001, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji proposed the swift enactment of the SCO Charter (Mursaliev, 2021, p. 5). China's advocacy accelerated the institutionalization process, resulting in the signing of the SCO Charter in 2002 and the establishment of the RATS in 2004. The RATS, along with the creation of the Secretariat, signify significant milestones in the institutionalization of the SCO, as they represent the only two permanent bodies of the organization. The inauguration of the SCO Secretariat in Beijing in January 2004, led by Secretary-General Zhang Deguang, highlights China's critical role in regularizing the organization's work through its permanent institutions. As noted by Hao (2023, p. 43), the PRC demonstrated its dedication to the institutional development of the SCO by offering the Secretariat free office space and financial assistance in 2004. At the 2017 Astana summit, President Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's dedication to the SCO's institutional development by announcing an additional contribution of RMB 10 million to the Secretariat. This allocation aimed to enhance working conditions and support expanded activities within the organization (Hao, 2021, p. 58).

Beijing's commitment to institutionalizing the SCO has gone beyond merely formalizing structures, procedures, and decision-making mechanisms. The PRC has consistently introduced well-targeted cooperation proposals and outlined the overall direction of multilateral cooperation (Sun, 2021). Initially centered on security, the SCO, driven by China's initiatives, has broadened its scope to include economy, energy, culture, society, education, cooperation, technology, tourism, and other related fields. Additionally, Beijing has consistently played a crucial financial role within the SCO, emerging as the largest financial contributor to various projects.

It is noteworthy that the PRC hosted three pivotal summits in Shanghai. On April 26, 1996, China welcomed the inaugural summit that officially launched the "Shanghai Five", which represented a crucial step towards formalizing dialogue among the parties involved. Then, on June 15, 2001, the country hosted the summit where the SCO was formally established, demonstrating its belief in the SCO's potential. Furthermore, in 2006, the city of Shanghai hosted another significant summit, bringing together member states and observer states to assess the five-year progress since the establishment of the SCO and commemorate the ten-year journey since the inception of the S5. This gathering served as a crucial symbolic event, laying the groundwork for subsequent developments.

In essence, China's contribution to the institutionalization of the SCO has been pivotal in shaping it into a structured and functional regional organization. Through a comprehensive approach involving advocacy, policy proposals, hosting meetings, and financial support, Beijing has played a central role in guiding the SCO's evolution into a more comprehensive organization.

4.4 China's Initial Impetus: Security Cooperation

The SCO was first envisioned as a security-focused organization, with the primary goal of addressing cross-border threats in Eurasia. Security considerations were central in its creation, with China viewing the SCO as a platform for tackling shared challenges, ultimately safeguarding its domestic stability and territorial integrity.

Since the launch of the "Shanghai Five", the PRC has insisted on enlarging the security agenda of the initiative to include non-traditional security threats. At the 1999 Bishkek summit, Chinese President Jiang Zemin called on the other members to continue their cooperation to combat religious extremism, ethnic separatism, and international terrorist activities (Yazdani & Hossain, 2020, p. 86). Furthermore, during the same meeting, China's proposal to establish an anti-terrorism center was endorsed, and Beijing's advocacy inspired the Bishkek declaration, adopted at the end of the meeting, which

outlined the commitment to tackle various cross-border criminal activities, including separatism, extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration.

The formal establishment of the SCO in 2001 marked a quantum leap in the fight against security menaces in Eurasia. China promptly began advocating for stronger cooperation in security-related areas. Beijing's stance was motivated by the brutal 9/11 terrorist attacks, which shocked the international community and showed the concrete menace of terrorism. This event, followed by the U.S.' declaration of the War on Terror and military intervention in Afghanistan, shifted the security landscape in Eurasia. The PRC recognized the need to strengthen cooperative mechanisms to prevent the spread of terrorism, which posed a threat to both China's domestic stability and regional security. As a result, following the 9/11 attacks, China advocated for enhanced security cooperation within the SCO, particularly in combating terrorism. At the Almaty summit on September 14, 2001, just three days after the attacks, Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji proposed the swift establishment of an anti-terrorism center (Mursaliyev, 2021, p. 5). This move was seen as crucial to bolstering the legal framework emerging in the field of security. China's advocacy was instrumental in facilitating the signing of the "Agreement between state members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure" in 2002, formalizing the creation of RATS, the SCO's anti-terrorism body.

China's security efforts within the SCO extended beyond combating terrorism. In 2004, at the Tashkent summit, Beijing endorsed the "Agreement on Cooperation in Fighting the Illegal Trafficking of Narcotics, Psychotropic Substances, and their Precursors". This agreement aimed to reduce drug trafficking in the region, which is often seen as one of the most significant sources of income for terrorist organizations. More recently, one of China's notable contributions was the adoption of the "SCO Convention on Countering Extremism" at the 2017 Astana summit. This convention, proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, aimed to enhance cooperation among member states in countering extremist ideologies and practices. By formally linking extremism and terrorism,

this document underscored Beijing's view on the interconnectedness of security threats. Furthermore, in 2017, China established the National Institute for SCO International Exchange Judicial and Cooperation to bolster judicial collaboration and provide a platform for training judicial and law enforcement professionals from SCO member states. President Xi reiterated China's commitment to this endeavor at the 2022 Samarkand summit, pledging to train 2,000 law enforcement personnel for SCO member states over the next five years and establish a China-SCO training base for counter-terrorism personnel (Hao, 2023, p. 44).

It is widely believed that China, along with Russia, played a key role in shaping the 2005 Astana Declaration. While reiterating support for the U.S-led anti-terrorism international coalition in Afghanistan, this declaration called for an end to the use of temporary facilities and the presence of military contingents in the territory of SCO member states. The Astana declaration marked a significant step in the SCO's efforts to enhance security in the Eurasian region. However, in the Western world, it has been viewed as one of the SCO's initial moves to counter American influence in Eurasia. This perception was heightened by the declaration's timing, following the so-called 2005 "Color Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan, where there were suspicions of American involvement or support.

Additionally, China has led efforts to address cyber threats, facilitating the adoption of the "Statement by the Heads of Member States of the SCO on International Information Security" at the 2006 Shanghai summit. This document reflects China's prominent position among member states in the technology field, as well as the SCO's broad approach to security. China's efforts have contributed to increase the SCO's attention towards technology and cybersecurity domains. Notably, during the 2020 online summit hosted by Russia, President Xi Jinping unveiled China's "Global Initiative on Data Security", which marked a significant step forward in addressing international information security concerns. Subsequently, at the 2021 summit held in Dushanbe, the SCO signed the "Statement on Cooperation in the Field of International Information Security", underscoring the progress made and reflecting China's satisfaction with the organization's efforts in this area (Chang & Xinwei, 2021, p.

80). Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Beijing has also emphasized the necessity of broadening the SCO's security agenda to include health issues and biosecurity. Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi reaffirmed China's dedication to this endeavor during a video conference of SCO foreign ministers in 2020. He proposed continued engagement in information-sharing, joint research and development of drugs and vaccines, and collaborative efforts to establish a health-focused community among SCO members (Chang & Xinwei, 2021, p. 80).

Furthermore, China has demonstrated a strong commitment to enhance the SCO's security framework by promoting joint military exercises with the other member states. According to Fravel (2007), these exercises are crucial for conflict prevention and border control, playing a key role in safeguarding China's territorial integrity and domestic stability. Additionally, they are significant to Beijing's hard power strategies, enabling China to showcase its military prowess and the rapid development of its military capabilities over the past three decades. Beijing's proactive stance towards military exercises represents a departure from its traditional stance of non-alliance and reluctance to engage in military activities with foreign countries. The PRC has been the most active participant in the SCO's military exercises, participating in all of them and hosting many (Zhao, 2013, p. 442). The first exercise, "Exercise-01", in 2002, involved Kyrgyz and Chinese armed forces on the border of the two countries, marking the first regular encounter between Chinese military and police personnel and a foreign counterpart. China furthered its engagement by participating in "Union-2003", the SCO's first multilateral anti-terrorist exercise, with stages in Xinjiang province, representing the first-ever joint military exercise on Chinese soil. Subsequent bilateral exercises with Russia in 2005 ("Peace Mission 2005"), Tajikistan in 2006 ("Coordination-2006"), and Kazakhstan in 2006 ("Tianshan I"), further demonstrated Beijing's commitment. Additionally, the PRC took part in many multilateral exercises, including "Peace Mission 2007", with the participation of all six SCO members' armed forces for the first time, and "Tianshan II", which marked the first exercise fully hosted on Chinese territory (Fan, 2021, pp. 110-113). Through hosting joint exercises and participating in exercises on foreign soil, the

PRC has shown its dedication to security multilateralism, despite its sensitive approach to sovereignty and non-interference.

To sum up, China has played a crucial role in the transformation of the SCO into a robust security organization. Through advocacy for a broader security agenda, support for the institutionalization of the security framework, and active participation in military initiatives, the PRC has significantly contributed to the development of the SCO in the realm of security.

4.5 China's Leadership in Economic Cooperation

China's multilateralism has consistently prioritized economic cooperation as a fundamental pillar. This emphasis on economic collaboration aligns with China's vision of a "Peaceful Rise" and its aspirations to assert itself as a major global power, recognizing the crucial role of multilateral economic cooperation in driving the country's economic development and growth. Though not initially designed for economic purposes, the SCO has evolved into a significant component of China's regional economic cooperation aspirations. As underscored by Article 3 of the SCO Charter, one of the primary objectives of the organization is to promote and advance regional economic cooperation, cultivate a favorable environment for trade and investments, and facilitate the free flow of goods, capital, services, and technologies among member states.

Since its inception, the PRC has actively sought to bolster economic collaboration within the organization, recognizing the value of sustainable economic development in the Eurasian region (Dexue, 2021). This pursuit serves dual objectives. Firstly, it aligns with the implementation of China's Western Development Program, which emphasizes enhancing economic growth, energy security, and infrastructure development in its western regions, especially Xinjiang (Kaukenov, 2007, pp. 65-66). In this context, the SCO provides a platform for China to strengthen economic bonds with neighboring states, thereby enhancing connectivity and economic ties between its western regions and Central Asia. Through active collaboration in economic initiatives, China not only bolsters its

economic ties but also cultivates stronger political and diplomatic connections with the Central Asian republics (Wu & Chen, 2004, p. 1049). The SCO has thereby played a crucial role in facilitating China's establishment of robust economic relations with the Central Asian states. China's focus, notably, has been on the energy sector, aiming to secure its energy supply and meet its increasing demand for energy resources, primarily sourced from Central Asia (Marketos, 2010). In this view, the construction of the China-Kazakhstan gas pipeline and China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline exemplify Beijing's growing participation in regional energy dynamics. Secondly, the SCO contributes to the broader economic advancement of the Eurasian region, which in turn, benefits China's own economic progress. As such, economic cooperation serves as a cornerstone for the SCO's development from China's perspective (Cheng, 2011, p. 647).

In the context of the SCO, China's contribution has been essential for actions taken in the economic realm. As the largest economy among SCO members, the PRC has been playing a dominant role in shaping economic cooperation within the organization, acting as the "strategic guide" and "active architect" of the SCO's economic potential (Hao, 2018, p. 31). The economic arena represents the realm where China, through the SCO, can exercise the most influence in the Eurasian region (Yuan, 2023, p. 429). Consequently, most of SCO's economic initiatives have relied heavily on China's leadership and initiatives.

At the SCO summit held in 2001 in Almaty, China took its initial step towards fostering economic cooperation within the organization. Beijing played a pivotal role in advocating for the endorsement of the "Memorandum Between the Governments of the State Parties of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization of Main Objectives and the Directions of Regional Economic Cooperation and Start of Process on Creating Favorable Conditions in the Field of Trade and Trade and Investments" (Mursaliev, 2021, p. 7). This document aimed to enhance economic cooperation by expanding trade and investment scales, facilitating the free movement of goods, capital, services, and technologies, harmonizing national economic legal systems, utilizing transport and communication infrastructure,

and eliminating trade and investment barriers. Furthermore, Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, proposed the four main principles of SCO economic cooperation: mutual benefit, adherence to market rules, a phased approach, and a blend of bilateral and multilateral cooperation (Mursaliev, 2021, p. 7). As clarified by Cheng (2011, p. 649), Chinese economic experts believed that regional economic cooperation within the SCO should be achieved through a gradualist approach, starting from the removal of non-tariff barriers and obstacles to investment, and concentrating on trade facilitation and investment promotion.

China's economic aspirations became clear in September 2003, during the Beijing summit, where the "20-year Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation" (2003 Program) was signed. This program aimed to foster a conducive environment for trade, goods flow, and investments, paving the way to extensive economic relations among member states. Concurrently, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao proposed an ambitious long-term goal of transforming the SCO into a free-trade area within 10-15 years, highlighting China's commitment to expanding trade opportunities (China Daily, 2003). However, despite China's reiterated emphasis on its importance, the project is yet to be fully implemented due to opposition from other member states, especially Russia.

Furthermore, during the 2004 Tashkent summit, Chinese President Hu offered US \$900 million in buyers' credit to other SCO members, with the aim of enhancing trade facilitation (Fei, 2010, p. 10). During the same summit, it was emphasized that the progressive economic development of the Central Asia region and contiguous states are guarantees of regional stability and security. This stance aligns with China's belief that economic and security cooperation should mutually reinforce each other within the SCO. At the 2005 Astana summit, the main priority for the near future was identified as putting into practice the action plan for fulfilling the 2003 Program. During this summit, President Hu Jintao reiterated China's commitment to the implementation of the U.S \$900 million buyer's export credit promised in the Tashkent summit, offering more preferential treatment to

facilitate the use of funds for SCO cooperative projects in the interest of all member countries (Pan, 2005, p. 5).

China's economic dominance within the SCO has positioned it as the primary financier of major projects within the organization. An illustrative example of this commitment is China's financial contribution to establish both the SCO Business Council and the SCO Interbank Association. At the 2005 Moscow Summit, member states unanimously agreed to establish the SCO Interbank Association, an initiative strongly championed by Beijing. This association, comprising national banks of member states, aimed to finance investment projects sponsored by SCO member states' governments. The inaugural meeting of the Interbank Association took place in February 2006 in Beijing, underscoring China's confidence in its success. Furthermore, at the 2006 Shanghai meeting, the PRC's advocacy contributed to the formation of the SCO Business Council, a non-governmental entity bringing together influential business community representatives from SCO member states. The council's objective is to expand economic cooperation, foster direct relations between business and financial communities, and facilitate the advancement of multilateral projects.

Moreover, as highlighted by Sun (2021, pp. 40-42), China implemented several other measures to strengthen the SCO's economic framework. For instance, in response to the effects of the 2008 international financial crisis, the PRC provided over US \$20 billion in concessional loans to the other member states. Additionally, China also actively advocated for the adoption of the "SCO Medium-term Development Strategy" at the SCO Beijing summit in 2012, which summarized the first ten years of the organization and set the planning and priorities for multilateral cooperation for the following ten years. In 2014, upon China's initiative, the SCO signed "the Agreement among the Governments of the SCO Member States on International Road Transport Facilitation", establishing a robust legal framework for SCO connectivity initiatives. This marked a significant stride in facilitating economic cooperation and trade among SCO member states (Hao, 2023, p. 43). Additionally, as the initial "SCO Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation" was

nearing its expiration, Beijing proposed a revised program, which was adopted in 2019 and became a guideline document for SCO regional economic cooperation from 2020 to 2035.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the SCO currently still lacks a Development Bank, a body that China has consistently advocated for during various SCO meetings. At the 2010 SCO meeting in Dushanbe, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao initially proposed the establishment of the SCO Development Bank. This proposal was reaffirmed by Wen during the 2011 SCO meeting in St. Petersburg, as well as during several other meetings. However, the proposal has yet to yield results due to lack of support from other member states, which view the creation of a Development Bank as redundant and contradictory to existing financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Gobareva et al., 2019).

In recent years, China has been actively advocating for the integration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the SCO. Launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the BRI is a global infrastructure and investment initiative aimed at fostering regional connectivity and economic cooperation by constructing infrastructure, trade networks, and investment corridors spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. Since its inception, this project has been closely intertwined with the SCO, with the latter playing a significant role in advancing the objectives of the BRI. Both initiatives share a geographical focus on the Eurasian region, common infrastructure projects, and shared goals of enhancing economic cooperation and trade liberalization (Azizi, 2024). China has actively advocated for closer alignment between the SCO and the BRI, recognizing the potential for mutual reinforcement. Beijing believes that aligning the SCO with the BRI could stimulate infrastructure development, industrial growth, and economic transformation among SCO member states. The BRI, from this perspective, can be viewed as the "Chinese solution" to economic cooperation within the SCO (Hao, 2018, p. 31). Under China's leadership, the SCO has expressed support for the BRI in various joint communiques and declarations, facilitating a synergy between the two initiatives. Nevertheless, despite progress towards closer integration between the SCO and the BRI, challenges

remain, including India's reservations about participating in the initiative and the absence of robust financing mechanisms within the SCO.

In essence, the PRC plays a pivotal role in the economic realm of the SCO. Since the organization's inception in 2001, the PRC has been actively engaged in enhancing economic cooperation within the SCO, aiming to promote regional development while advancing its own economic interests. Despite notable progress, full realization of economic cooperation within the SCO remains elusive, hindered by opposition from some member states. For instance, Russia has yet to fully endorse the concept of a free-trade area within the SCO and the establishment of a Development Bank. Additionally, India has so far refused to participate in the BRI, which Beijing considers crucial for the SCO's economic advancement. Furthermore, New Delhi has recently refused to sign the “SCO Economic Development Strategy for 2030”, alleging that the document was designed primarily to advance Chinese interests. However, despite these challenges, Beijing's unwavering commitment to enhancing economic collaboration remains essential for shaping the future trajectory of the SCO.

4.6 China's Advocacy for Cultural Cooperation

As a testament to its emphasis on soft and normative power, China has consistently advocated for broadening the SCO's scope beyond security and economic matters. By expanding the organization's activities, the PRC aims to not only bolster its strength and enhance cooperation among member states but also to create additional avenues for exercising its influence and showcasing its expertise. Since the creation of the SCO, Beijing has stressed the necessity of including new areas of cooperation, including education, culture, sports, tourism, healthcare, environmental protection, youth affairs, and other cultural and social endeavors.

Chinese President Hu Jintao emphasized the significance of cultural cooperation during the 2004 CHS in Tashkent, underscoring its role in fostering mutual understanding and friendship among the peoples of the SCO (Pan, 2007, p. 53). Thanks to China's advocacy, the SCO's emphasis on cultural

cooperation has been improved since the 2006 Shanghai Summit, where the first agreement between member states on educational cooperation was signed. Since then, the SCO has emphasized the significance of people-to-people cooperation to enhance mutual trust and understanding across the diverse communities of Eurasia. This commitment to cultural exchange was further solidified in 2007 with the adoption of the “Shanghai Cooperation Organization Treaty on Long-Term Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation”, again driven by China's initiative. This document aimed at enhancing mutual communication and understanding among different civilizations and nations in the Eurasian region.

China has been a significant beneficiary of the cultural cooperation within the SCO, training specialists in various cultural fields and hosting most SCO Cultural and Art Festivals (Morozov, 2009, p. 141). Furthermore, Beijing favorably endorsed the launch of the SCO Forum in 2005. This platform for academic and scholarly research and discussion facilitates educational and scientific cooperation among member states. Additionally, China has spearheaded significant initiatives in cultural exchanges within the SCO framework. These include the establishment of the Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation Commission of the SCO in 2013, the initiation of the SCO Youth Exchange Camp in 2016, and the provision of scholarships to over 30,000 students from other SCO member states since 2012. Furthermore, China has funded the study and research of over 10,000 Confucius Institutes (Hao, 2023, pp. 44-45).

In recent times, Xi Jinping has reiterated the importance of strengthening cultural cooperation, as part of China's goal to construct a "new community with a shared future for all mankind". At the 2018 CHS in Qingdao, Xi emphasized the value of cultural exchanges among member states. He also proposed practical initiatives such as increasing student exchanges, organizing joint cultural events, and promoting tourism to deepen mutual understanding and friendship among SCO nations. Additionally, Xi expressed China's commitment to providing 3,000 training opportunities for human resource development among SCO member states (Perskaya et al., 2021, p. 155).

China has been actively involved in expanding people-to-people exchanges within the SCO. For instance, in 2014, China established the China Center for SCO Environmental Cooperation, followed by the launch of the SCO Environmental Information Sharing Platform in 2018. Additionally, China has initiated various programs such as the SCO Science and Technology Partnership Program and established the China-SCO Medical Innovation and Cooperation Committee, the SCO Hospital Alliance, and the International Tourism Alliance of Silk Road Cities. Moreover, China has hosted several significant events including the SCO media summit, the women's forum, the forum on people-to-people friendship, the forum on traditional medicine, the industrial and supply chains forum, and the SCO forum on poverty reduction and sustainable development (Hao, 2023, p. 45).

4.7 China's Stance on Enlarging the SCO's Membership

The SCO's potential enlargement has been a subject of intense debate since its creation. While the organization was conceived as open to new members, the original six states did not actively pursue full admission for new members in its early years. This was primarily due to the need to first institutionalize and deepen ties among the founding members. However, the possibility of enlargement was contemplated, especially considering that the organization's openness is enshrined in its founding documents.

As noted by Panda (2012), China has always adopted a cautious approach towards enlargement, stressing that the expansion shall be based on consensus and shall be realized only after the complete institutionalization of the SCO. However, despite this stance, the PRC has actively contributed to its expansion. The first step toward enlargement occurred in 2004 at the CHS in Tashkent, with the introduction of the status of observer state, marking a significant development. The first wave of enlargement, between 2004 and 2005, included important regional countries like India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan as observers. The inclusion of observers, despite lacking voting rights, represented a first step in expanding the SCO beyond its Central Asian origins and confirmed the organization's openness. Mongolia joined in 2004, while India, Iran, and Pakistan in 2005. China

supported Mongolia's observer status in 2004, highlighting the strong diplomatic ties between the two countries based on geographical proximity and socio-cultural affinities. Moreover, this decision was also influenced by Mongolia's appeal as a business destination and a source of natural resources (Panda, 2012, p. 507). Beijing also backed the inclusion of Iran, one of its most important regional partners. Additionally, China expressed openness to the admission of Pakistan and India, despite their longstanding disputes could complicate their full membership in the long term. By endorsing their admission, Beijing aimed to further strengthen its already robust diplomatic ties with Pakistan and enhance its relationship with India. Furthermore, China hoped that, by cooperating within the SCO platform, Islamabad and New Delhi could improve their bilateral relations.

The 2010 Tashkent summit reignited discussions on expansion, with Beijing influencing the adoption of the “Regulation on Admission of New Members to the SCO”. This document outlined membership criteria, which encompassed geographical location in Eurasia and the maintenance of diplomatic relations with all existing SCO member states. China continued to play an active role in the SCO's expansion, particularly at the 2012 Beijing summit, where Afghanistan was granted observer status. This decision was the result of China's longstanding advocacy for closer SCO-Afghanistan relations. After the deployment of U.S troops in Afghanistan, the PRC saw Afghanistan's membership as crucial to solidify regional security cooperation.

A significant milestone reached at the 2017 Astana Summit when India and Pakistan were admitted as full members, expanding the SCO's geographic scope beyond its original Central Asian origin to include the South Asian space. This development positioned the SCO as the “largest transnational body in the Eurasian region” (Hao, 2018, p. 28). China had been a champion of Pakistan's admission for a long time and welcomed with favor the decision to include it as a full member. Despite occasional challenges in Sino-Indian relations, Beijing endorsed India's full membership in the SCO. This endorsement was deemed crucial for extending the SCO's reach into South Asia and fostering cooperation across the broader Eurasian region. Additionally, India's rapid economic and

demographic growth positions it as a significant player in the Eurasian landscape, likely justifying China's supportive stance toward its admission. Therefore, China's favorable position on granting India and Pakistan full membership underscores its commitment to fostering “cross-regional partnerships” (Panda, 2012, p. 506).

China also played a crucial role in Iran's acceptance as a full member in 2023, staunchly supporting its participation in the SCO, evident from its backing of Iran's observer state status in 2005. Over the years, China's relationship with Iran has strengthened, particularly in economic, security, and energy matters. This partnership has become increasingly important for Beijing, especially since the launch of the BRI in 2013. Hence, the PRC has long insisted on accepting Iran as a full member, a process which eventually culminated in 2023 with its admission.

At the 2024 Astana summit, Belarus was welcomed as a full member of the SCO. China has been a strong advocate for this move, viewing Belarus as a key European partner. This commitment was highlighted during the SCO's annual Head of State meeting in Samarkand in 2022, where Belarusian President Lukashenko and Chinese President Xi Jinping upgraded their bilateral relationship to an “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership” (Xinhua, 2022). This strengthened interaction between the two countries includes Belarus's strong support for China's GDI and GSI, as well as a deepened cooperation under the BRI, with Belarus serving as a critical hub in China's strategic plans.

In conclusion, China's active support has been pivotal in the SCO's enlargement, demonstrating its commitment to strengthening the organization and expanding regional cooperation. As a key player in the SCO, Beijing is likely to continue playing an essential role in its future enlargement.

Summary

This chapter has thoroughly examined China's efforts to advance the SCO. It began by providing an overview of China's involvement in the organization and highlighting Beijing's pivotal role in shaping the "Shanghai Spirit". The discussion then turned to the process of institutionalization, illustrating the PRC's proactive efforts to strengthen the SCO's institutional framework. The chapter also explored China's significant contributions to the SCO's security architecture and its efforts to bolster economic cooperation, emphasizing the integration of the SCO with the BRI. Additionally, it shed light on China's initiatives in cultural and humanitarian cooperation, demonstrating Beijing's active role in broadening the SCO's scope. The chapter concluded by emphasizing China's supportive stance towards expanding the SCO's membership.

Overall, this chapter has underscored China's essential role in the SCO, highlighting its commitment to advancing and fortifying the organization. By doing so, it has revealed the crucial contribution of the PRC to this endeavor, showcasing Beijing's significant dedication and investment in the SCO. The insights provided here set the stage for the next chapter, which will apply a theoretical lens through the dual perspectives of realism and neoliberal institutionalism. This approach will offer deeper insights into China's involvement in the SCO, highlighting the complex interplay of pragmatic considerations and genuine motivations shaping its policies and behavior within the organization.

Chapter 5: China's Endeavors Through a Theoretical Lens

The preceding chapter examined China's efforts in advancing the SCO, exploring various aspects of its contributions, such as shaping the “Shanghai Spirit”, institutionalizing the organization, fostering economic, security, and cultural cooperation, and advocating for the organization's enlargement. This analysis highlighted Beijing's commitment to the SCO and emphasized the significance that it attributes to this organization.

To deepen our understanding of China's actions, this chapter integrates empirical observations with theoretical insights. By employing both realist and neoliberal institutionalist perspectives, it aims to provide a balanced explanation of China's behavior. This approach elucidates the motivations behind China assuming a leadership role in enhancing the SCO over time. This dual theoretical framework recognizes the importance of strategic and material considerations while also acknowledging the deeper motivations that underpin China's sustained engagement with the SCO. Consequently, it offers a comprehensive analysis of Beijing's behavior, enhancing our understanding of its actual contributions to the organization.

5.1 The Realist Paradigm and China's Pragmatic Moves

As with China's initial endorsement of the SCO, the predominant analytical paradigm for understanding its actions within the organization remains rooted in realism, particularly among Western observers. This perspective views China's involvement in the SCO through the lens of power politics and strategic self-interest, often adopting a pessimistic and pragmatic approach. Realism provides a framework to scrutinize China's behavior within the organization, offering a tool to interpret its various contributions. When viewed through this theoretical lens, China's actions appear to align with a broader pragmatic approach, consistent with its assertive foreign policy and its ambitions for global superpower status. In this perspective, China's proactive and multifaceted efforts, as well as its leadership within the organization, are not viewed as a genuine or sincere embrace of

multilateral endeavors or regional cooperation. Instead, they are interpreted as a calculated strategy to secure its national interests and expand its influence at both the regional and international levels (Carroll, 2011; Pradhan, 2018). This approach suggests that China's engagement with the SCO is primarily driven by a desire to reinforce its power and assert its dominance, rather than by a commitment to fostering cooperative and inclusive regional dynamics.

One of China's key contributions to the SCO is its role in shaping and promoting the "Shanghai Spirit", the foundational philosophy of the organization. From a realist perspective, Beijing has pragmatically used this normative framework to advance its strategic interests. This approach is seen as China's effort to champion an illiberal order that prioritizes state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in domestic affairs, countering Western liberal democratic values. The SCO, under China's influence, has consistently upheld these principles, exemplified by the 2005 Astana Declaration condemning U.S. military presence in Central Asia. In this viewpoint, China's normative influence within the SCO reflects a broader ambition to establish a new international order centered on principles that starkly contrast with the democratic values promoted by the U.S. and its allies (Sharshenova & Gordon Crawford, 2017). The SCO's avoidance of human rights issues further reinforces the view that China is leveraging the SCO to challenge Western norms. Consequently, the SCO is often perceived as a platform through which China advances an alternative normative order aligned with its strategic goals, potentially with the tacit support of its Eurasian neighbors (Fulton, 2023). This realist interpretation has led many to label the SCO as a "club of dictators" or an authoritarian bloc, a forum where member states can create their own rules and unify against the current international order. Hence, the SCO, under China's guidance, would differ from other regional organizations, prioritizing regime stability over political change and running counter to the promotion of democratic development and human rights (Ambrosio, 2016).

Alongside shaping the "Shanghai Spirit", China's efforts to extend its soft and normative power within the SCO are evident in its promotion of cultural cooperation. Through initiatives such as

cultural exchanges and educational programs, the PRC seeks to shape the cultural and ideological landscape of the region to align more closely with its own values and interests. This cultural diplomacy pragmatically aims to align the member states' cultural and ideological perspectives more closely with China's own, thereby reinforcing its leadership role within the organization. By advancing cultural cooperation, Beijing also aims to create a cohesive regional bloc that is resistant to Western influence. This aspect of the SCO's activities is seen as a strategic move by China to build a regional consensus that supports its vision of an international order based on principles such as sovereignty and non-interference. In doing so, the PRC simultaneously challenges the spread of Western liberal values, further solidifying its influence in the region.

The realist paradigm provides valuable insights into the PRC's efforts to institutionalize the SCO. From this perspective, China's push for institutionalization is seen as a calculated strategy to create a stable and predictable framework that reinforces its leadership within the organization. By advocating for a formalized structure with clear rules and procedures, Beijing aims to ensure that the SCO remains a key platform through which it can exert control and influence over regional affairs, aligning the organization's agenda with its national interests. Moreover, by solidifying the institutional framework of the SCO, China effectively secures its role as a central player in the region, minimizing the chances of external powers disrupting its influence. This process of institutionalization is also interpreted as a means for China to legitimize the SCO on the global stage, positioning it as a credible and significant multilateral organization that can serve as a counterbalance to Western-dominated institutions like NATO and the G7.

China's leadership within the SCO is particularly pronounced in the economic domain, where it serves as the principal driving force behind the organization's key initiatives and decisions. The PRC's pragmatic economic strategy can be analyzed through two primary objectives: the advancement of its own economic interests and the establishment of regional economic hegemony. Firstly, Beijing is actively working to develop the SCO's economic framework to secure stable access to essential

energy resources, expand trade opportunities, and enhance regional infrastructure connectivity. These endeavors not only serve China's national interests but also facilitate greater economic integration among member states. A key component of this economic strategy is the integration of the BRI with the SCO. The BRI, adopted by the PRC to enhance regional connectivity and embrace economic partnerships, is closely linked with the SCO's goals. By intertwining the BRI with the SCO's economic activities, China aims to create a seamless infrastructure network across Eurasia that supports both regional and global trade. This integration helps to solidify China's influence within the SCO by positioning it as the central hub of economic activity in the region. Through the BRI, China thus not only facilitates trade and investment flows but also strengthens its strategic ties with SCO member states, ensuring that their economic and infrastructure development is aligned with Beijing's long-term objectives. Secondly, this strategic approach aligns with China's broader geoeconomic ambitions, enabling it to maintain its status as the preeminent economic actor in the Eurasian region, despite the growing economic influence of nations such as India. This positioning is instrumental in China's quest for recognition as a dominant player on the global economic stage. Furthermore, China's contributions to the SCO's economic initiatives may reflect a strategic intent to promote an alternative economic and financial model that challenges the existing Western-dominated order. The SCO is often perceived in Western discourse as integral to China's aspirations for global economic preeminence, alongside other multilateral institutions like the BRICS, which similarly aim to contest the prevailing international financial architecture based on the U.S dollar (Diesen, 2024). For Beijing, multilateral groups like the SCO and the BRICS are key vehicles to further President Xi's vision of a new international order guided by Chinese principles, especially in economic matters (Freeman, Glantz & Markey, 2024). Thus, although the SCO's economic potential remains underutilized due to internal divergences among member states, it is nonetheless widely regarded as a critical instrument for advancing China's strategic economic objectives.

Another domain where China's leadership is clear is in the realm of security. Since the early stages of the SCO, the PRC has been the driving force behind the development and refinement of its security initiatives and mechanisms. Initially, these efforts were focused on addressing the threats posed by the "three evils" in Xinjiang. However, over time, the security dimension has become a cornerstone of Beijing's engagement within the SCO. The realist paradigm provides a useful framework for interpreting China's actions in the SCO's security domain. From this perspective, Beijing's involvement in the SCO's security initiatives is seen as a pragmatic pursuit of its national interests. The organization serves as a critical tool for ensuring border stability and maintaining regional security, which are essential for China's domestic and international strategy. Hence, China's efforts to shape the SCO's security agenda, along with its active participation in joint military exercises, are viewed as strategic maneuvers to safeguard its regional security interests and assert its military presence. These actions are often interpreted as calculated responses to perceived threats from the United States and NATO, showcasing the PRC's growing military capabilities (Song, 2013). There are ongoing concerns in Western media and academic circles about the potential for the SCO to evolve into a Chinese-led military alliance, despite China's traditional stance against formal military alliances. These concerns have been amplified by China's significant military investments and expansion in recent years, which have included modernizing its armed forces and increasing its defense budget. Through the SCO, the PRC is thereby able to project its military power and influence across Eurasia, thereby challenging the existing international security framework. In recent years, Beijing has also used the SCO as a platform to promote its GSI, an evolution of the NSC. The GSI, introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2022, emphasizes the need for a comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable approach to global security. It advocates for respect for sovereignty and non-interference, opposing unilateral actions and military alliances that could undermine global stability (Fravel, 2024). Through the GSI, the PRC thus seeks to reshape the international security order by promoting an alternative model that counters the Western-led security architecture. The SCO plays a

crucial role in advancing this vision, providing China with a platform to gain support for its security agenda and challenge the current international system.

Finally, realism provides a valuable framework for interpreting China's support for the expansion of the SCO, viewing it as a calculated strategy to maintain and strengthen its regional hegemony. By advocating for the inclusion of new member states, the PRC can extend its influence over these states while also mitigating potential challenges to its dominance within the Eurasian space. For instance, China's openness to India's inclusion in the SCO in 2017 served multiple strategic purposes. Despite their historical rivalry, bringing India into the SCO allowed China to engage with it in a controlled multilateral environment, reducing the risk of direct confrontation. By integrating India, Beijing could monitor and manage New Delhi's regional aspirations, ensuring that it does not become a counterweight to Chinese dominance. Similarly, Pakistan's admission into the SCO illustrates China's strategic use of the organization to balance regional power dynamics. Supporting Islamabad's membership was a calculated effort to counterbalance India's influence within the SCO, thus preventing any one nation from dominating the organization. This move aligns with China's broader strategy of maintaining a balance of power in South Asia, where it can play Pakistan against India to its own advantage. By keeping both India and Pakistan within the SCO framework, Beijing can mediate their interactions and ensure that regional tensions are managed within a multilateral context that it largely controls. Iran's inclusion in 2023 is similarly motivated by China's desire to extend its influence and secure its strategic interests in the Middle East and Central Asia. By bringing Iran into the fold, the PRC strengthens its access to vital energy resources and deepens its strategic partnership with a key regional player. Moreover, including Iran serves to challenge the U.S.-led sanctions regime and reduces Tehran's international isolation, aligning with China's broader goal of weakening Western influence in the region. Iran's membership also helps to diversify the SCO's strategic portfolio, adding a significant Middle Eastern dimension to the organization and enhancing its role as a counterweight to Western alliances. Furthermore, the recent openness to Belarus's potential

membership as a permanent member of the SCO highlights China's strategic ambitions towards Europe. By supporting Belarus's inclusion, China is not only expanding the geographic scope of the SCO but also signaling its intent to exert influence closer to the European Union's borders. Belarus's membership would serve as a bridgehead for China into Eastern Europe, enhancing the SCO's reach and positioning it as a more significant player in the global geopolitical landscape. This move is consistent with China's long-term strategy of creating a multilateral bloc that challenges Western dominance, extending the SCO's influence well beyond its traditional Central Asian heartland. Through the enlargement of the SCO, China therefore seeks to build a more cohesive and strategically aligned regional bloc, one that can resist external pressures and assert its own vision of global governance. The inclusion of these countries is not merely about increasing membership; it is a deliberate effort by Beijing to shape the organization in a way that serves its broader geopolitical objectives.

5.2 A More “Optimistic” Perspective: Neoliberal Institutionalism

The realist perspective provides valuable insights into China's active engagement with SCO, highlighting power-related motives and pragmatic concerns. However, this approach may oversimplify the complex dynamics at play and miss the broader scope of China's involvement. Realism emphasizes strategic considerations, which can lead to a pessimistic view that portrays China as a threat or significant challenger to the current international order. This perspective risks fostering misconceptions about China's regional and global ambitions, as it tends to overlook the possibility that Beijing's actions might be driven by factors beyond narrow interests. A core tenet of realist theory is that states form alliances and institutions solely to serve their self-interests. In an anarchic international system, states rely on their own capabilities and engage in multilateral arrangements only as long as these serve their immediate goals. Once these objectives are met, states typically withdraw from or weaken such alliances. Realism, therefore, views institutions as temporary tools under state control, rather than as facilitators of long-term cooperation. From this standpoint, China's

involvement in the SCO is seen as primarily driven by its security, economic, and regional influence concerns. However, this view struggles to explain why China continues to support and invest in the SCO even after achieving key objectives, such as border security, economic expansion, and increased regional influence in Eurasia. Beijing's sustained commitment suggests that additional factors beyond immediate, self-serving goals influence its actions within the organization.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of China's involvement in the SCO, it is beneficial to integrate the realist perspective with the more nuanced framework offered by neoliberal institutionalism. This approach allows for an analysis that recognizes the importance of strategic and material considerations while also considering deeper motivations behind China's continued engagement. Neoliberal institutionalism argues that while pragmatic considerations are crucial, they do not fully account for a country's behavior. This theoretical lens suggests that China's sustained support for the SCO reflects a genuine interest in promoting and developing the organization as a platform for long-term cooperation, beyond the immediate pursuit of national interests. By blending the insights of realism with those of neoliberal institutionalism, a more balanced and nuanced understanding emerges. This approach acknowledges that while China, like other SCO members, prioritizes its national interests, its actions are also influenced by a broader set of motivations. These include a commitment to regional cooperation, the desire to play a constructive role in shaping the international order, and the recognition that sustained engagement with multilateral institutions can yield long-term benefits that extend beyond narrow strategic gains.

China's efforts to shape the "Shanghai Spirit" within the SCO are frequently interpreted through a realist and pragmatic lens. This perspective frames Beijing's actions as a calculated exercise of normative power, aiming to align the organization's principles with its broader strategic objectives. However, this realist interpretation may oversimplify the complexity of China's intentions within the SCO. While the PRC indeed emphasizes soft power and normative influence as tools to advance its national interests, focusing solely on these aspects can lead to a narrow understanding of its role. To

gain a more comprehensive perspective, it is useful to integrate insights from neoliberal institutionalism, which offers a broader interpretation. Neoliberal institutionalism posits that international institutions like the SCO are not merely instruments of state power but platforms that shape and are shaped by the collective behavior of their member states (Keohane, 1988, p. 396). From this standpoint, the "Shanghai Spirit" should be viewed not merely as a tool for China to exert influence but as a set of enduring norms and rules that actively shape interactions among SCO members. These principles foster a peaceful environment which facilitates cooperation, reduces uncertainty, and mitigates the risk of conflict. By promoting the "Shanghai Spirit", Beijing contributes to creating a multilateral framework that prioritizes dialogue, mutual trust, and collaboration over competition and unilateralism. This approach lays the foundation for a lasting cooperative model of regional inter-state relations, aligning with China's broader commitment to multilateralism and its evolving stance on regional cooperation and international governance. China's advocacy for the "Shanghai Spirit" reflects its ambition to establish a cooperative and stable regional order that could serve as a model for international relations beyond Eurasia. This approach suggests that China's actions are driven not only by immediate strategic interests but also by a broader vision of peaceful and cooperative global relations, in line with its vision of a "community of a shared future for all mankind". In this context, the "Shanghai Spirit" embodies China's ambition to reshape international relations towards a more cooperative and harmonious international community.

In the same vein, China's promotion of cultural cooperation within SCO serves multiple purposes that extend beyond simply expanding its influence in the region. While realism argues that these cultural initiatives primarily aim to reinforce China's leadership and reshape the ideological landscape for its national interests, neoliberal institutionalism offers a more nuanced interpretation. This theoretical framework emphasizes the growing recognition of cultural cooperation as essential for achieving enduring peace, fostering understanding and respect among different civilizations. The SCO, with its shared historical and cultural ties among member states, is particularly well-positioned to facilitate

this process. By advocating for cultural cooperation, China demonstrates a genuine commitment to long-term regional stability and collaboration. Through cultural initiatives, the PRC seeks to cultivate a sense of community and mutual respect among SCO nations, thereby reducing the potential for conflicts. This aligns with the idea that strengthening cultural and social ties can lead to a more stable regional environment. China's emphasis on cultural complementarity and shared identity reflects a governance vision that prioritizes the well-being of the people in the region alongside state interests. President Xi Jinping has frequently described the SCO as the "shared home" of the Eurasian region, underscoring its role as a community of diverse peoples rather than just a political and economic alliance. This perspective aligns with China's broader aspirations for a "harmonious Asia" and a "harmonious world", where cultural commonalities and individual well-being are central to the narrative, complementing state-centric concerns. By focusing on cultural exchange and mutual understanding, Beijing thus aims to lay the groundwork for lasting peace and prosperity in the region. This approach enhances the notion that peaceful inter-state relations can create an environment conducive to cultural affinity among member states. Ultimately, China's efforts within the SCO reflect its desire to establish a collaborative framework that prioritizes cultural ties, mutual respect, people-to-people bonds, and long-term regional harmony.

Additionally, China's efforts to institutionalize the SCO can be more comprehensively understood by combining the neoliberal institutionalist perspective with the realist one. From a realist standpoint, these efforts are viewed as a strategic move by Beijing to consolidate its control and leadership within the organization, ensuring that the SCO remains a key platform for exerting influence in the region. However, through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, China's push for institutionalization extends beyond self-interest. It reflects a broader objective to establish a stable, rules-based regional order that benefits all member states. Institutions, according to this theoretical approach, play a vital role in reducing uncertainty, fostering inter-state cooperation, and ensuring long-term commitment to the organization. Since the early beginnings, the PRC has been a staunch advocate for institutionalizing

the SCO, recognizing that a well-defined institutional framework enhances credibility and predictability in interactions among member states. This, in turn, strengthens the organization's capabilities and bolsters its influence on both regional and international levels. China's commitment to this process underscores its belief that a structured organization not only advances its strategic interests but also contributes to broader regional stability and cooperation.

China's promotion of economic cooperation within the SCO can be effectively analyzed through both realist and neoliberal institutionalist lenses. From a realist perspective, China's economic initiatives within the SCO are often seen as self-serving efforts to secure access to vital resources, expand its market reach, and strengthen its economic dominance in the region. However, the neoliberal institutionalist perspective reveals a more nuanced picture of China's economic actions. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights the role of institutions like the SCO in promoting economic collaboration, establishing shared norms, and creating mechanisms that facilitate peaceful inter-state relations (Keohane & Nye, 1977). This approach suggests that while China's initiatives are indeed aimed at advancing its national interests, they also reflect a broader commitment to creating long-term stability and mutual benefit among member states. By fostering economic interdependence, the PRC aims to build a regional environment where cooperation becomes more sustainable, and the likelihood of conflict is reduced. For example, China's efforts to establish cooperative mechanisms within the SCO can be seen as part of a genuine endeavor to foster mutual economic benefits and ensure long-term regional prosperity. These initiatives, while supporting China's economic growth and the export of Chinese goods, also contribute to the creation of a framework of shared norms and regulations that guide economic interactions among member states. China's advocacy for more ambitious economic projects within the SCO, such as the establishment of the SCO Development Bank, further illustrates its broader vision for the organization. These initiatives aim to enhance economic integration and cooperation across the Eurasian region, contributing to regional stability and development. Moreover, China's efforts to integrate the BRI with the SCO can also be understood through this dual lens. While

the realist perspective may view it as a strategic move to expand China's global influence and soft power, neoliberal institutionalism provides additional insight by emphasizing the shared goals and principles between the BRI and the SCO. Both initiatives emphasize dialogue, inclusivity, mutual benefit, and long-term cooperation, reflecting China's vision of creating a new multipolar world order. By intertwining the BRI with the SCO, Beijing seeks to enhance connectivity and foster economic collaboration, not just for its own benefit, but as part of a broader effort to create a new model of regional and international governance that promotes global development and well-being.

In the security domain, realism posits that China's contributions to the SCO's security agenda primarily reflect efforts to safeguard its regional security interests and assert its military capabilities. However, neoliberal institutionalism offers a more nuanced interpretation, suggesting that China's efforts go beyond mere self-interest and reflect a genuine commitment to fostering regional stability and cooperative security. From this viewpoint, Beijing's endeavors are seen as part of a broader strategy to build a stable, predictable, and peaceful regional environment. This stability is crucial not only for China's security but also for its broader goals of economic development and international influence. Neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes that by fostering inter-state cooperation on security matters, the PRC helps create a regional order where the likelihood of conflict is reduced, thus contributing to long-term stability. Historically, China's approach to security within the SCO has been shaped by its NSC, introduced in the late 1990s. The NSC marked a departure from traditional security doctrines by advocating for comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security arrangements that prioritize dialogue, mutual trust, and non-interference. Within the SCO, the NSC has served as a guiding framework, influencing the organization's security focus. Through the SCO, China sought to implement the NSC principles, addressing not only its immediate security concerns, particularly in its western regions, but also contributing to a broader regional security architecture that emphasized collective stability over unilateral action. In recent years, the PRC has further expanded its security vision beyond the regional scope of the NSC with the introduction of the GSI.

The GSI calls for a security order based on mutual respect, non-interference, and win-win cooperation, aligning closely with the "Shanghai Spirit". By promoting the GSI within the SCO, China aims to use the organization as a model for its broader international security ambitions, demonstrating its commitment to creating a cooperative global security environment that moves beyond traditional power politics. China's push for security cooperation within the SCO, therefore, reflects both its regional and global aspirations. On the one hand, it seeks to ensure that the Eurasian region remains stable and secure, providing a conducive environment for economic growth and regional integration. On the other hand, through initiatives like the GSI, China is attempting to reshape the global security landscape by promoting a more inclusive and cooperative approach to security.

Finally, China's support for the enlargement of the SCO can be interpreted as a strategic move. From a realist perspective, this expansion is viewed as a means for the PRC to counterbalance rival powers and maintain its regional dominance. However, a neoliberal institutionalist approach offers a complementary interpretation, suggesting that this enlargement is also about fostering a more inclusive and cooperative regional framework capable of addressing a wider range of challenges and contributing to regional stability. While the neoliberal theory does not explicitly claim that the size of an organization determines its effectiveness, it is evident that broader membership can yield significant benefits. Enhanced legitimacy, increased capabilities, and access to a diverse range of resources are among the common advantages of expanding membership. Thus, while size alone may not dictate an organization's efficacy, increasing membership can considerably strengthen its overall influence and capacity. China's favorable stance toward SCO enlargement reveals significant advantages for the regional environment. By advocating for the inclusion of new members, the PRC aims to bolster the organization's legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing a range of challenges. For instance, in security matters, China recognizes the value of enhanced multilateral cooperation in tackling threats. Similarly, the inclusion of major economic players such as India and Iran establish a stronger foundation for economic collaboration among member states. Hence, China's endorsement

of the SCO's expansion demonstrates its commitment to enhancing the organization's capabilities in both security and economic domains, thereby contributing to a safer and more prosperous Eurasian region. By promoting enlargement, Beijing seeks to increase predictability in the regional environment, aligning with neoliberal institutionalism's emphasis on reducing uncertainty among states. The inclusion of new regional actors facilitates dialogue, fosters understanding, and builds trust among member states, which in turn diminishes the likelihood of conflict and contributes to a more peaceful regional atmosphere. Ultimately, China's support for the SCO's enlargement reflects a multifaceted strategy that blends elements of power dynamics with a commitment to cooperation. By integrating diverse nations into the SCO, China not only aims to bolster its own influence but also aspires to create a robust institutional framework capable of addressing contemporary challenges.

5.3 Relative and Absolute Gains in China's Actions

In IR theory, one of the most contentious topics is the distinction between relative and absolute gains. Relative gains refer to the benefits states achieve in comparison to other states, whereas absolute gains pertain to the total benefits or improvements a state realizes independently of others. The contraposition between relative and absolute gains is at the core of the theoretical debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Neorealism emphasizes the anarchic structure of the international system and the distribution of power as the primary influences on state behavior. This perspective highlights the competitive nature of international relations, where the main goal is to prevent other states from gaining significant advantages. The system's inherent characteristics drive states to pursue relative gains rather than absolute gains. This focus on relative gains decreases the likelihood of cooperation, as states fear that any gains by other states might come at their own expense. Conversely, neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes absolute gains over relative gains, highlighting the benefits of cooperation for all involved parties, regardless of how gains are distributed. Absolute gains are of paramount importance in the neoliberal perspective, which assumes that states focus primarily on their own absolute gains and are indifferent to the gains of others. From this theoretical

viewpoint, whether cooperation results in a relative gain or loss is not significant as long as it brings an absolute gain. Therefore, in terms of preferences, the focus on absolute gains usually means that a state's utility is solely a function of its absolute gain. This perspective underscores the potential for mutual benefits and collective problem-solving, suggesting that states can achieve more through cooperation than through competition.

The confrontation between relative and absolute gains adds depth to the analysis of China's role in the SCO, a topic that this thesis scrutinizes through the double theoretical lens of realism and neoliberal institutionalism. This work is rooted in the main realist assumption that states are rational-unitary actors pursuing their interests in an anarchic system, where anarchy complicates inter-state cooperation. However, it rejects the notion that cooperation is unattainable or that multilateral organizations like the SCO are mere facades. In this endeavor, it advocates for a more balanced and double-side perspective on the topic, employing a theoretical framework which uses neoliberal institutionalism alongside realism.

When examining China's role in the SCO, realism provides valuable insights, explaining the influence of relative gains on its strategies and actions. As a major regional and international actor, the PRC is deeply concerned with its relative power and influence compared to other actors, making relative gains a significant factor in its behavior. In terms of power balancing, the SCO serves as a crucial platform for the PRC to counterbalance the influence of other major regional powers, particularly Russia, India and Iran. By maintaining a strong leadership role in the SCO, China ensures that it does not lose relative influence in Eurasia, remaining in a superior position compared to other actors. In China's SCO policy, relative gains are also evident in the economic sphere. Beijing acts as the driving force within the SCO, striving to maintain its strategic superiority and dominance in economic matters. China's significant investment in the SCO's economic projects, as well as its efforts to integrate the BRI with the SCO, can be seen as a strategy to secure a dominant economic position and prevent rivals, especially a dynamic and rapidly growing economy like India, from

gaining too much economic influence. Similarly, security concerns are paramount in China's strategy, especially considering the military modernization efforts that have been ongoing since Xi Jinping's presidency began in 2013. The relative gains that Beijing can achieve in security matters undoubtedly shape its behavior, as China places great importance on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and border security. By leading the SCO's security initiatives, the PRC not only addresses common security threats but also positions itself as the primary security provider in the region. This allows China to maintain a security advantage over other member states and assert its military capabilities, demonstrating its potential to use military power if necessary.

In contrast, neoliberal institutionalism explains China's involvement in the SCO from the standpoint of absolute gains. In this view, the focus is not on what the PRC can gain compared to other actors, but on what it can achieve from engaging in the SCO regardless of others. From this perspective, China's behavior is driven not by power balance considerations but by the recognition of the advantages of regional cooperation. Motivated by a genuine commitment to the SCO, China fosters a cooperative institutional framework that lowers the transaction costs of cooperation among member states and enhances the predictability of their interactions. This results in more efficient collective action that benefits all members through shared norms, practices, and coordinated policies, encouraging states to focus on the long-term benefits of cooperation over short-term relative gains. This, in turn, facilitates the creation of a peaceful regional environment, yielding absolute gains for all regional countries, including China. Absolute gains are also evident in the economic sphere, where China's actions are viewed not as efforts to assert economic superiority but as a genuine attempt to promote economic integration. Through multifaceted economic initiatives, the PRC aims to promote regional economic development, creating a win-win situation where all member states benefit from improved infrastructure, trade, and investment opportunities. This, in turn, benefits Beijing itself, supporting its economic growth and development, as well as its "Peaceful Rise" within the current global order. Similarly, in security terms, the SCO provides a collective security benefit, offering a

platform to address shared cross-border security threats. China actively works to strengthen the SCO's security architecture, recognizing the absolute gains from a solid cooperative mechanism to handle these threats. By reducing these menaces, the stability of the entire region is enhanced, which is advantageous for all member states, including the PRC, whose attention to security and domestic stability is paramount.

This thesis recognizes the importance of relative gains in determining its overall behavior. As a nation-state with substantial influence at both regional and international levels, the PRC undoubtedly places great significance on its relative position compared to other countries, seeking to retain a dominant position in all matters. In this endeavor, the SCO represents a crucial element of China's policy, serving as a platform where Beijing's leadership and pivotal role in regional dynamics are most evident. The SCO supports China's domestic interests by enhancing its power and influence, allowing it to exercise leadership, keep other key actors in check, and demonstrate its economic prowess and military capabilities. However, while recognizing the importance of relative gains in shaping China's behavior, this research rejects the idea that they are the sole determinants of its actions. It argues that absolute gains also significantly influence the formulation of China's SCO policy and its involvement in the organization. Therefore, it advocates for a balanced examination of China's behavior, considering both relative and absolute gains and the intricacies of their interplay. This research shifts away from the overly power-balance and state-centric perspective of realism to endorse a theoretical framework where both types of gains are paramount in Beijing's actions. For instance, China's significant endeavors in economic and security initiatives secure its dominant position (relative gains), while simultaneously contributing to regional stability and prosperity (absolute gains). Similarly, China's active engagement in shaping the SCO maximizes mutual benefits among member states, reinforcing its leadership role (relative gains) while fostering a peaceful regional environment (absolute gains). Moreover, China's relationships with other key SCO actors, such as Russia, India, and Iran, illustrate a complex interplay of relative and absolute gains. The PRC

benefits from their participation, enhancing both economic and security cooperation, thus bolstering the overall organization (absolute gains). However, their involvement also allows Beijing the opportunity to carefully manage relative power dynamic, ensuring that dominance by these other three regional actors is avoided (relative gains).

In conclusion, while China's behavior is undoubtedly influenced by relative gains, this thesis underscores the significance of absolute gains in shaping its actions. It emphasizes China's sincere commitment to multilateral initiatives and regional cooperation, recognizing the SCO as a vital framework for collaborative interaction in Eurasia.

Summary

Building on the previous chapter's analysis, this chapter has offered a theoretical exploration of China's efforts in advancing the SCO. It has delved into various dimensions of China's involvement, including its role in shaping the "Shanghai Spirit", institutionalizing the organization, promoting economic and security cooperation, advocating for cultural exchange, and supporting the organization's enlargement. By analyzing these aspects through both realist and neoliberal institutionalist lenses, the chapter highlighted Beijing's crucial role within the SCO while providing a nuanced understanding of its actions.

While the realist perspective illuminates China's strategic interests and power dynamics, it doesn't fully account for the possibility that China may be motivated by more than just narrow, pragmatic concerns. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, this view has been broadened by integrating it with neoliberal institutionalism. This combined analysis challenges the traditional dominance of realism in scholarly discourse, revealing that China's engagement with the SCO is not solely driven by national interest and power considerations but also by a genuine commitment to multilateralism and regional cooperation. By employing this double-sided theoretical framework, the chapter has provided deeper insights into the complexities of China's role in the SCO. This approach encourages scholars to move beyond conventional realist paradigms and consider the broader implications of China's participation in multilateral organizations. In doing so, it enriches the ongoing discourse on China's contributions to the SCO and highlights the importance of incorporating multiple theoretical perspectives to fully grasp the dynamics at play in regional and international relations.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined China's involvement in the SCO, the first multilateral organization created under China's leadership. Since its inception in 2001, the SCO has reflected the evolution of Chinese foreign policy, transitioning from a reluctance toward multilateral arrangements to proactive engagement in institution-building. The SCO has consistently held significant importance for the PRC, serving as a key pillar of its foreign policy and a priority in its diplomatic agenda. This strategic importance has driven China to make proactive efforts to enhance and advance the organization over time, investing considerable energies and resources to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness.

The primary research question guiding this study has been: "*Why has China actively contributed to the establishment and development of the SCO?*". Addressing this question required a comprehensive exploration of China's motivations and strategies within the organization. As with any "why" question, the answer lies in understanding the underlying reasons and driving factors behind a particular conduct or action. In this case, the thesis sought to uncover the motivations behind Beijing's behavior in the SCO, shedding light on its contributions to both the establishment and advancement of this regional organization. Specifically, the research focused on two intertwined inquiries: why China endorsed the creation of the SCO in 2001 and why it has consistently worked to advance the organization since its inception.

To accomplish its objectives, this thesis has employed a robust and innovative theoretical framework, balancing the perspectives of realism and neoliberal institutionalism. This dual approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of China's actions, recognizing that while China naturally pursues national interests and strategic goals, its behavior within the organization is also influenced by deeper motives, such as cooperative efforts and a genuine commitment to multilateral engagements. Realism, with its emphasis on national interests and power dynamics, provided a valuable lens for understanding China's strategic use of the SCO as a tool to advance its domestic interests and bolster its regional

and global standing. This perspective underscored the pragmatic aspects of China's engagement, emphasizing the SCO as a platform for Beijing to assert its influence in the Eurasian region, counterbalance other regional and international powers, and pursue its ambitions to reshape the current world order. Consequently, the research highlighted the critical importance of this regional organization for China, positioning it as a central framework for its engagement in the Eurasian space and its broader geopolitical aspirations.

However, while rooted in the realist assumption that states strategically pursue their national interests, the work rejected the notion that China's actions are solely driven by power and influence. Instead, it argued that pragmatic strategic interests alone do not fully explain China's engagement with the organization, advocating for a more balanced perspective. The study conducted a deeper analysis to uncover the genuine factors that, alongside strategic concerns, drive Beijing's involvement in the SCO. In this view, neoliberal institutionalism added depth to the exploration by emphasizing China's commitment to multilateralism and regional cooperation. This theoretical lens suggested that China's actions reflect the evolution of its foreign policy over the last three decades, marked by a belief in regional cooperation and institution-building initiatives. It highlighted the importance of the SCO in China's regional and international endeavors, with its aspiration to build a peaceful and prosperous regional order benefiting all member states. This approach aligns with Beijing's larger vision of a new global order characterized by dialogue, win-win cooperation, peaceful coexistence, and collective progress, as envisioned in projects such as the BRI, the "community with a shared future for all mankind" and the GSI. By adopting this dual analytical approach, the research elucidated that China's engagement with the SCO is not solely driven by self-interest but also by a sincere desire to foster long-term cooperation in its neighborhood and create a more cooperative international environment. Thus, it posited that China's participation in the SCO reflects a complex interplay between pragmatism and multilateralism. This duality is emblematic of China's broader foreign

policy and diplomatic strategy, where the pursuit of national interests is coupled with efforts to contribute to regional stability and global governance.

To address the initial research inquiry, the thesis began by offering an overview of the SCO, detailing its historical development, the foundational "Shanghai Spirit", its institutional framework, and its initial security-oriented focus. By providing this comprehensive background, the first chapter established a strong foundation for the subsequent analysis, ensuring that readers had a clear understanding of the SCO's structure and objectives. This multilevel description set the stage for the deeper exploration of China's role in the organization, laying the groundwork for the rest of the study.

Subsequently, the second chapter investigated the primary factors that motivated China to spearhead the creation of the SCO. Three interconnected factors were identified as particularly influential in shaping Beijing's decision-making. First, China's developmental trajectory during the 1980s and 1990s played a pivotal role. This period was characterized by significant economic reforms and increased openness, which bolstered China's confidence in its regional and international standing. As Beijing engaged more actively with the global community, it envisioned the "Shanghai Five" as a strategic mechanism to solidify its regional influence while promoting stability and development in its neighborhood, thereby facilitating its continued economic growth. Second, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the resulting power vacuum provided the PRC with an unprecedented opportunity to engage actively in Central Asia and develop its first comprehensive strategy for the region. Recognizing the necessity of a multilateral platform to engage with its post-Soviet neighbors, Beijing swiftly initiated the S5. This forum became the primary multilateral framework for China's involvement in the Eurasian region. Through the S5, Beijing successfully resolved border disputes, strengthened diplomatic ties, built mutual confidence, advanced its economic and energy objectives, and ensured internal stability in Xinjiang by securing regional cooperation against the "three evils". Third, China's embrace of multilateralism in the mid-1990s was a decisive factor in its approach. Following the collapse of the USSR, the PRC transitioned from reluctance to assertiveness in

participating in multilateral initiatives, recognizing their significance in both economic and security domains. This shift not only led China to engage more deeply with existing multilateral mechanisms but also motivated the creation of new frameworks, such as the SCO. This work posited that the SCO serves as a tangible manifestation of China's evolving approach to multilateralism, marking the first multilateral initiative initiated under Chinese leadership. It suggested that the SCO embodies both China's "New Security Concept" and "New Regionalism", both developed between the mid-1990s and early 2000s, reflecting a shift towards cooperative security mechanisms and positive interactions with neighboring states. Furthermore, it argued that the SCO reflects China's vision for a "Peaceful Rise", a diplomatic strategy seeking to advance China's economic and political interests while mitigating perceptions of threat.

Following this, Chapter 3 provided a theoretical analysis of China's endorsement of the SCO, building on the analysis conducted in the second chapter. This chapter balanced the insights of realism and neoliberal institutionalism to offer a comprehensive understanding of Beijing's stance. Realism, with its emphasis on power dynamics and national interests, was used to explain China's strategic use of the SCO as a tool to enhance its influence in Central Asia and secure its economic, security, and geopolitical objectives. It highlighted how the PRC leveraged the power vacuum created by the USSR's collapse to assert its presence in the region, viewing the SCO as a means to counterbalance other powers, particularly Russia, and to manage the distribution of influence in the Eurasian space. However, the chapter argued that realism alone could not fully explain China's actions, as it risked oversimplifying Beijing's motivations. To provide a more nuanced perspective, the chapter introduced neoliberal institutionalism. This perspective emphasized China's recognition of the growing importance of multilateral frameworks and its genuine commitment to regional cooperation. It clarified that the endorsement underscores China's commitment to proactive engagement and cooperation with neighboring states, driven by its "New Regionalism" approach. Additionally, China's decision was driven by its NSC, envisioning the SCO as a mechanism to promote a new

security paradigm based on cooperation and partnership, departing from traditional Cold-War alliance structures. Through neoliberal institutionalism, the chapter illuminated China's desire to create a stable, rules-based regional order that fosters peaceful relations and addresses common challenges, extending beyond mere power calculations. By blending both theoretical approaches, this chapter thereby provided a balanced picture of China's endorsement, considering pragmatic considerations alongside a sincere dedication to multilateralism and regional cooperation.

Having established the driving factors behind China's support for the SCO, the analysis then shifted to examining Beijing's initiatives to advance the organization. Chapter 4 focused on this aspect, detailing the various efforts undertaken by China within the SCO. The chapter began by emphasizing China's key contributions to the "Shanghai Spirit", the set of norms and principles underpinning the SCO. This was identified as a clear demonstration of China's normative power, showcasing its intent to shape the SCO's ideological framework. The discussion then transitioned to the institutionalization of the SCO, where the PRC has played an active and decisive role, viewing this process as essential for the organization's development and reinforcement. Next, the chapter addressed the security domain, highlighting that pressing security threats were the primary motivation behind China's engagement in the organization. This section revealed Beijing's strong advocacy for enhancing the SCO's security framework. Efforts include promoting norms and legal documents, adopting targeted measures for various security challenges, and hosting military exercises. Significant attention was also devoted to the economic realm, where China's leadership is especially prominent. The chapter examined economic cooperation within the SCO and China's role in shaping its economic framework, supporting vital projects, and facilitating trade and goods exchange. Additionally, it underscored China's ambition to integrate the SCO with the BRI, which Beijing views as fundamental to the economic development of the Eurasian region. Furthermore, the chapter explored the cultural cooperation within the SCO, an area that the PRC has consistently championed. Recognizing the importance of people-to-people connections and cultural complementarity among member states,

Beijing has acted as the main driving force, advocating for cultural initiatives and actively promoting them by hosting various cultural events. Finally, the chapter examined the process of SCO enlargement, highlighting China's pivotal role in advocating for the expansion of the organization. Since the first enlargement in 2004, China has been instrumental in welcoming new members, such as India and Pakistan in 2017, Iran in 2023, and, more recently, Belarus in 2024.

Building upon the examination in Chapter 4, the fifth and final chapter scrutinized China's multifaceted endeavors through the dual lenses of realism and neoliberal institutionalism. The realist perspective was instrumental in highlighting the pragmatism driving China's actions, with the PRC advancing the organization to serve its own interests and strategic goals. For instance, the "Shanghai Spirit" and cultural cooperation were seen as expressions of China's normative and soft power, reflecting its intent to influence the behavior of fellow member states while shaping a normative framework aligned with its authoritarian values. Similarly, this approach provided a lens to interpret the institutionalization of the SCO as a means for China to consolidate and reinforce its leadership within the organization. This perspective also shed light on the material aspects of China's economic and security initiatives. In the economic realm, China's actions were viewed as efforts to demonstrate its economic prowess and establish regional economic dominance, exemplified by the integration of the SCO with the BRI. These actions were also interpreted as steps toward creating a new economic and financial order that challenges the existing global framework. In the security domain, Beijing's actions were seen as driven by the need to ensure border stability, assert its military presence, and challenge the existing international security framework. Finally, the realist viewpoint offered a pragmatic interpretation of the SCO's membership expansion, viewing it as an effort by China to strengthen its regional hegemony, extend its influence over member states, and maintain power dynamics in the Eurasian region. After exploring these aspects through the realist lens, the chapter, in line with the thesis's intention to provide a dual-sided perspective, examined the same efforts through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism. This approach offered a more optimistic view by

emphasizing the importance of genuine motives in shaping China's SCO policy. From this perspective, China's efforts to shape the "Shanghai Spirit" and promote cultural cooperation were interpreted not as assertions of aggressive normative power, but as attempts to promote a new paradigm of regional state-to-state interactions potentially extending beyond the regional level. Similarly, the institutionalization process was viewed not as a way to consolidate leadership but as China's effort to enhance predictability and reduce tensions in state interactions. The neoliberal institutionalist perspective also highlighted China's economic and security initiatives as efforts to ensure regional prosperity and stability, evidenced by the integration of the BRI with the SCO and the promotion of the GSI within the SCO framework. Finally, this theoretical perspective interpreted the SCO's expansion as China's genuine attempt to foster a more inclusive and cooperative regional framework capable of addressing a broader range of common challenges.

In essence, this thesis has conducted a thorough exploration of China's pivotal role within the SCO, aiming to clarify why the PRC has taken a leading position in both initiating and advancing this regional organization. With its integration of theoretical insights with real-world dynamics, the research has provided a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors driving China's engagement in the organization. By investigating China's involvement from the launch of the S5 in 1996 to recent developments, the study has offered an updated and comprehensive analysis that revitalizes the literature on the subject. Through its innovative dual-sided theoretical approach, integrating realism and neoliberal institutionalism, the thesis has provided a balanced and holistic understanding of China's behavior, highlighting both material factors and deeper motivations. This dual framework has been instrumental in revealing the complex interplay between pragmatism and multilateralism in shaping China's engagement with the SCO. While strategic calculations and national interests are certainly significant drivers, this study has demonstrated that they are complemented by a genuine embrace of multilateralism and regional cooperation. The SCO, therefore, is not merely a tool for advancing China's power considerations but also a platform embodying its

vision for a new paradigm of international relations, as seen in initiatives like the BRI, the concept of a "community with a shared future for all mankind" and the GSI.

By challenging the predominant realist interpretations and offering a nuanced perspective that incorporates neoliberal institutionalism, this study contributes significantly to the academic discourse on China's role in the SCO and its broader foreign policy. This balanced analysis also addresses gaps in the existing literature, particularly those prevalent in Western scholarship, which often portrays China as a monolithic threat to the international status quo. This one-sided perspective tends to emphasize the risks associated with China's behavior while overlooking the nuanced motivations and complexities that underlie its actions. By unpacking the nuanced motivations behind China's actions, this thesis aims to dispel misconceptions and foster a more balanced discourse on China's foreign policy objectives. Furthermore, this research encourages further studies on China's foreign policy and its role in regional and international organizations, a topic which continues to garner much attention among observers and analysts. As China's influence in global affairs continues to grow, it is crucial to comprehend the multifaceted factors driving its actions in multilateral frameworks. A deeper understanding of these dynamics is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for informing policy decisions and anticipating future developments in international relations.

In sum, this thesis has demonstrated that China's involvement in the SCO is characterized by a dual approach, where pragmatic strategic interests are intricately intertwined with sincere multilateral aspirations. This duality is emblematic of China's broader foreign policy strategy, where the pursuit of national interests is thoughtfully balanced with efforts to contribute to regional cooperation and global governance. By examining China's role through both realist and neoliberal institutionalist lenses, this study has offered a nuanced understanding of the motivations behind China's actions, providing valuable insights into its evolving role in regional and global dynamics.

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