

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Japan

– Moving Together to Reshape the Eurasian Community –

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Introduction: How to understand the SCO

Everything surrounding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been interpreted as negative, particularly, for US analysts. The SCO summit's decision to demand the withdrawal of a "foreign army" from the SCO sphere at Astana in 2005 and the invitation of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to a Shanghai summit in 2006 tend to be considered as the SCO's common will, initiated by Russia and China, to end the US presence in Central Asia. Some Western analysts believe that the current SCO tendencies have developed into an anti-US coalition. While many doubt that, their analyses, nonetheless, should be tested against an informed and systematic study of how the SCO has evolved so far.

According to research, the possibility of the SCO developing toward an anti-US coalition is overstated. Even if Vladimir Putin often trumpets the SCO's role in balancing US influence in the region, other member states basically do not share this view so much. Even China, a would-be best partner in balancing the US, has repeatedly emphasized the SCO's utility in mostly economic terms while downplaying the military context. In Russia's mind, out of fear of China making inroads into Central Asia, the establishment of such a strategic partnership within the SCO sounds far from the kind coalition against the US that many analysts claim.

Factually, the SCO decision on limiting the US presence in Central Asia was unexpectedly demanded by Uzbek President Islam Karimov, while Russia and China both sought to tone down the terms of the declaration. Even the invitation to the Iranian President to the Shanghai summit in 2006, as well as to other heads of the SCO observer states, was a procedural protocol. Ahmadinejad did attend the summit along with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and Mongolian President Nambaryn Enkhbayar, though he played up his commitment to the SCO to show an Iranian strong counteraction against US pressure over its nuclear development program. Groundless misunderstandings of the SCO are often repeated. One of the reasons for this is that the spirit and development of the SCO is too often ignored.

A Key for the SCO: Regional Cooperation via Border Arrangement

The SCO was conceived out of the "Shanghai process" on the basis of the "Four (Russia + Three Central Asian countries) plus One (China)" framework on the former Soviet-Sino border cooperation. The SCO predecessor, the so-called

"Shanghai Five," was born as a forum to discuss CBM and the demarcation issue in the former Soviet-Chinese border region under a Russo-Chinese co-initiative. The beginning was in the late 1980s, when both sides agreed to build measures to prevent would-be military conflicts and resolve territorial issues in the border area. The former led to an agreement on the leading principles of armed forces reduction and confidence-building in the military field on the border in April 1990, the latter to a 1991 agreement, which resolved 98% of the eastern border between the Soviet Union and China, with two disputed islands, Xeixiazi and Abagaitui, untouched.

After 1993, the "Four plus One" formation was put into play for two regular committees – for confidence-building and arms reduction and for joint boundary demarcation. Here we focus on the fruits borne by the committee for confidence-building and arms reduction. Firstly, it was the Shanghai agreement on confidence building in the military field in the border area in 1996. Then, all concerned states agreed to stabilize their border areas by establishing non-military zones and promising to exchange military information. The overall effectiveness was dubious, but it did represent a symbolic step toward peace and cooperation on the former Sino-Soviet border, which had been historically plagued by severe military conflicts and a deep-rooted mutual distrust. Since then, "Shanghai" has acquired the special meaning of "stability and trust" among the five member countries.

In February 1997, when the leaders of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Moscow and signed an agreement on the mutual reduction of armed forces along the border area, the level of "stability and trust" between the concerned parties was upgraded by the agreement for the limitation of arms and personnel within the 100 kilometer zone of the former Sino-Soviet border and the mutual inspection of it. The name "Shanghai Five" became popular just following the second summit.

Over time, the "Shanghai process" developed. It brought about a cooperation organization and widened its membership to include Uzbekistan as a full-fledged member in 2001 and Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Iran as observer members a few years later. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization reached another dimension: security cooperation vis-à-vis a kind of transnational "evil" beyond the border and economic regional cooperation, while maintaining and developing the original spirit of the "Shanghai process." The key of the spirit was undoubtedly in the regional cooperation via the border arrangements.

Balance Game in/around the SCO vs. Border Politics

As the SCO develops, a new character of the organization has been apparent vis-à-vis international alignments. The "Shanghai process," though it principally shed light on the border cooperation, was sometimes reflected by the

Sino-Russian strategic cooperation in world affairs. The cooperation, neither strong nor comprehensive enough in the 1990s, sounded more like an ad hoc accommodation in individual events, but sometimes served for balancing vis-à-vis the West and US foreign policy. This orientation became more pronounced following the establishment of the SCO and when Uzbekistan, a Central Asian country and former Soviet republic that shares a border neither with Russia nor with China, joined as a full-member. In a sense, Uzbekistan is free from the border arrangement accumulated by the “Shanghai process.” Uzbekistan has a kind of “free hand” within the SCO policy. Then, how Uzbekistan acts in the SCO was decisive for the SCO orientation. This became apparent following the SCO’s reaction just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Uzbekistan’s decision to permit the US presence in Central Asia. It is also worth remembering the SCO response (at Astana) to the Andijan incident in 2005 after the freezing of US-Uzbek relations. Uzbekistan appears to play the role of steering country for the SCO, particularly in its balancing politics.

India and Iran, though only observer states, play a similar role as Uzbekistan. India has no shared border with Central Asia while Iran’s neighboring countries include Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, namely, far from the place of “the Shanghai spirit.” Interestingly, both countries can take a relatively “free” attitude toward the SCO but it is clearly contrasted: the latter is aggressive and the former is cool. India hopes to be in a close coalition with the US, and the SCO’s priority is low, at least, keeping in touch with the SCO is closely related with balancing Pakistan within the SCO. On the contrary, Iran has some reasons to need the SCO. Iran is isolated even in the Gulf and highly pressed by the US, particularly for the nuclear issue. For Iran, the SCO seems a good place for maneuvering and balancing against the US. This is the reason behind Iran’s eagerness to join the SCO as a full-fledged member. In short, owing to the presence of Uzbekistan and Iran in the SCO, the SCO is looked upon as a kind of “rouge states union” in the US mind.

However, Mongolia and Pakistan should be viewed differently. Mongolia is a country that lies between China and Russia. Unless Mongolia joined the SCO, the border security arrangement between Russia and China would not have been completed. Therefore, Russia and China are said to have agreed that the first country to be invited to the SCO would be Mongolia. Though many Mongolian experts expressed their dissatisfaction with the SCO and refused to make a commitment to it, Mongolia eventually joined the SCO first as an observer state in 2004. Mongolia hopes to develop its relations with the US and Japan as a “third neighbor country” beyond the border but could not refuse an invitation from its two giant neighbors to join the SCO. On the contrary, Pakistan has been eager to join the SCO since 2000. Pakistan was the first country to apply for membership but was refused for its deep commitment to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Some watchers may wonder about Pakistan's commitment to the SCO but Pakistan did establish all-round relations, at least, for stabilizing the border area vis-à-vis Central Asia. It is not difficult for Pakistan to make its commitment to a "Shanghai process."

Putting the SCO more open and transparent

Concluding the SCO characteristics, we should draw the two dimensions of the dynamics within the SCO. First, border politics and regional cooperation, following the "Shanghai spirit," and, second, balancing in/around the SCO, particularly promoted by Uzbekistan and Iran. The most important thing is to discern these two dimensions. The balancing dimension may serve some member countries' short-term interests but could cause huge damage to SCO unity and its constructive cooperation with the non-members surrounding the SCO in the long run.

Therefore, an urgent task is how to defuse the collision between the SCO and others, particularly, the US. In this sense, the SCO should state the original spirit of "Shanghai" more clearly while the US and some western countries should stop pushing the SCO toward opposition to the West. The SCO must be more open and transparent, following the original "Shanghai spirit," namely, "Never be against a third party," or "being a new model for the post-Cold War." A suggestion "against a mono-polar world" from the SCO is understandable to a degree but the SCO must not act as an exclusive forum against the US and Europe from the point of view of the "Shanghai Spirit." Then, how can we bridge that gap between them? This is an urgent task for constructing a partnership between the SCO and the US, Europe, Japan and other countries, which want to establish peaceful and stable regime over Central Eurasia.

The August 2007 summit in Bishkek apparently calmed down the "furious" anti-US tendency within the SCO that some researchers had played up before. The results likely suggest that there will be a good opportunity for a dialogue between the SCO and the West. Japan can help bridge this gap by playing the role of intermediary.

Japan's Commitment to the SCO

Some reasons to put Japan on the agenda are as follows.

1. Japan's "colorless" presence in Central Asia;
2. Its "all-around good ties" with the observer member states;
3. Its "strategic accommodation" both with Russia and China;
4. Its "alliance" with the US;
5. Its role as an "Asian open gate" toward the West.

Japan's considerable commitment to the political and economic development of the Central Asian countries is well-known. They appreciate Japan's contributions to the region, while recognizing that Japan has little linkage to any specific

religion or ideology. They also have little to fear about Japan wanting hegemony over the region. Even Uzbekistan would accept Japan's presence in Central Asia. The "Central Asia plus Japan" format is also successfully strengthened.

"Colorless" positioning is also true for Japan's relations with the observer states. Japan is a neutral but desirable partner to both India and Pakistan. Even Iran has stable relations with Japan thanks to Japan's independent foreign policy toward the Middle East since the 1970s. Mongolia, not only a Central Eurasian partner but also a member of the Northeast Asian community, is open to Japan's involvement in the region. Japan's commitment to the SCO has no reason to be rejected by them.

One of the problems may come from Russia, China and the US respectively. It is true that Russia negatively responded to the "Central Asia plus Japan" format and ex-Premier Koizumi Junichiro's visit to Tashkent and Almaty in 2006. While Japan's past militarism toward the Eurasian continent is still a point of contention, China is also worried that Japan may develop ties with Central Asia, a part of "China's backyard." However, after Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's inauguration, strategic bilateral dialogue has developed both with Russia and China. China clearly has restrained its criticism of Japan (i.e., Japan bashing) recently and Russia appreciated Japan's active commitment to the Russian market regardless of the existing territorial dispute. A strong counter-response against Japan's commitment toward Central Asia from China and Russia could be manageable. The US also might as well have a chance to change its harsh attitude toward the SCO in consideration of the Bush administration's recent policy shift. Particularly, after the presidential election in the coming year, a mood for reconciliation with the Eurasian powers is not out of the question. Japan, as a trustworthy ally of the US, should persuade the US to make a more positive commitment toward the SCO to reshape the Eurasian security situation together. As a historic "Asian gate" toward the West, Japan has an incentive to invite other western countries to back up this mission. Then, how do we go forward toward a concrete procedure? I point out the procedure as follows in the "Eurasian interaction initiative":

- Using the SCO Charter article 14 : a "Dialogue Partner," not an "Observer"
- Start-up on an ad hoc status at the summit: "Guest" (e.g. Afghanistan)
- Pre-summit interactions: e.g. the Japanese Foreign Minister's visit to Dushanbe on the eve of the 2008 Summit
- Establishing a "SCO plus alpha" format; from a "Guest" toward a "Partner": the SCO plus 3 (EU, US, Japan), the SCO Regional Forum and so on.
- Linking the SCO and other regional organizations as SAARC, ASEAN, the six-party talks (a would-be future Northeast Asian security forum) and others toward reshaping a Eurasian security community

It is important not to hasten deep commitment to the SCO. The SCO has its

own independent and proper history. It is enough to establish an interface with others at the first phase. A “guest” status is available here. Then, we go to the second phase: a “dialogue partner.” Though the status is mentioned in the SCO Charter, its potential has yet to be realized. The next phase is to create a format for “the SCO plus alpha,” for example, “the SCO plus 3,” including Japan, EU and the US. If the US has yet to commit to the process, “the SCO plus EU and Japan,” for the time being, will suffice. As the dialogues proceed, the multi-vectorized cooperation will be on track. At the last phase, the institutionalization would be linked with other institutions, e.g. a future security forum on Northeast Asia, perhaps, a successor of the six-party talks.

Conclusion: Toward Sharing a “Eurasian Interaction Initiative”

In conclusion, I wrap up a balance sheet on the “Eurasian Interaction Initiative.”

The benefits for the SCO are as follows:

- More prestige
- Preventing potential conflicts with the West
- Future perspective as a key component of a future all-around Eurasian forum
- Calming down the unnecessary noise for “balancing” around the SCO through a build-up of mutual confidence mechanisms with non-member states and groups
- Strengthening the positive aspects of constructive regional cooperation under a global support

The benefits for Japan are as follows:

- Cost-benefit commitment to Central Asia (in a liaison with the “Central Asia plus Japan” format)
- Cost-effective commitment to the SCO as its “Partner”: Neither deep nor heavy obligations toward the SCO (non-involvement in daily arrangements or meetings within the SCO)
- Prestige that follows the promotion of an emerging Eurasian security forum
- Redefining and developing Japan’s role in the US-Japan security arrangement
- Multi-facet channels for managing relations with Russia and China

There isn’t any reason to exclude the “SCO plus alpha” format or to reject Japan’s commitment to the SCO developing process. To realize the initiative, the EU’s and US’s cooperation, at the very least, understanding, will be necessary. How we unify voices of “plus three” to make a more stabilized Eurasia is the next key to be discussed.