HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

EVOLUTION OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION: FROM THE "SHANGHAI FIVE" TO A MULTIFUNCTIONAL INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION

Yusupova Guljakhon Makhammat qizi
Master's student at Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
y.guljahon@mail.ru
+998943227122
doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22901415

Abstract. The evolution of the SCO from a border confidence-building mechanism to a multifunctional intergovernmental organisation is examined. The stages of the "Shanghai Five", the establishment of the SCO, institutionalisation, the expansion of functions and membership, and the strategic renewal of 2025-2026 are identified. It is shown that the organisation developed through consensus, permanent bodies and sectoral coordination without transferring sovereign powers to supranational structures.
Keywords: SCO, Shanghai Five, regionalism, institutionalisation, security, consensus, Central Asia.

Annotatsiya. ShHTning chegaraviy ishonchni mustahkamlash mexanizmidan ko'p funksiyali hukumatlararo tashkilotgacha bo'lgan evolyutsiyasi ko'rib chiqiladi. "Shanxay beshligi" bosqichi, ShHTning tashkil etilishi, institutlashuv jarayoni, funksiyalar va a'zolik tarkibining kengayishi, shuningdek, 2025–2026-yillardagi strategik yangilanish bosqichlari ajratib ko'rsatiladi. Tashkilotning rivojlanishi suveren vakolatlarni millatlararo tuzilmalarga topshirmagan holda konsensus, doimiy organlar va tarmoq yo'nalishlaridagi muvofiqlashtirish asosida amalga oshgani ko'rsatiladi.
Kalit so'zlar: ShHT, Shanxay beshligi, regionalizm, institutlashuv, xavfsizlik, konsensus, Markaziy Osiyo.

Аннотация. Рассматривается эволюция ШОС от механизма укрепления доверия в приграничных районах до многофункциональной межправительственной организации. Выделяются этапы «Шанхайской пятёрки», создания ШОС, институционализации, расширения функций и членства, а также стратегического обновления в 2025–2026 годах. Показано, что развитие организации осуществлялось на основе консенсуса, деятельности постоянных органов и отраслевой координации без передачи суверенных полномочий наднациональным структурам.
Ключевые слова: ШОС, «Шанхайская пятёрка», регионализм, институционализация, безопасность, консенсус, Центральная Азия.

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

INTRODUCTION

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has evolved from a border confidence-building mechanism into a multisectoral intergovernmental organisation [4]. As of 2026, it comprises ten member states. Its contemporary agenda includes security, political coordination, the economy, transport, energy, digital technologies and humanitarian ties. The development of the SCO should therefore be considered as both a historical and an institutional process.

Regionalism theory explains the expansion of the functions of regional groupings after the end of the Cold War [12]. The institutional approach shows that stable rules and recurring procedures reduce uncertainty in interstate interaction [13]. The purpose of this article is to identify the main stages in the evolution of the SCO and determine the institutional changes that transformed the "Shanghai Five" into a multifunctional organisation.

METHODOLOGY

The source base of the study consists of the Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO, the Charter of the organisation [7], official information on SCO membership, and materials from the 2025 Tianjin Summit and the 2026 Bishkek Summit [1]. The scholarly basis includes studies on regionalism, international institutions, regional security and the history of the SCO.

Historical-chronological, institutional and comparative methods were used. The historical method made it possible to establish the sequence of stages; the institutional method was used to compare changes in rules and bodies; and the comparative method helped distinguish the initial border-focused model from the contemporary multisectoral structure. Regional security complex theory was applied to explain the interdependence of regional threats [11].

RESULTS

The immediate precursor of the SCO was the "Shanghai Five". In 1996, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed an agreement on confidence-building in the military field in the border area, and in 1997 an agreement on the mutual reduction of armed forces; these arrangements increased military predictability along the former Soviet-Chinese border [10]. K. Kh. Rakhimov associates this stage with the formation of a stable "Shanghai process", which by the end of the 1990s had moved beyond exclusively border-related issues [5].

The expansion of the agenda was linked to transnational threats. Terrorism, extremism, separatism and illicit drug trafficking became recurring areas of cooperation; S. Aris characterises the early SCO primarily as a regional response to non-traditional threats rather than as a classical military-political alliance [9]. This feature remained after the formal establishment of the organisation.

On 15 June 2001, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed the Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO [2]. The inclusion of Uzbekistan demonstrated that the new format was no longer limited to states sharing a border with China [2]. In 2002, the Charter established the goals, principles and system of SCO bodies.

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

In 2002-2004, a permanent institutional structure took shape: the legal foundations of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) were established, and the Secretariat in Beijing and the RATS Executive Committee in Tashkent began operating. Zhou Jun regards this stage as a transition from political arrangements to a stable system of bodies of an international organisation [8].

From the mid-2000s, the SCO expanded its functional agenda: trade, transport, energy, education, culture, healthcare and emergency response were added to security cooperation [4]. At the same time, the organisation retained its intergovernmental character: common bodies coordinate interaction, but member states do not transfer supranational powers to them [7].

The next stage was associated with membership enlargement. India and Pakistan became full members in 2017, Iran in 2023 and Belarus in 2024; by 2026, the SCO comprised ten member states. Enlargement increased the organisation's geographical scale while also increasing the diversity of interests, making coordination procedures even more significant.

At the Tianjin Summit on 1 September 2025, the SCO Development Strategy until 2035 was approved together with 24 documents [6]. At the Bishkek Summit on 1 September 2026, the member states continued to update organisational mechanisms and adopted a new package of decisions [1].

The SCO's internal dynamics are influenced by different national emphases. Li Xing identifies a shared Chinese and Russian interest in stability across Eurasia while noting differences in instruments: the Chinese approach is more closely associated with economic interconnectedness, whereas the Russian approach places greater emphasis on security and political coordination [3].

Table 1. Main stages in the institutional evolution of the SCO

Period	Key content	Result
1996-1997	Military confidence-building and arms reductions	"Shanghai Five"
2001	Establishment of the SCO with Uzbekistan	Regional format
2002-2004	Charter, RATS, Secretariat	Permanent institutional structure
2005-2016	Expansion of the sectoral agenda	Multisectoral model
2017-2024	Accession of India, Pakistan, Iran and Belarus	Membership enlargement
2025-2026	Strategy until 2035 and new decisions	Long-term planning

DISCUSSION

The results show that the evolution of the SCO has been determined not only by an increase in the number of participants. Its functions expanded at the same time as permanent procedures became more

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

firmly established. This dynamic corresponds to contemporary regionalism, in which regional organisations gradually combine several areas of activity [12].

The SCO, however, has not become a supranational integration organisation. Its model is based on intergovernmental coordination and consensus. This supports the sovereign equality of the participants, but makes the pace of decision-making dependent on the willingness of all member states to compromise. The effectiveness of the organisation is therefore appropriately assessed through the continuity of dialogue, the existence of functioning mechanisms and the implementation of agreed areas of cooperation.

The SCO's original security logic can be explained by the regional interdependence of borders, military transparency and transnational threats. This foundation was subsequently supplemented by economic and humanitarian functions. A SIPRI study shows that the SCO combines the tasks of reducing conflict potential, responding to transnational threats and developing practical regional cooperation [10].

Uzbekistan occupies a distinct place in the institutional history of the SCO: the republic became one of the founding states of the organisation in 2001, and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure is located in Tashkent [8]. These facts underline the importance of Central Asia in the SCO's institutional geography.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the SCO comprises successive stages of border confidence-building, the establishment of the organisation, institutionalisation, functional expansion, membership enlargement and long-term strategic planning. Security has retained its role as a core area, while being supplemented by economic, transport, technological and humanitarian dimensions.

Its main feature remains its intergovernmental and consensus-based character. The SCO creates rules and platforms for coordinating interests, but does not replace the national policies of member states. The Strategy until 2035 and the decisions adopted in 2026 confirm the continuation of this model.

REFERENCES

1. SCO Bishkek Summit: 26th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State and the "SCO Plus" Meeting. 1 September 2026 // Official SCO website. URL: https://eng.sectsco.org/20260901/2493609.html (accessed: 20.09.2026).
2. Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Shanghai, 15 June 2001 // Official SCO website. URL: https://eng.sectsco.org/20010615/1626670.html (accessed: 20.09.2026).
3. Li Xing. China's and Russia's Strategies in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Comparative Analysis // Comparative Politics. 2017. Vol. 8, No. 2. P. 98-107. DOI: 10.18611/2221-3279-2017-8-2-98-107.

HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

4. About the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation // Official SCO website. URL: https://eng.sectsco.org/20170109/192193.html (accessed: 20.09.2026).
5. Rakhimov K. Kh. History of the Establishment and Main Stages of Formation and Development of the SCO // Kazachestvo. 2021. No. 51. P. 52-55.
6. SCO Tianjin Summit: 25th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State and the "SCO Plus" Meeting. 1 September 2025 // Official SCO website. URL: https://eng.sectsco.org/20250901/1963431.html (accessed: 20.09.2026).
7. Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. St Petersburg, 7 June 2002 // Official SCO website. URL: https://eng.sectsco.org/documents/
8. Zhou Jun. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: History of Establishment // St. Petersburg State Polytechnical University Journal. Humanities and Social Sciences. 2015. No. 3 (227). P. 64-72. DOI: 10.5862/JHSS.227.8.
9. Aris S. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: "Tackling the Three Evils". A Regional Response to Non-traditional Security Challenges or an Anti-Western Bloc? // Europe-Asia Studies. 2009. Vol. 61, No. 3. P. 457-482. DOI: 10.1080/09668130902753309.
10. Bailes A. J. K., Dunay P., Pan Guang, Troitskiy M. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. SIPRI Policy Paper No. 17. Stockholm: SIPRI, 2007. 58 p.
11. Buzan B., Wæver O. Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 564 p.
12. Hurrell A. Explaining the Resurgence of Regionalism in World Politics // Review of International Studies. 1995. Vol. 21, No. 4. P. 331-358. DOI: 10.1017/S0260210500117954.
13. Keohane R. O. International Institutions: Two Approaches // International Studies Quarterly. 1988. Vol. 32, No. 4. P. 379-396. DOI: 10.2307/2600589.