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Central Asian Agency: from the Shanghai Five to the SCO

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ABSTRACT

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is usually traced to the 1990s "Shanghai Five" process and read as a product of strategic convergence between China and Russia. Yet its other participants, the Central Asian states, are rarely treated as active agents. Tracing the grouping's evolution into the SCO between 1996 and 2001, this brief argues that these states were rule-comakers rather than rule-takers. Kazakhstan convened the 1998 Almaty summit, keeping the process alive as its agenda widened beyond border security, while Kyrgyzstan proposed the organization's anti-terrorist structure. The 2000 Dushanbe summit further institutionalized the forum and brought in Uzbekistan as an observer that joined the SCO as a founding member the following year. Drawing on the summit declarations and sources in Chinese, English, and Russian, the brief presents these moves as deliberate policies by newly sovereign states acting as subjects, not objects, of regional order. Their agency corrects a great-power-centric reading of how China builds regional institutions and cautions against seeing smaller states merely as scenery.

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Introduction

A quarter century ago, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established, an organization with a distinctive place in Chinese diplomatic history. It was the first international body to bear the name of a Chinese city and the first major multilateral organization co-founded by the People's Republic of China—the culmination of a decade of regional diplomacy that followed China's post-Tiananmen isolation. The SCO grew out of the "Shanghai Five," a grouping born of two parallel border negotiations, on delimitation and demilitarization, between China and its post-Soviet neighbors. It took shape amid the wider transformation that followed the Soviet collapse: the sudden appearance of independent states across Central

Eurasia. On its 25th anniversary, this brief revisits how the Shanghai Five became the SCO, focusing on the role of the Central Asian states in that process. Much of the academic and expert commentary explains the organization's origins as a story of great-power convergence—the strategic alignment of China and Russia in the 1990s—with Central Asia treated as the setting rather than a participant (Lo 2008; Sun 2021). That account is incomplete. The Central Asian states were at the table, and they helped shape what was built. That agency has begun to draw scholarly attention (Aris 2011; Cooley 2012), though rarely at the level of the SCO's founding. This brief takes up the founding itself, arguing that the Central Asian states were rule-comakers, not merely rule-takers. Newly sovereign and eager to act as subjects rather than objects of regional politics, they used multilateral institution-building to assert their standing and manage their exposure to larger neighbors. Kazakhstan is the clearest case, keeping the process alive at a decisive moment. Kyrgyzstan later proposed the structure at the core of its security architecture, and the 2000 Dushanbe summit brought Uzbekistan in as an observer, setting the stage for the group's transformation into the SCO a year later. Recognizing this agency offers a fuller account of how regional institutions in Eurasia are actually built, and a reminder that China's regional engagement is negotiated rather than imposed.

The Origins of the Shanghai Five

The SCO's roots lie in a border negotiation that began in the final years of the Soviet Union. It was the third attempt to resolve the Sino-Soviet border dispute, after rounds in 1964 and 1969–1978 had ended without result (Kireev 2006, 63–85, 110–160). Almost three decades of frozen relations had followed the Sino-Soviet split, including the 1969 border clashes that closed and militarized the frontier. Mikhail Gorbachev's reorientation of Soviet foreign policy reopened the door, and both sides returned to the table committed to two interlocking questions at once: where the border ran, and how to pull back the forces massed along it. Talks on delimitation began in 1987, on demilitarization in 1989. The dual-track approach produced results. In April 1990, on the demilitarization track, the two sides signed an agreement on guiding principles for mutual troop reductions: cuts could be asymmetric, with the side holding superiority in a given area reducing more, and remaining forces would be configured for defensive purposes only (Kireev 2006, 380). On the delimitation track, progress was also made. The Sino-Soviet border comprised two sections divided by Mongolia: an eastern section bordering Russia, and a western section running mainly alongside the Central Asian republics, with a short Russian stretch as well. In May 1991, China and the USSR signed an agreement defining the border line in the eastern section, where no fundamental disagreement existed (Kireev 2006, 282–301). The disputed areas within that section and the western section, where the agreed border line had yet to be put on paper, were left for further negotiations when the USSR collapsed in December of that year.

The Soviet dissolution transformed China's neighborhood almost overnight. Where Beijing had faced a single counterpart across a long shared border, it now faced four post-Soviet states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Rather than start over, the parties extended the existing framework under new political conditions. Border demilitarization talks resumed

in March 1992, and that September the four post-Soviet republics formalized their format, establishing joint delegations for the delimitation and demilitarization talks with China (Kireev 2006, 252, 387; Amanzholova, Atanov, and Turarbekov 2022, 45), an arrangement Iwashita (2008) calls "Four Plus One." For the first time, the Central Asian states took part as sovereign states rather than as Soviet republics. These "Four Plus One" negotiations produced two landmark agreements. In April 1996, the five heads of state met in Shanghai and signed the Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field in the Border Area, committing to non-military zones, mutual notification of exercises, and limits on troop concentrations. A complementary agreement on mutual force reductions followed in Moscow in 1997. These two accords drew wider attention to the grouping and fixed its identity as the "Shanghai Five."

The 1998 Almaty Summit: Kazakhstan as Institutional Agent

The 1996 and 1997 agreements marked the culmination of the border-security track: the grouping had achieved what it set out to do. That raised an obvious question—what next? In spring 1998 Kazakhstan supplied an answer, proposing to convene the next summit in Almaty, the first held in Central Asia, and the other participants agreed. Its central theme, extending cooperation beyond the border into regional security and trade, came at China's proposal, according to Kireev (2006, 400), who headed the joint delegation in the border-demilitarization negotiations with China. In other words, the agenda came out of China and a Central Asian state working together, not out of a Sino-Russian design. Without the summit, the Shanghai Five might not have outlasted the border task it was built for, let alone become the SCO. The widening took several forms. Security concerns extended from the border to the region: the Joint Statement named national separatism, ethnic intolerance, and religious extremism as unacceptable, and pledged joint measures against international terrorism, arms and drug trafficking, and organized crime (Almaty Joint Statement 1998, pt. 5). This early formulation anticipated what the SCO codified in 2001 as its "three evils": terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. The Joint Statement also opened economic cooperation, transport, energy, and investment to multilateral engagement, well beyond what the border talks had covered (Almaty Joint Statement 1998, pts. 6–7). Jiang Zemin's address gave the economic agenda its content, proposing cooperation in trade, transport, energy, metallurgy, light industry, and agriculture, and reaffirming China's part in building the Eurasian Land Bridge (Jiang 1998). Kazakhstan, for its part, won endorsement for an initiative of its own, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) (Almaty Joint Statement 1998, pt. 3). The summit pushed toward institutionalization as well, agreeing to convene meetings of experts, foreign ministers, and heads of state as needed. And it changed the format, moving away from the "Four Plus One" arrangement of 1992–1997, in which the four post-Soviet states had negotiated with China as a single side, toward a multilateral setting of individual participants (Xia 2001). How the summit came together is itself telling. In late June 1998, days before the meeting, Russia informed Kazakhstan that President Yeltsin would not attend and would be represented by Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Zhang Deguang—who had served as China's ambassador to Kazakhstan in 1992–1993 and was by then its deputy foreign minister—recalled the immediate reaction: if Russia sent only its foreign minister, could this

still be a summit of heads of state? Kazakhstan, as host, had a stake in keeping it at the highest level. Foreign Minister Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, now Kazakhstan's president, called Zhang directly to convey that President Nazarbayev was personally inviting Jiang Zemin to make an official visit and attend, with full protocol. Jiang came. Zhang, who would later become the SCO's first secretary- general, judged the episode plainly: the Almaty meeting was key to keeping the five-nation summit going as a process, and ultimately to its becoming the SCO in 2001 (Zhang 2016). Almaty produced a bilateral milestone too. Kazakhstan and China had already settled most of their border on their own: an April 1994 agreement fixed roughly 90 percent of the line and left two disputed areas, about 944 square kilometers in all, for later, following the 1991 precedent of codifying what was agreed and negotiating the rest (Amanzholova, Atanov, and Turarbekov 2022, 50–51, 54). On July 4, 1998, on the summit's sidelines, Nazarbayev and Jiang signed an agreement settling them. It applied a "fifty-fifty" principle, not a literal split but a negotiated compromise (Iwashita 2008): of the 944 square kilometers, Kazakhstan received 537 (57 percent) and China 407 (43 percent) (Amanzholova, Atanov, and Turarbekov 2022, 60–61). With it, Kazakhstan became the first post-Soviet state to fully settle its border with China, setting an example for the others.

From Almaty to Dushanbe: A Wider Agency

The momentum from Almaty carried into the two summits that followed, at Bishkek in August 1999 and Dushanbe in July 2000, which together completed the Shanghai Five's transformation into the SCO.

The regional security environment deteriorated sharply in between, and the Central Asian states turned that pressure into a case for deeper multilateral cooperation. In February 1999, bomb explosions in Tashkent targeted President Karimov (RFE/RL 1999), attributed by Uzbekistan to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) (Pannier 2019). That summer brought one of the gravest challenges to the region's security since independence: IMU fighters crossed from Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan's Batken district, taking hostages and prompting a military response, with a second incursion in 2000 (Pannier 2019). Rather than face these threats alone, the exposed states pressed for a joint response, lending the group's security agenda new urgency. Kyrgyzstan—hit directly at Batken—proposed a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, endorsed at Dushanbe. It built on the Bishkek Group, a forum of the five states' law-enforcement and security chiefs founded in 1998 (Logvinov 2002, 11). The two declarations sharpened the security agenda and advanced the group's institutions. Terrorism, religious extremism, and national separatism were named with increasing force at Bishkek and Dushanbe, alongside drug and arms trafficking and illegal migration (Bishkek Declaration 1999, pt. 4; Dushanbe Declaration 2000, pt. 5). Dushanbe went furthest institutionally, committing to transform the Shanghai Five into a regional multilateral structure and establishing a Council of National Coordinators, the group's first standing coordinating body (Dushanbe Declaration 2000, pts. 1, 18). The declarations also engaged the region's two major conflicts: the war still under way in Afghanistan and the civil war that had ended in Tajikistan in 1997. All three summits named the Afghan war a threat to regional stability and backed a

UN settlement, and at Bishkek the group welcomed Kyrgyzstan's proposal to host an Afghan peace conference (Almaty Joint Statement 1998, pt. 9; Bishkek Declaration 1999, pt. 7; Dushanbe Declaration 2000, pt. 11). The group also held up the Tajik settlement as a model of negotiated compromise (Bishkek Declaration 1999, pt. 8). Tajikistan, once the region's most war-torn state, hosted the Dushanbe summit itself. Beyond the anti-terrorist structure, other Central Asian initiatives ran through both meetings. Kazakhstan's proposal for CICA was endorsed at all three summits, from Almaty to Bishkek to Dushanbe (Almaty Joint Statement 1998, pt. 3; Bishkek Declaration 1999, pt. 5; Dushanbe Declaration 2000, pt. 13), and its call for a heads-of-government meeting to deepen economic cooperation was written into the Dushanbe Declaration (Dushanbe Declaration 2000, pt. 14). Bishkek also endorsed Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev's "Silk Road Diplomacy" doctrine, which called for reviving the Silk Road as a framework for contemporary cooperation, sustainable development, and regional stability (Bishkek Declaration 1999, pt. 6). That last point is a reminder that the Silk Road framing now associated with China's 2013 Belt and Road Initiative did not originate in Beijing alone: Central Asian leaders were invoking it in their own diplomacy more than a decade earlier. Uzbekistan, an observer at Dushanbe, acceded as a founding member at the SCO's establishment in 2001. The organization founded in Shanghai that June was the culmination of a decade of negotiation and summitry, carrying forward the agenda, security architecture, and membership the process had built. That configuration of six held until the SCO's first enlargement in 2017, when India and Pakistan joined.

Conclusion

This story is worth retelling now because great-power engagement with smaller states is usually examined from the powerful side: their aims, their resources, their intentions. The making of the SCO is a reminder to look past Sino-Russian strategic convergence to the states on the other side of the table, which came to it with purposes of their own and pursued them deliberately. Nor is this only history. The SCO has grown well beyond its six founders, and each new member arrives with an agenda of its own, reshaping the organization much as the Central Asian states did at its creation. The point reaches beyond the SCO. As the post-1945 order frays and great powers act with growing disregard for its rules, attention narrows to the strongest players. That is exactly when the smaller states are easiest to overlook and hardest to do without: even in a moment defined by the strong, they negotiate, initiate, and shape the terms of their own engagement.

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