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Ten Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Lost Decade? A Partner for the U.S.?

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	4
INTRODUCTION	6
PART I: SCO AT 10: EVOLVING SLOWLY, BUT SURELY	8
CHAPTER ONE: INCREMENTAL ACHIEVEMENTS.....	10
A. Security Activities Dominate	11
B. Economic Focus Rising.....	14
C. Soft-Power Attention Distributed	16
CHAPTER TWO: CONSTANT CHALLENGES	17
A. Stability? Or Noninterference?	17
B. Divergent National Goals and Bilateral Tensions	18
C. A Work in Progress=Weak, Ineffective?.....	19
CHAPTER THREE: SURVIVING DESPITE THE STRESSES	20
A. Participants See Value.....	20
B. Rise of Regionalism Helps	23
PART II: US-SCO PARTNERSHIP: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES.....	26
CHAPTER FOUR: WASHINGTON CAUTIOUS THUS FAR.....	26
A. Bush Administration Burned.....	26
B. Obama Administration Open.....	27
CHAPTER FIVE: SHOULD THE U.S. AIM FOR MORE?.....	29
CHAPTER SIX: WHAT’S AT STAKE FOR WASHINGTON	32
A. A Rising China	32
B. A “Reset” Russia.....	33
C. Unstable Regimes.....	33
CHAPTER SEVEN: RISKS EXIST FOR THE U.S.	36
A. Unintentionally Endorsing Repressive Regimes.....	36
B. Subject to Rejection and Fickleness.....	38
C. No Seat at the Big Table	38
CHAPTER EIGHT: STRATEGIES FOR A FUTURE U.S.-SCO RELATIONSHIP....	40
A. Active Opposition.....	40

B. Benign Neglect.....40
C. Positive Partnership.....41

CHAPTER NINE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FORWARD PROGRESS43
A. Department of State.....43
B. Department of Defense.....44
C. National Security Council.....46

CONCLUSION.....49

Abstract:

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's June 2011 head of state summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, will mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the SCO. The SCO is comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as full members, with India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan as official observers. Afghanistan participates in some activities through the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, and Belarus and Sri Lanka were recently approved as the organization's first dialogue partners.

This milestone is an opportune time to examine the SCO's development over the last decade and where it appears to be headed. Key questions this paper considers are: Has the past decade been a "lost" one for the SCO, or has it made any progress as an effective organization? And, are there reasons why the U.S. might consider the opportunities – and risks – of enhanced engagement with the organization? This review lays out potential steps the U.S. could take to move such a relationship forward if it chooses to do so.

A "Lost" Decade? Some commentators have wondered "What happened to the SCO?" But in ten years of existence, and only the last six with a functioning secretariat and counterterrorism group, the SCO has developed its organizational structure, expanded its formal ties with other states and multilateral institutions, and taken concrete, albeit incremental, actions to try to broaden and cement its economic, political, and security-related impact and influence. On the security front, it has conducted multilateral security exercises, developed its counterterrorism and counter narcotics coordination efforts, and set forward a cyber security architecture. The SCO approved an extensive program of multilateral trade and economic cooperation in 2003 and established an Interbank Association in 2005 and a Business Council in 2006, along with fresh impetus to create a SCO Development Fund to help move the program forward. The SCO is focusing on transportation and infrastructure improvements to facilitate economic cooperation, and China has granted billions of dollars worth of loan credits for members under the SCO umbrella. The group has branched out to other areas of regional cooperation, too, such as planning for a disaster relief center and, since 2005, providing election observers to members' contests. The SCO faces constant challenges as it moves forward – divergent member goals, bilateral tensions within its ranks, and regional instability that brings into question its policy of noninterference – but it appears on track to survive for the near term. This survival likely will be aided by the rising acceptance of regionalism as part of the solution to global challenges, along with renewed Chinese and Russian interest in utilizing the group and other countries interested in establishing or deepening their relationship with it.

U.S.-SCO? The SCO's central focus on combatting the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, its geostrategic siting where the U.S. has been fighting two wars for the last several years, and its inclusion of countries with which this administration has sought to reset relations, suggest there may be opportunities for cooperation between Washington and the SCO. Washington has had a cautious and inconsistent approach to the SCO, with a nadir in relations around 2005 when the U.S. was viewed as promoting regime change in the region and the SCO was seen as partly responsible for the closing of a U.S. airbase in Uzbekistan supporting Coalition efforts in Afghanistan. The Obama Administration, however, has called for more regional input into and burden sharing for complex problems such as Afghanistan, and agreed to U.S. participation at a SCO-sponsored international conference on Afghanistan in 2009. In pursuing enhanced engagement with the SCO, the U.S. risks unintentionally being seen as legitimizing these mostly authoritarian states, being rejected outright by the SCO members, and being sidelined.

Strategies for the Future. Official membership status in the SCO probably is neither preferred nor attainable for Washington, given each party's lingering suspicions of the other's long-term intentions. The U.S. thus is left with a spectrum of possibilities to consider for its relationship with the SCO. The U.S. could adopt a position of active opposition to or benign neglect toward the SCO, or move toward more active partnership. While the U.S. has bilateral relationships with each of the SCO's participants (albeit distant in the case of Iran), Washington would need to consider whether this approach is sufficient for the complex challenges in the region. If the decision is made to enhance engagement with the SCO, several bureaucratic and policy steps could be taken within the administration, including cross-bureau and multi-agency coordination arrangements and specific action plans with tangible goals and deliverables, to facilitate a positive and productive relationship in a region where U.S. interests look to endure.

Introduction:

The U.S. military officers surveyed the foreign troops advancing with them toward the simulated terrorist stronghold. On the U.S.'s right were Russian special operations forces, with a few Central Asian personnel alongside, and to their left were their Chinese counterparts. Seeing the variety of foreign equipment in action at the joint security exercise was amazing and hearing the cacophony of languages over the communications lines was a bit jarring, but most striking of all to the U.S. officers was the patch on everyone's arm – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization emblem.



Far-fetched? Perhaps not. The United States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have common concerns in the region, including instability, counterterrorism, and counter narcotics. The SCO also includes several countries that Washington likely fears could be the setting for future security hot spots. Washington's persistent entanglement in Afghanistan further cements an interest in the SCO, which includes an Afghanistan Contact Group and guest attendance by President Hamid Karzai at SCO heads of state meetings. Furthermore, the SCO operates in the Eurasian region, where the U.S. finds itself heavily involved, yet geographically distant. And finally, all of the SCO countries, except China, have signed Partnership for Peace (PfP) framework documents with NATO and the Central Asian SCO members are past participants in PfP defense training and exercises, indications that the potential security benefits of cooperation already are recognized.

But perhaps no other regional organization is less consistently or objectively studied than the SCO. Foreign policy commentators have had varying takes on this organization and whether it is something the U.S. should care about or ignore, with the majority of the interest and research centered on the China-Russia relationship within the SCO and on the group's security exercises. The basic facts about the organization are so laxly tracked that even prominent authors mistakenly include all five Central Asian states as official members (Turkmenistan, however, only attends meetings as an invited guest) or upgrade Afghanistan to an official observer state (again, as of now it is just a guest) in their best selling books.¹ Even the New York Times, in a January 2011 article on Chinese inroads into Central Asia, gave an incorrect date for the establishment of the SCO's precursor organization, the Shanghai Five (taking almost

three weeks to correct its “editing error” from the originally posted “1966” to the correct “1996”).²

Extreme views on the nature of this organization often accompany the lack of accuracy by many commentators. Some describe the SCO as a paper tiger while others suspiciously eye it as a counterweight to NATO.³ At the SCO’s five-year mark, a few authors questioned whether it was a nascent military alliance. In reality, however, the SCO’s direction and activities suggest it has evolved into something more in the middle of these positions in response to the changing global landscape over the last decade.

The SCO’s June 2011 summit will mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the SCO. This milestone is a crucial time to examine the SCO’s development over the last decade and where it appears to be headed. The key questions of this paper are: Has the past decade been a lost one for the SCO, or has it made any progress as an effective organization? And, given uncertainties about a rising China, a reset Russia, and unstable regimes in the Eurasian region, are there reasons why the U.S. might consider the opportunities – and risks – of enhanced engagement with the SCO, a group which encompasses all of these challenges? This paper lays out potential next steps the U.S. could take to move a U.S.-SCO relationship forward if Washington chooses to do so.

Part I:

SCO at 10-Evolving Slowly, But Surely

Some commentators have wondered “What happened to the SCO?,” perhaps expecting a new version of the Warsaw Pact to evolve.⁴ But in ten years of existence, the SCO has taken an alternative path and developed its organizational structure, expanded its formal ties with other states and multilateral institutions, and taken concrete, albeit incremental, actions to try to establish its economic, political, and security-related impact and influence in Eurasia. The SCO, at least formally, has emphasized action based on consensus and derived from national interests vice bloc behavior compelled from a central authority.

The SCO is comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as full members, with India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan as official observers. Afghanistan participates in some activities through the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, and Belarus and Sri Lanka were recently approved as the organization’s first dialogue partners. The organization evolved out of the original Shanghai Five (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan), which concluded agreements between 1996 and 2001 to deepen military trust, reduce military forces in border regions, and define China’s borders with these nations after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁵ In June 2001, the Shanghai Five welcomed Uzbekistan into the group, even though it did not share a border with China, and institutionalized their relationship officially as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The driving philosophy for the SCO is the so-called “Shanghai spirit,” which emphasizes harmony, working via consensus, respect for other cultures, noninterference in others’ internal affairs, and nonalignment. The SCO’s common focus is working cooperatively against the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The SCO’s *Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism*, signed in 2001, defined these terms and highlighted in particular how these specific ‘isms’ use violence or intimidation against people or governments in an attempt to change behavior, borders, or regimes.⁶⁷ China’s foreign ministry has described the SCO as a successful example of Beijing’s “new security concept,” a late 1990’s initiative to promote security through dialogue and multilateral cooperation and to encourage mutual benefit and trust.⁸

The SCO’s basic bureaucratic structure consists of two standing bodies: the Secretariat based in Beijing and overseen by a Secretary General who serves a three-year term, and the Regional Anti Terror Structure (RATS) with a staff based in Tashkent. Senior-level councils of heads of state, heads of government, foreign ministers, and defense ministers meet throughout the year in preparation for the annual heads of state

summit, which is hosted on a rotating basis among member states. The Secretariat and ministerial-level officials compile an agenda and deliverables to which all member states can agree, since the SCO operates on a consensus basis. Such summits, like similar leadership meetings around the world, are somewhat of a rote event, scripted in advance. But they also provide host nations with an opportunity to showcase their country and, more interestingly, have become the setting for newsworthy moments. For example, at the June 2009 summit, leaders of two SCO observer states, India and Pakistan, met on the sidelines in their first face-to-face meeting since the terrorist attack on Mumbai the previous November, which allegedly involved Pakistani support.⁹ The SCO's regional forum gave Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Asif Ali Zardari a neutral setting where they were not the main event, giving them space to address the emotionally-charged issue as part of the preliminary process of resuming dialogue with each other.

Chapter One:

Incremental Achievements

Beyond the SCO's original structure and mission, the organization's evolution has come to include a broadened range of substantive topics, with representatives from all member states and sometimes observers and guests that meet regularly. Most commentators highlight the SCO's security focus, but the SCO also devotes attention to economic issues, including promoting its Business Council and an Interbank Association, as well as a SCO Forum of academic advisors, and joint councils on topics such as agriculture, education, health, culture, judiciaries, and legislatures.

The SCO also has moved beyond its own structure and substantive efforts to expand the group's formal ties with other nations and other multilateral groups. In 2004, the SCO created the official status of observer and brought Mongolia into its fold. India, Iran, and Pakistan joined as SCO observers the following year. In 2005, the organization created a SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, recognizing the near- and long-term importance of stability in Afghanistan to the SCO region, and probably an effort to balance the ongoing American and Coalition military presence in Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai has attended subsequent SCO heads of state summits as a guest and according to Russian press from March 2011, Moscow now supports giving Afghanistan observer status in the group.¹⁰ In addition to the categories of members and observers, the SCO in 2008 established regulations on dialogue partners and accepted Belarus and Sri Lanka as its inaugural dialogue partners in 2009.¹¹

The SCO has reached out to not only other countries, but also to other multilateral organizations. The UN granted it observer status to the General Assembly in 2004, and then signed a Joint Declaration on Cooperation between the UN and SCO Secretariats in 2010. The SCO concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2005, with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) in 2006, and with the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2007.¹² The SCO continues to develop links with the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). For example, it attends EU and OSCE forums, particularly on Central Asian security issues.¹³

The SCO has moved forward, albeit unevenly, on some concrete areas of activity as well, such as security cooperation (including security exercises, counterterrorism, counter narcotics, and cyber security), economic cooperation, emergency assistance, and election monitoring. When assessing the SCO's accomplishments, however, it is important to note that although the organization itself was established in 2001, the Secretariat and the counterterrorist arm, the RATS, has only been functioning since 2004

and other issue-based SCO groups are even more recent.¹⁴ In its five year anniversary declaration in 2006, the SCO highlighted accomplishments in bureaucratic, security, economic, and international outreach areas; its ten year anniversary declaration will likely expand upon those achievements.¹⁵

A. Security Activities Dominate.

The SCO's security exercises attract the most public attention of any of its activities, largely because of the media coverage (particularly by China's official news outlets, and clips posted on YouTube¹⁶), the powerful participants involved (at least China and/or Russia typically are involved in each exercise), and the scope of effort (it's not unusual to have thousands of troops reportedly participating). These exercises' breadth, regularity, and focus illustrate the SCO's evolution as an organization.

The SCO has, as a group or with only a portion of the members, held security exercises since 2002.¹⁷ The Central Asian SCO states normally send far fewer troops and personnel than do China and Russia. Uzbekistan at times has sent only officers to observe the proceedings or has opted out of several of the exercises. Some of the activities have been labeled "Anti-terror" exercises specifically, while others, usually larger and involving more countries, have been named "Peace Mission" exercises. All depict joint efforts at disrupting and defeating simulated "three evils" behavior, such as killing or capturing hostage takers and rescuing hostages, storming buildings and surrounding villages, or forcing down hijacked airliners.

Members benefit from the successful conduct of these exercises as their military and security services practice tactics and weapons handling, but also gain useful experience working with other countries on planning, command and control, logistics, and maneuvers. The SCO members achieve other messaging objectives through these exercises. The first large-scale China-Russia war games, called Peace Mission-2005, reportedly included up to 10,000 personnel, and featured activities based in both countries such as robust amphibious landings on the Yellow Sea coast, long-range bombers flights, and submarine involvement. These were not what many considered to be typical counterterrorist operations, suggesting to some a Chinese message of strength directed as much at Taiwan as at extremist elements within the SCO states. Peace Mission-2007, held for the first time concurrently with the SCO's annual heads of state summit, furthered the mingling of political objectives with the security aspects of these exercises. President Vladimir Putin used the occasion to announce Russia's resumption of long-range heavy bomber flights, which had ceased after the Soviet Union's collapse, widely seen as a move to demonstrate Russia's resurgent great power focus.¹⁸

The SCO has successfully broadened the focus of these exercises. In 2008, the SCO expanded its exercise cooperation to include corporate partners and held the

Volgograd Anti-terror-2008 exercise at a Lukoil commercial refinery port, with a scenario aimed at neutralizing terrorists who had seized an oil tanker and its crew.¹⁹ The group also focused on unconventional targets with the Vostok Anti-terror-2006 exercise, which included repelling a simulated attack on Uzbekistan's Institute of Nuclear Physics and its nuclear reactor,²⁰ as well as in the Norak Anti-terror-2009 exercise, which reportedly included simulated defense of a chemical factory in Tajikistan under terrorist threat.²¹²² Peace Mission-2010, hosted by Kazakhstan, also represented several advancements for the SCO's conduct of security exercises. Chinese bombers in the exercise flew cross-border training missions for the first time, according to the deputy Chinese commander on the scene,²³ and night-time maneuvers were integrated for the first time into a joint SCO exercise.²⁴

While the security exercises are a prime focus for the organization, its efforts to be regarded as a regional power on Afghanistan-related security issues, such as counterterrorism and counter narcotics, has gained ground in the last few years. In March 2009, Moscow hosted a SCO-sponsored conference on Afghanistan, attended by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Patrick Moon (reportedly the first participation in a SCO event by a U.S. government official). Other participants included Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Mehdi Akhonzadeh, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, OSCE Secretary General Mark Perrin de Brichambaut, and NATO Assistant Secretary General for Operations Martin Howard, plus representatives from the G8, the EU and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The unanimously adopted declaration from the conference gave some legitimacy to the SCO when it stated that "The participants also noted that the SCO was one of the appropriate forums for a wide dialogue with participation of partners on the Afghanistan-related issues, in the context of joint efforts of the international community and Afghanistan, and for practical interaction between Afghanistan and its neighboring states in combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime."²⁵ The broad attendance likely was encouraging to the SCO especially because its conference took place only four days before another Afghanistan-related conference, sponsored by the U.S. under the auspices of the U.N. at The Hague. A SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan was produced by the conference, which called for joint operations to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime, involving relevant Afghan bodies to take part in joint law-enforcement exercises by the SCO, as well as measures to improve drug agency training and border controls.²⁶ A successful raid in late October 2010 by Russian, U.S., and Afghan forces against drug labs in Afghanistan may be evidence of forward momentum on this action plan.²⁷

After security exercises and a focus specifically on Afghanistan, the RATS, the SCO's counterterrorist arm, has moved to achieve broader counterterrorism objectives, too. It reportedly has advised several nations' on operational training, helped draft international legal documents to combat terrorism, and compiled a database of suspected or known terrorists and extremists for SCO member use.²⁸ According to a

February 2011 interview with RATS Executive Committee Director Dzhenisbek Dzhumanbekov, the group participated in drafting the action plan on the implementation of the U.N. Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia²⁹ and has plans to strengthen counterterrorism cooperation with ASEAN.³⁰ The group claims to have been responsible for successful criminal interdictions, arrests, and advance warnings to other SCO states.³¹ The RATS has reportedly assisted with security during the Beijing Olympics in 2008,³² the 2010 World Expo, and the 2011 Asian Winter Games.³³

The SCO has made progress on counter narcotics issues as well, to complement its Afghanistan-focused efforts. The RATS signed a Protocol of Cooperation with the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center (CARICC) on September 27th, 2010 to combat drug trafficking, trans-border drug crime, and subsequent terrorist related financing. The CARICC is a joint drug control effort established in 2006 between Russia, Central Asian nations, and the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).³⁴ SCO members, as part of the action plan from the SCO-sponsored conference on Afghanistan in 2009, agreed to consider establishing a regional anti-drug training center³⁵ – moving forward on an idea originally proposed by Tajikistan officials to be based in Dushanbe.³⁶ Officials from the SCO states' counter drug agencies meet regularly to discuss the status and prospects of joint efforts against trafficking and to build five-year anti-drug strategy programs.³⁷ Victor P. Ivanov, Director of the Russian Federal Narcotics Control Service, described a three-tier mechanism within the SCO (including expert, departmental, and leadership level meetings) that began in 2009 under Russian auspices, which has allowed for the exchange of information and decisions on cooperation.³⁸

The SCO has also been on the forefront to manage the Internet's impact on governments, specifically to counter its use for what it calls "information terrorism." In 2009, the SCO approved a Russian-proposed cyber agreement, which defined "information war" as an effort by one state to undermine another state's political, economic, and social systems.³⁹ According to press reporting, U.S. officials suspect the SCO's accord might be used as a template by other governments wanting to more broadly control Internet content deemed "aggression" through an agreement brokered via the U.N.'s International Telecommunications Union.⁴⁰

The SCO is sometimes negatively judged based on whether it has evolved into a military counterweight to NATO, perhaps because it has certain similar bureaucratic attributes, including a signed charter, a permanent secretariat, issue-based centers based in regional partners' capitals, and annual summits. But it has important differences: specifically, not being limited to security issues and not being bound by Article 5-type mutual defense guarantees. Because of this, evaluations of the SCO should not be based solely on comparisons to NATO.⁴¹

B. Economic Focus Rising.

Traditional hard power security is being joined by economic security as a priority for the SCO, with concrete initiatives underway. The SCO established in 2003 a program of multilateral trade and economic cooperation that encompassed over 120 projects, including energy and transportation cooperation.⁴² To facilitate progress on these projects, the SCO has worked to create an organizational structure to link businesses and banks. The SCO's Business Council, founded in June 2006, has a Secretariat based in Moscow and is run by a Chairman, Deputy Chairman, and Board consisting of member state representatives. According to its website, the Business Council's key functions are to facilitate cooperation in trade, credit, financial, scientific, engineering, transport, telecommunications, agricultural and other spheres, to implement projects in different sectors of the economy in members' territory, and to assist in finding funding for and making recommendations towards improving economic cooperation between SCO countries.

The SCO's website also notes several specific areas where the Business Council has cooperated on regional tasks. At a SCO Business Council meeting in 2009, Leonid Moiseyev, the Russian President's Special Representative to the SCO, stated that the SCO believes there cannot be stability in the region without economic security, which is why the organization has emphasized economic cooperation and development.⁴³ China's Business Council representative at the same meeting also described initial steps that China had taken under the SCO auspices to foster economic cooperation, including organizing trips of small and medium business owners to increase familiarity with and interest in China's agricultural sector.⁴⁴

The SCO's Business Council also contributes to the soft power aspect of the organization's efforts to improve basic living and business conditions in the SCO region. One such initiative, for example, is the promotion of a small-scale health project involving SCO states' public health ministries, medical personnel, and pharmaceutical companies, which was launched in 2007.⁴⁵ The project – a “health train” to help jointly deliver high-tech medical assistance to remote areas in the region – required cooperation between SCO states' rail and health ministries and helped tens of thousands of people in 2008 and 2009, according to the Council.^{46,47} SCO participant states are planning to expand the program.⁴⁸ SCO member states, particularly China and Russia, probably view such soft power outreach as useful to try to mitigate other countries' fears of economic or security domination by Beijing and Moscow.

The SCO's Interbank Association (IBA), sometimes referred to as the Interbank Consortium, established in 2005, also is an ongoing effort to strengthen cooperation between the major banks of the SCO nations, helping to implement investment projects that are bilateral or multilateral.⁴⁹ By 2006, the IBA had agreed to credit and fund joint investment projects worth about \$742 million.⁵⁰ In 2009, the head of the IBA told an

economic gathering in St. Petersburg about some of the group's projects and accomplishments. Among these, he listed strengthened interbank cooperation, improved relationships with the Eurasian Development Bank, loan agreements between Russian and Kazakhstani banks, and initiating an international infrastructure fund reportedly joined by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and elements of the World Bank.⁵¹

One sign of the SCO's achievements in the economic field is how member states find it useful as an umbrella under which they can initiate and deepen economic ties with one another. For example, Kyrgyzstan's northwestern Talas province in February 2011 announced plans to sign a memorandum of economic partnership with Russia's Altai province under the SCO's umbrella.⁵² And in 2009, the SCO's umbrella was used to initiate joint economic cooperation amidst the global financial crisis,⁵³ with the first meeting of SCO finance ministers and heads of central banks held in Kazakhstan that December.⁵⁴ China, though, has by far used this umbrella the most. Beijing used the setting of the 2009 heads of state summit to announce a \$10 billion credit line for SCO members to help them "counter the shock of the international financial crisis."⁵⁵ Chinese officials indicated that the loan would focus on large transportation and energy projects as well as smaller business projects that would go through the Business Council and the Interbank Association.⁵⁶ This is not the first time China used the SCO to hand out loans to SCO states. In 2004, China pledged \$900 million worth of preferential export buyers' credit to other SCO members.⁵⁷ And by 2007, the Chinese government had pledged an additional \$1.2 billion worth of credits for SCO members.⁵⁸

In addition to enhanced regional finance and trade, the group has recognized the importance of improving transport corridors in the area as a necessary and positive evolution of its economic cooperation. In 2006, the SCO selected two pilot projects to jumpstart cooperation on infrastructure in the region. Uzbekistan is the SCO coordinator for one of the projects: simultaneous construction of roads connecting the cities of Volgograd-Astrakhan-Atyrau-Baineu-Kungard and roads linking Aktau-Baineu-Kungard, with the completed construction of a bridge over the Kigach River in 2007.⁵⁹ China is the SCO coordinator for another project: development of a transport route between the cities of Osh-Sarygash-Irkeshtam-Kashgar, with the construction of a transshipment terminal in Kashgar.⁶⁰ The SCO continues to work with the Asian Development Bank and the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) to prepare and implement a regional transport agreement to promote transit, trade, and tourism, illustrating the group's ability to reach out as a unit, albeit slowly, for expert assistance in managing stakeholder concerns and objectives.⁶¹

Economic cooperation is important for the SCO to show concrete benefits to participants from the organization. The National Intelligence Council and EU Institute of Security Studies' Global Governance 2025 report, published last year, noted that

business has often been the pioneer in establishing links within regional groups, even in the face of political tensions. The report stated that business efforts build trust and provide incentives for cooperation, although the benefits sometimes are unevenly distributed within a region.⁶² As the SCO has evolved in its conduct of security activities, so has its economic focus, making the group a more comprehensive regional actor.

C. Soft Power Attention Distributed.

The SCO's security and economic efforts have been joined by organizational attention to the soft power side of regional cooperation. For the SCO, initial activities have been narrowly focused such as to include health care initiatives like the health train to remote areas mentioned previously. Disaster relief is another soft power area of cooperation in the SCO likely seen as important for legitimizing the group in the broader public view and essential for creating better regional economic and security conditions to forestall social unrest. In 2010, the SCO provided relief assistance to Pakistan after severe floods there,⁶³ and the SCO provided a detailed accounting in its end-of-year chronicle of specifically how each SCO participant aided China with monetary aid, relief supplies, or loaned medical personnel after the devastating Sichuan province earthquake in 2008.⁶⁴ The SCO has held joint emergency department ministerial meetings since 2002 and in 2005 signed an agreement on mutual aid to members during a disaster. In the following years, the SCO has approved annual action plans, which lay out a framework for providing assistance in emergency communications, information, and training. Actions since then have focused on emergency relief in border areas and on establishing a disaster relief center, which Kazakhstan has requested be headquartered in Astana.^{65,66}

Since Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary elections in 2005, the SCO has also focused its soft power effort on providing election observers to monitor contests in participant states. The SCO's group of election monitors might seem to be counter to its avowed stance of noninterference in other states' internal affairs, but it likely was intended as an additional legitimizing factor for the organization and for member states' ruling authorities. There are several international and regional election monitoring organizations currently in existence, and their differing compositions and political philosophies often result in contradicting proclamations about the same election process.⁶⁷ The OSCE and the SCO monitoring missions have at times not agreed on whether specific elections were indeed "free and fair," for instance.⁶⁸

Chapter Two:

Constant Challenges

Even as these incremental achievements have occurred, establishing broad networks between governments and officials on a wide range of important issues create important challenges to the SCO. There is an inherent tension between SCO states' desire for regional stability and the organization's mandate for noninterference in other nations' domestic affairs. The members also have to manage divergent national goals and bilateral tensions that threaten the group's goal of consensus-based actions. And the SCO is still slowly developing its bureaucratic structures and mechanisms for cooperation. Indeed, maintaining progress on joint activities in any multi-actor realm may be a more challenging hurdle than the initial decision to work together. The end result can appear to external observers as weak and ineffective, exacerbated by the lengthy time necessary for each member to consider, ratify, and sign SCO agreements. Some analysts have already declared the SCO to be irrelevant after only a decade.⁶⁹

A. Stability? Or Noninterference?

The SCO walks a thin line between its promotion of regional stability and its stated rejection of interference in other's internal affairs. One example of this balancing act occurred when Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, while dozens of world leaders were in Beijing for the Olympic Games' opening ceremonies. Russia's subsequent recognition of the independence of breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia drew unfavorable comparison with secessionist struggles in other SCO member states' regions such as Xinjiang for China.⁷⁰ As a result, the SCO did not come out with unequivocal support for Russia's actions. At the SCO heads of state summit less than a month after Russia's actions, the group's final declaration included statements of support for Russia's efforts at "promoting peace and cooperation," but also regretted the "use of armed force to resolve problems."⁷¹

Unrest in SCO member state Kyrgyzstan in April 2010 resulted in violence and eventually a change in the government, which has also been touted as an example of where the SCO was ineffectual in response to a regional crisis. The SCO issued statements of concern about the events, expressed condolences to victims, and urged "peace, security, and political stability." The SCO Secretary General Muratbek Imanaliev, a Kyrgyz national, visited the country to meet with the provisional government members, eventually securing assistance to Kyrgyzstan on a bilateral basis from SCO states. The SCO's policy of noninterference apparently won the day in this case because of a hesitation to set a precedent and intercede in internal unrest. The SCO acted similarly in 2005, during a period of previous governmental change in Kyrgyzstan.⁷² SCO members will need to periodically reassess whether this tension

between stability and noninterference is sufficiently balanced to maintain organizational legitimacy and states' needs.

B. Divergent National Goals and Bilateral Tensions.

The competing regional objectives of Moscow and Beijing are also an oft-used rationale for declaring the SCO an ineffective group.⁷³ The thinking here is that Russia views Central Asia as squarely within its sphere of influence and that Chinese economic inroads and the corresponding influence it brings in the region will be met with resistance from Moscow. Noted regional expert Bobo Lo, for example, describes China and Russia's relationship as an "axis of convenience" that manifests itself in Central Asia.⁷⁴ He believes that as the SCO has expanded its participants and its agenda, divisions between China and Russia over the SCO's future and role have become apparent. According to Lo, Russia is more interested in promoting the security aspects of the SCO, whereas China prefers emphasis on economic issues. He acknowledges, though, that these differences have been managed well overall so far.

Multilateral groups as a rule encompass cross purposes and lingering disagreements over important issues between members. Even well-established organizations such as the European Union struggle with this, as evident in its contentious consideration of Turkey's membership. Such situations do not doom organizations to complete ineffectiveness. The challenges of integrating divergent objectives of two power players like China and Russia are undeniable, but actions such as continued security exercise cooperation and senior-level statements in support of the SCO suggest that the issue is being managed by both parties, for national interests (the SCO is useful for each country's maintenance of their influence in the region) as well as outward appearances (no one wants to be associated with an obviously unsuccessful group).

In SCO Central Asian states, conflicts over regional hydropower arrangements are emblematic of lingering bilateral tensions that threaten consensus behavior. In one of the more recent disagreements over water rights among SCO members, Tashkent opposed Dushanbe's and Bishkek's plans to construct hydropower stations on regional rivers because of fears that Uzbekistan's downstream agricultural industry would be disadvantaged. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, however, asserted that their countries' severe power shortages required them to act to develop the hydropower resources.⁷⁵ Uzbekistan held up hundreds of freight cars at its border, bound for Tajikistan, and closed key border checkpoints in apparent retaliation, according to Dushanbe officials.⁷⁶ On the sidelines of the 2010 SCO heads of state summit, Uzbekistan agreed to begin releasing some trains to Tajikistan as long as they were not headed to the hydropower project. Tajikistan, for its part, agreed to an "unbiased international" study of the proposed dam's environmental impact, but a final agreement on this issue is still to be

decided. This demonstrates the enduring challenge of these kinds of issues and the opportunity to help manage them through regional engagement.⁷⁷

The SCO has encouraged joint projects on hydropower to help move these issues forward, such as the joint venture between Kazakhstan and China under SCO joint financing auspices for the Moinak hydropower station in Kazakhstan, expected to be completed in December 2011.⁷⁸ Energy issues, however, involve each country's national security and sovereignty interests and as such are slow to be resolved with the necessary compromises.

C. A Work in Progress=Weak, Ineffective?

The SCO still is faced with structural and bureaucratic challenges, especially as it expands and creates additional business areas and works to fully implement its initiatives, leaving it open to charges of being a talk shop. Funding appears to be a particular challenge for the SCO. At a heads of government meeting in late November 2010, Kazakhstani Prime Minister Karim Massimov stated that the launch of the SCO's Development Fund, approved in 2009, needed to be accelerated to facilitate implementation of the group's economic projects.⁷⁹ In addition, at a 2009 gathering, officials of the SCO Business Council noted that they still needed to work out an "efficient mechanism of interaction" between the Business Council and the SCO Interbank Association, and tabled proposals to achieve better and more continuous attention to economic investment and development.⁸⁰

Energy is another area where progress has been confined. The Russian proposal in 2006 for the creation of an Energy Club within the SCO caught international attention as the beginning of a potential cartel-like group. This, though, appears to be a casualty of the divergence of interests between SCO members who are energy producers, such as Russia, and those whose energy needs are growing, such as China.⁸¹ The individual nations have been shown to prefer to keep national control over their production, supply, and consumption mechanisms and agreements. Evidence of this direction came in 2009, when the Russian President's Special Representative to the SCO, Leonid Moiseyev, stated at a Business Council meeting that the group now believed that a SCO Energy Club should not be an "over-organized" structure, but rather a more informal discussion forum to exchange ideas on energy cooperation in the region.⁸² This approach of lowering expectations about a club's scope still holds sway given SCO statements in 2011 that it is continuing efforts to satisfy both energy producers and consumers in the organization as it works to form the club.⁸³

Chapter Three:

Surviving Despite the Stresses

The SCO, still quite young as an organization, appears on track to survive for the near-term. Despite stresses in the group, participants appear to see potential benefits from association, with many lobbying for enhanced status and roles. The trend of regionalism worldwide further suggests a positive outlook for the SCO's continued existence. Thus, the last decade does not appear to have been a completely lost decade for this organization, but instead a predictably challenging and slowly evolving time period of building, outreach, and incremental steps forward.

Writing about their observations of other regional organizations' development, regional academics Johannes Linn and Oksana Pidufala summarized several challenges facing groups operating in Central Asia, including the SCO.⁸⁴ These include:

- Difficulty and time it takes to develop and achieve even gradual improvements
- Necessity for sacrifices by national leaders for the good of the region
- Membership interests that diverge
- Deleterious effects of multiple organizations operating in the region without collaboration
- Requirement for ample and steady financial resources to implement group objectives
- Difficulty reaching out to external actors and organizations for assistance
- Need for synchronization of transportation and trade investment with development of policies
- Myriad hurdles to finding solutions to energy resource sharing, particularly with water supplies

These hurdles may yet become insurmountable obstacles for the SCO, but as Linn and Pidufala point out, the organization has only very recently emphasized an economic focus. Thus, expectations for quick progress are unrealistic. Steps, such as a Chinese proposal in 2010 to supply \$8 billion of the Development Fund's suggested \$10 billion price tag,⁸⁵ are being taken to follow up on financing projects with an emphasis on funding transit proposals across the region. The SCO still is stymied by resource squabbles, however, and it is not readily apparent what sacrifices have been made so far by SCO leaders on behalf of regional cooperation.

A. Participants See Value.

Ultimately, the SCO is likely to survive if its participants perceive individual benefits from their association with the group. Regional expert Bobo Lo has observed

that there are enough common interests, specifically regime stability, counterterrorism, and trade, for the SCO to survive.⁸⁶ But, while common interests and presumed common benefits may be important, they are not sufficient to spur individual members of groups to move forward on collective action, according to noted economist Mancur Olson's theory of groups and public goods.⁸⁷ Olson assessed that there must also be incentives for the individual (beyond the common benefit) or that individual must be somehow compelled to act.

For China and Russia, as the major players in the organization, incentives to pursue collective action include their investments of their separate reputations in the SCO's success, in addition to each one's desire to deepen (China) or retain (Russia) influence in the region, committing them to the group for, in Lo's words, "strategic convenience." The SCO's Central Asian members, Lo notes (but Olson presumably would agree), sign on to the SCO's collective action because each gains influence through the group's consensus operating style and are able to maximize their individual influence through playing China and Russia off of one another.⁸⁸

The SCO observer nations – India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan – see political, economic, and security benefits from working with the group as well. Although together, and on their own, they present challenges to the organization's consensus operating style because of their many disputes with each other or SCO members. This year, India has reportedly joined Iran and Pakistan in applying to become a full member of the SCO. In a change from its original participation, it has even sent its most senior officials to attend recent summits.⁸⁹⁹¹ Of the regional organizations in Central Asia, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC), U.N. Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), Central Asian Regional Cooperation Organization (CAREC), and the Eurasian Economic Organization (ECO), only SCO includes Indian participation, representing a unique opportunity for Delhi to engage.⁹²

Mongolia, though, seems content remaining as an observer, a status in line with its foreign policy of remaining neutral while seeking out "Third Neighbors" to balance its two powerful border countries – China and Russia.⁹³ But Mongolia too has looked to gain concrete benefits from this association. In 2010, it negotiated with the SCO to have the group sponsor a "health train," which provides medical aid and services to underserved populations, to come to Mongolia as part of the increased cooperation between the organization and its observers.⁹⁴

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has noted Pakistan's interest in helping promote the SCO's economic agenda and plans for regional development.⁹⁵ But the group does not appear to be inclined to accept either Iran or Pakistan as official members anytime soon, given Tehran's intransigent behavior on its nuclear program and Islamabad's precarious stability. At the 2009 SCO heads of state summit, the

organization published long-anticipated guidance on accepting new members. Among other criteria, the SCO declared that new members must not be under UN Security Council sanctions, a blow to Iran's application.⁹⁶ Still, both Iran and Pakistan reaffirmed their desire to become official members during the November 2010 heads of government council meeting in Dushanbe, suggesting the new regulations have not completely blunted these states' aspirations nor solved the SCO's challenge of accommodating them.⁹⁷

In earlier years, the SCO kept observers at a distance from the workings of the member states; they were invited to attend meetings, but not much else. The observers soon expressed frustration with their minimal inclusion. SCO members no doubt understand that they must enhance the observers' experiences with the group enough to keep them interested and to encourage their sending senior-level attendees to meetings, thereby attesting to the SCO's legitimacy and effectiveness. SCO officials also are taking steps to further the inclusion of observers in the regular plans and activities of the member states. The SCO Business Council annual meeting in early 2010 took place for the first time in an observer nation, Mongolia.⁹⁸ In 2009, the Russian President's Special Representative to the SCO stated that it would be desirable to include observers in any forum to discuss energy cooperation in the region,⁹⁹ and the Interbank Association stated that it had created opportunities for observer nations' banks to become involved in the work of the group.¹⁰⁰

Aware of other nations' interest in the SCO, but probably mindful of the potential trouble from additional formal membership expansion, in 2008 the group created a new type of association, "dialogue partner," for others interested in working with the group. The SCO, in adopting this new category, echoed another regional grouping, ASEAN, which also created a dialogue partner category several years after its founding.¹⁰¹¹⁰² Belarus and Sri Lanka became the first SCO dialogue partners at the 2009 heads of state summit. The SCO's regulations indicate that dialogue partners can participate in meetings of the group with an aim toward promoting cooperation on specific issues, and with advance permission, even use the SCO's website to publish their own statements about such cooperation. The regulations clearly state, however, that dialogue partners are not involved in the preparation, decision-making, and signing authority for the group. Partners are limited to an "advisory" vote on cooperation in specified areas of dialogue.¹⁰³

Before becoming dialogue partners, Belarus and Sri Lanka petitioned for some kind of association with the SCO, probably viewing it as an opportunity to derive benefits from the larger, more powerful member states. Belarus officials stated in 2010 that its partnership memorandum signed with the SCO included areas of cooperation such as counterterrorism, economic, and transportation, focused on ways to tackle common concerns, and aimed at creating specific joint projects in the future. In a statement after signing the memorandum, officials emphasized that Belarus was the

first European nation to achieve official participation in the SCO. Terrorism and regional security were cited by Sri Lankan officials as specific interests for cooperation with the SCO, noting that the country in May 2009 defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, but still was active battling its remnants.

Afghanistan perceives a benefit from being part of the SCO as well, and has asked this year for an upgrade of its status within the SCO from its Contact Group role to being an official observer to the organization, according to the Russian foreign minister.¹⁰⁴ It is unclear whether the SCO members will accede to Afghanistan's request or, given its likely turbulent near future and the SCO's aversion to instability, will put it in the dialogue partner category as somewhat of a holding position.

B. Rise of Regionalism Helps.

Also sustaining the SCO's continued existence and possible influence is the trend of regionalism globally. The National Intelligence Council's 2010 report on global governance devotes an entire annex to the role of regionalism around the world. This section judges that regional cooperation is likely to make further strides because of the dissatisfaction with current global governance institutions, the shifting of relative power at the regional level with major powers willing to invest in the groups, and because the global financial crisis has made nations more aware of their interdependence and need for regional solutions to transnational challenges.¹⁰⁵

In Asia, this trend of multilateralism coexists within a web of bilateral relationships and a variety of functional and diplomatic groupings, such as the Six-Party Talks on North Korea. Other regions are experiencing a similar trend, with South America launching a new organization – the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) – in 2008, in addition to the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) group, according to the NIC study. In Africa, the African Union (AU) has been complemented by sub-regional organizations like the South African Development Community, to meet the challenge of a large continent with uneven capacities and many fragile states. The European Union (EU), of course, stands as the most accomplished of these groups, but it is still coping with many integration challenges as it expands its membership. The NIC's report notes that progress toward closer cooperation on the regional level has occurred over the last decade, but also outlines challenges such as poor governance and disparate economic policies as hurdles to creating effective organizations.

A look at some of these regional groups around their ten-year mark suggests the period is generally a time of mixed results, echoing the SCO's current status. For MERCOSUR, the first phase of success in the group coincided with agreements on tariffs and common micro- and macroeconomic interests, while the remaining years

leading up to its decade anniversary were marked by divergent economic and foreign policies and a more complex and conflict-prone agenda for the organization.¹⁰⁶ The AU, according to one analysis of its activities, has led forcefully for regional integration, but has suffered over the last several years from a lack of consistent political support from its members and economic assistance from its donor community.¹⁰⁷ ASEAN's own website describes the group's first several years as slow, a pace intended to promote trust and goodwill, with important developments such as a peace declaration and the first summit coming several years after the organization's establishment.¹⁰⁸

Therefore, the SCO's uneven track record does not appear to be unusual in its developmental pace relative to other regional groupings. In 2007, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) looked at regional security organizations in the former Soviet area, including the SCO, to assess their effectiveness.¹⁰⁹

SIPRI judged that such an organization was legitimate and had potential for success if it:

- Avoided hegemonic or coerced cooperation
- Did not promote a zero-sum relationship to the outside world
- Was not rigid or static
- Was not artificial or superficial
- Was efficient in its management and resource use

Using these criteria, the authors judged that the SCO:

- Could not be described as hegemonic given the group's consensus approach to decision making
- Had actively sought partnership with other international groups and thus was not zero-sum in its thinking
- In its evolution demonstrated it was not following a rigid path

The authors of the SIPRI study noted, however, that the SCO needed to move beyond pronouncements to concrete action and funding. SIPRI's criteria and assessment still appear valid in 2011, although movement forward on joint projects continues to be slower than most SCO members would prefer.

The SIPRI's criteria for legitimacy in this region, dominated by larger powers Russia and China, is important as a way to judge the ability of the smaller countries to play an appropriate role in the organization and as a tool to assess the group's adaptation to the globalized and interconnected, economic and security environment of today. These criteria are valid and also reasonable, given the realistic purview of such groups. No regional organization will replace bilateral relationships that countries utilize, nor fully resolve long-standing tensions between discordant neighbors. Not

even the most accomplished of regional organizations, the EU, has superseded state-to-state relations or completely aligned central and western European nations' economic and security priorities. Thus, while the SCO might be able to do more to mitigate conflicts between members, its stated policy of noninterference suggests that it will use mostly diplomatic methods to influence actions within the group. And for this collection of countries, such methods probably are the limit of persuasive power if the group wants to keep all of its members.

Part II: US-SCO Partnership, Challenges and Opportunities

Chapter Four: Washington Cautious Thus Far

Washington has made some tentative overtures to the SCO over the last decade, but consistent engagement has not occurred. Although the U.S. and the SCO have shared common concerns about instability and extremism in the region, the two actors have not always shared the same approaches, leading to uncertainty about and suspicion of each other's objectives.

A. Bush Administration Burned.

The SCO was established just a few months before September 11th. U.S. efforts to pursue the 9/11 instigators and facilitators led Washington to expand its diplomatic, economic, and military activities in the region surrounding Afghanistan, including in SCO member states individually. For example, Uzbekistan allowed the U.S. to establish the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase that October to serve as a refueling and transit point for U.S. and Coalition troops in and out of Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Beth Jones, after a trip to the region in February 2002, stated that Russian officials had briefed U.S. officials on the SCO's activities and that the U.S. encouraged regional cooperation to improve the overall situation and expressed a strong desire to coordinate their respective activities in the region to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication.¹¹¹

Answering questions from a U.S. House of Representatives committee in 2004, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe told the members that "in fact, we have, from the first, offered to take up even an observer's status at some point with the organization to work" with the SCO, underscoring Washington's desire to see regional cooperation, especially against terrorism, succeed.¹¹²

Despite Washington's apparent openness to cooperation with the SCO, the lingering U.S. military presence in the region exacerbated fears of U.S. sponsored regime change, especially after the so-called "color revolutions" that upended

governments in Georgia (Rose Revolution, 2003), Ukraine (Orange Revolution, 2004), and Kyrgyzstan (Tulip Revolution, March 2005). Autocratic leaders in the SCO were undoubtedly worried they could be next in line.¹¹³ At its summit in July 2005, the SCO issued a declaration calling for the U.S. to set a withdrawal timeline for its forces in the region. Uzbekistan decided later that year to evict the U.S. from K2, a result of Tashkent's unhappiness with perceived U.S. criticism about its harsh crackdown on public unrest at Andijon in May, but linked in many people's mind to the SCO's earlier call for a withdrawal deadline.¹¹⁴ By November 2005, the last U.S. plane had departed K2.¹¹⁵

The K2 incident likely soured the Bush Administration on relations with the SCO, however, the need for coordination of effort on critical issues in the region continued. In 2006, former Assistant Secretary of State Jones publicly noted that the SCO "should by all means" develop counterterrorism and counter narcotics programs, but asked "since resources are not endless, why not take a few minutes to coordinate among the various organizations to assure complementarity of effort and not duplication? The fact that the U.S. is not a member of the SCO does not diminish the value of the organization – provided it is doing real work and not just hosting summit meetings."¹¹⁶

Given Uzbekistan's ouster of U.S. forces in 2005, questions arose about the status of the Coalition's air base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan. U.S. lease payments and fuel contracts for Manas have been at the center of Kyrgyzstani political and public disputes over corruption and benefits. A few months after the SCO's declaration in 2005, Kyrgyzstan demanded higher compensation for use of Manas and in 2006 reached agreement with the U.S. for an increase from \$2 million a year to over \$17 million for a five-year lease.¹¹⁷

According to some press reporting and academic writings, the Bush Administration requested in 2005 some form of membership in the SCO, but was rejected.¹¹⁸ Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher, in testimony before the Helsinki Commission in September 2006, however, stated that the U.S. had not sought membership in the SCO.¹¹⁹ Thus, by 2007 at least, suspicion and uncertainty about the SCO's objectives, especially concerning the continued presence of U.S. and Coalition troops in the region, appear to have undermined the potential for cooperation and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Evan Feigenbaum publicly stated that the U.S. did not "seek to become a member or observer" of the SCO.¹²⁰

B. Obama Administration Open.

The saga of the Manas base, now called a transit center, and its impact on Kyrgyzstani politics continued even after the Obama Administration took over in 2009.¹²¹ In June 2009, the U.S. increased the rent it paid to Bishkek to \$60 million per

year after Kyrgyzstan made threats in February 2009 to end the basing arrangement, according to the New York Times.¹²² Some commentators judged that the crackdowns by President Kurmanbek Bakiev's regime in reaction to domestic criticism about his handling of the Manas contracts contributed to the April 2010 uprising and overthrow of his government.¹²³ The controversy continued as the Kyrgyzstani government urged the U.S. in November 2010 to cancel its contract with the fuel supplier, which was under investigation in Kyrgyzstan (although the U.S. Congress did not find evidence of corruption during its investigation of the company).¹²⁴ The annual lease agreement for Manas is set to conclude in July 2011, making close engagement with Kyrgyzstan – and interested parties such as Russia and China – a priority for Washington. Future U.S.-SCO engagement could help facilitate transparency on the longstanding issue of access to Manas.

The Obama Administration has adopted a policy of outreach to regional partners and in 2009 sent Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Patrick Moon to attend a SCO Special Conference on Afghanistan in Moscow in March. The SCO's forum attracted international attendance, including the Iranian deputy foreign minister.¹²⁵ The conference resulted in a SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan, which called for joint operations against terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, and security collaboration with Afghanistan. Presidents Obama and Medvedev welcomed the U.S. participation at the conference in a joint statement after their meeting the following month and then raised its "particular importance" in a joint statement in July 2009.¹²⁶¹²⁷ In January 2010, Secretary of State Clinton, in remarks on Asian regional architecture in Hawaii, stated that "we've also seen new organizations, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+3, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; we hope that we will be able to participate actively in many of those,"¹²⁸ raising the possibility of future U.S.-SCO engagement.

Most recently, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake met with SCO officials in mid-March and hoped to get their "perception of the situation in Central Asia and how the SCO as an organization, but also individual members, are working to address some of the challenges the region faces."¹²⁹ No word yet publicly on how those discussions turned out, but the U.S. obviously is in position to reassess its engagement with the SCO.

Chapter Five:

Should the U.S. Aim for More?

Some experts have advised against the U.S. rushing in to cooperate with the SCO, saying it instead should wait for tangible achievements from the group.¹³⁰ Depending on the criteria one uses, of course, a case can be made that the organization already has accomplished bureaucratic, security, networking, and political goals, as discussed throughout this paper. SCO members appear to have recommitted to the organization within the last couple of years, probably to maneuver for gain in response to increased global economic uncertainty and security concerns and to take advantage of the U.S. desire to seek regional burden sharing. Rather than rushing in, the U.S. seems to have bided its time.

The current U.S. administration has emphasized cooperation and partnership with regional organizations. Should the U.S. take a chance to change its relationship with the SCO, an organization some have suggested is set up specifically to provide an alternative to Western norms and values in international relations?¹³¹ Might the United States gain from enhanced efforts to engage with regional organizations like the SCO? Focused attention on regional fora has been promoted by some foreign policy experts as a necessary part of revitalizing the global security system. The NIC study on global governance notes the challenges and sometimes lackluster results to date of regional organizations and posits that renewed interest in such groups could create momentum and enhance their effectiveness, complementary to bilateral and larger multilateral global governance arrangements.

For a precedent on furthering engagement with the SCO, the U.S. could look at European-based organizations that continue to demonstrate interest in cooperating with the group. European interest in the SCO is not surprising. In 2006, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated that there were three strategic interests for Europe in Central Asia: Central Asia's location near unstable countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan; the regional battle against Islamic extremism; and the region's importance in energy resources.¹³² These issues now not only include Central Asia, but also SCO members China and Russia.

Since the SCO's founding, the European-focused OSCE and the SCO have been involved in exchanges and collaborated on workshops on topics such as counterterrorism, conflict prevention, and democratic elections.¹³³ The OSCE includes all of the SCO member states as participants, except for China, and in the OSCE's 2001 Bucharest Plan of Action the group recognized the need to broaden dialogue with regional organizations, including the SCO, which are outside the traditional OSCE area.¹³⁴ As one example of these two worlds growing closer, the most recent outgoing

SCO Secretary General, Bolat Nurgaliyev, followed up his three-year SCO stint by serving as the OSCE's Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson for Protracted Conflicts under Kazakhstan's chairmanship, where he would have been well-positioned to share insights about fostering effective dialogue between the two organizations.¹³⁵

Along with the OSCE's attention, the EU formally adopted a Central Asian strategy in 2007, and revisited its implementation most recently in a progress report in June 2010.¹³⁶¹³⁷ The EU's strategy document declared that it was prepared to enter into "an open and constructive dialogue" and to have "regular ad hoc contacts" with regional groups, including the SCO. The report also stated that the EU would aim specifically to strengthen its cooperation with the SCO on drug trafficking. Pierre Morel, the EU's Special Representative to Central Asia in 2008, publicly described the SCO as "a work in progress" and stated that the EU was not looking for an MOU with the group, but instead a dialogue for concrete cooperation.¹³⁸

Following along Europe's path, some commentators have pressed for NATO to reach out more to the SCO. Hudson Institute senior fellow Richard Weitz suggested in March that NATO could grant China more formal ties and make the SCO a "global partner," in exchange for greater access to the SCO and its activities. He argued that cooperation in areas such as disaster relief, counterterrorism, and counter narcotics would be mutually beneficial to both organizations and would help NATO and SCO countries avoid great power competition in Central Asia.¹³⁹ In 2009, former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski encouraged NATO (via Washington) to reach out to both the CSTO and the SCO, suggesting expanded cooperation could lead to a joint NATO-SCO council which the U.S. could use to indirectly engage the participant states. He did, though, acknowledge that fashioning such a relationship would not be easy or quick.¹⁴⁰ All of the SCO countries except China have signed Partnership for Peace framework documents with NATO, an indication that the potential security benefits of cooperation already is recognized.¹⁴¹

The confluence of interests between NATO and SCO—including stability in the region and countering extremism and narcotics flows—highlights potential areas where these two groups could begin cooperation. The United States and Russia have the ability to guide these respective groups toward mutual discussion and possible action in areas of common concern. Even if there were not identical objectives, enhanced transparency and awareness of each other's agendas would be another step to move relations forward. Although some have proposed that NATO work with the CSTO on common concerns, working only with them and not the SCO leaves out an increasingly important player in this region—China.¹⁴² NATO's new Strategic Concept, agreed to at Lisbon in November 2010, includes as one of three core tasks a commitment to cooperative security. Specifically, the Strategic Concept states that NATO will "engage actively" through partnership with "other international organizations," and asserts that Euro-Atlantic security is "best assured through a wide network of partner relationships

with countries and organizations around the globe.” It goes on to state that NATO is prepared to “develop political dialogue and practical cooperation” with nations and organizations interested in peaceful international relations. Although the document does not mention SCO specifically, it notes NATO’s desire to see a “true strategic partnership” with Russia, potentially opening the way for organizational dialogue and interaction.¹⁴³

Washington’s hesitancy to increase engagement with the SCO, based on the unsavory nature of some of its participants, might be somewhat assuaged after being reminded of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), where the U.S., Russia, and China participate in dialogue on both political and security issues of common concern along with non-democratic members such as Burma and North Korea.¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵ In fact, on the ARF’s ten-year anniversary, it listed one of its achievements as being a useful venue for bilateral and multilateral dialogue, gradually building mutual confidence via cooperation and dialogue, promoting transparency and developing a network of security-focused participants.¹⁴⁶ While some regional experts have questioned the ARF’s effectiveness in preventive diplomacy, such as in quieting North and South Korean tensions, others have suggested that the ARF’s realistic utility may lie more with confidence building or humanitarian cooperation among participants.¹⁴⁷ Given similar organizational values between ASEAN and the SCO (such as operating via consensus, the importance of sovereignty and noninterference), the U.S. would be well advised to temper expectations that engagement with the SCO would result in immediate or far-reaching results on integral security questions. However, staying outside these venues represents opportunity costs for the U.S. such as opportunities to engage, build trust, and demonstrate interest and respect for regional issues and players that lay the foundation for working together on the more difficult problems.

Patrick deGatigno of the Atlantic Council, writing in November 2010, observed that hardly a week goes by without a senior Obama Administration official involved in a regional or global governance meeting or dialogue, such as with ASEAN.¹⁴⁸ Thus, if the U.S. were so inclined, expanding that attention to the SCO would not be a complete change of regional strategy.

Chapter Six:

What's At Stake for Washington?

What's so important about the SCO region that the U.S. might consider a change in its relationship with the organization in the future? What is at stake there for U.S. interests over the next few years?

The SCO's primary common objective is to counter terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which would seem to align closely with U.S. objectives against terrorism and concerns about extremist ideologies affecting international stability. All of the SCO member states have been hit with extremist or terrorist attacks in recent years. Tajikistan was plagued by such events in 2010 – including a September ambush of government troops and an August jailbreak by convicted extremists – increasing U.S. and regional concerns about the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist-related terrorism in the neighborhood.¹⁴⁹ In Russia, the Domodedovo airport suicide bombing in 2011 was a more recent example of this regional threat.

And there are already some troubling suggestions that the ultimate goal of the Coalition effort in Afghanistan – denying al-Qaeda a base for operations against the West – is under stress. The Wall Street Journal in April outlined the reappearance of al-Qaeda activity over the last several months in Afghanistan's northeast border region with Pakistan, including “setting up training camps, hideouts, and operations bases,” taking place after the U.S. left this area under the command of Afghan security forces. Senior al-Qaeda operators and one of Saudi Arabia's most wanted militants have been killed or captured in the area since September of last year, raising concerns about al-Qaeda's interest in reestablishing a safe haven in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁰ U.S. and Coalition forces cannot stay in Afghanistan forever. But geography is harder to escape and SCO participants, as Afghanistan's neighbors in the region, will remain. Establishing a better connection to, and possible partnership with, the SCO could help the U.S. track al-Qaeda and other extremist organizations in Afghanistan and the rest of Eurasia.

Beyond this primary shared concern of terrorism are three other important U.S. foreign policy interests – a rising China, a reset Russia, and unstable regional regimes – that might be better understood and pursued through an enhanced relationship with the SCO.

A. A Rising China.

Engagement with the SCO has the potential to benefit Washington by increasing U.S. awareness of Beijing's perceptions and regional activity as the rise of China continues, helping to mitigate the attendant uncertainty and angst. Such a move might

seem counterintuitive – after all, isn't China a major force within the SCO and wouldn't U.S. engagement thereby strengthen Beijing? But engagement does not have to be wholesale accommodation or appeasement. Interaction, on U.S. terms, could provide access and transparency, and possibly influence. Respected foreign policy commentator Fareed Zakaria characterized President Obama's November 2010 trip to Asia as "America's opening move in a new great power game unfolding in Asia." He noted the hope that a closer relationship between Washington and Beijing could be used to moderate Beijing's behavior and proposed American policy that could be thought of as a hedge strategy that would emphasize engagement, but be prepared, by cultivating relationships with China's Asian neighbors, in case China's rise turns increasingly negative.¹⁵¹ Cultivating the Chinese relationship through the SCO might fit into such a strategy.

B. A "Reset" Russia.

The Obama Administration's reset strategy for Russia is well-known and has had its successes and challenges. Commentators and officials in both the U.S. and Russia have noted the countries' common interests in stability, security, and economic progress desired in this region, suggesting engagement with the SCO, where Russia is a prime player, could complement the reset approach.¹⁵² A U.S. decision to work with the SCO also would appeal to Russia's desire to be viewed as a preeminent power in the region, especially in light of China's rising activities there.

C. Unstable Regimes.

The SCO neighborhood contains a variety of unstable or authoritarian regimes ripe for transition. Afghanistan, of course, is the nation the U.S. primarily is focused on right now, given combat troops on the ground there. SCO assistance to help achieve or maintain U.S. goals in Afghanistan, especially given the likelihood that U.S. and some Coalition forces will be in Afghanistan until 2014, if not longer, could be well worth the outreach from Washington.¹⁵³

A Council on Foreign Relations-sponsored independent task force, co-chaired by Richard Armitage and Samuel Berger, in November 2010 noted that what happens in Afghanistan and Pakistan – both participants in the SCO – matters to Americans.¹⁵⁴ The task force judged that Americans will be less secure if terrorists are able to freely operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, given their demonstrated ability to threaten the U.S. and its interests from those bases. The report noted the threat of extremists taking advantage of ethnic turmoil and internal conflict in both nations to win more influence, undermine fragile governance there, and increase tensions with their neighborhood, particularly given Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. It also stated that Afghanistan's neighbors also are particularly interested in the fate of Afghanistan during any potential conflict reconciliation process there, especially with Taliban elements, watching for their own

interests and for the potential for a renewed civil war. Two Russian think tank scholars, Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko, suggested in 2010 that the SCO could be a “useful convener” to bring about dialogue on national reconciliation in Afghanistan, given the organization’s inclusion of many of the critical players on the issue.¹⁵⁵ While it is unclear whether Washington would welcome this role for the SCO, the group, given its location and membership, no doubt will have the ability to influence the outcomes in Afghanistan, and therefore the U.S. might start to consider how most usefully to incorporate them into the process.

The sudden turmoil in Egypt this past winter, culminating in a change from a longtime autocratic ruler, along with the continuing unrest against long-time leaders in the Middle East and North Africa, are useful reminders of the situation with some SCO members. The Central Asian SCO states have had leadership challenges in their post-Soviet experiences, with states either still under the authoritarian rule of the same man since independence or subject to violent, shaky transitions. Presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, and Islom Karimov of Uzbekistan are all Soviet legacy rulers who have worked to suppress competitors and democratic processes, resulting in uncertain future transitions and stability.¹⁵⁶ Kyrgyzstan, the other Central Asian SCO country, in early April 2010 experienced riots that overthrew President Kurmanbek Bakiev, resulting in a provisional government with an appointed president through 31 December 2011.¹⁵⁷ Bakiev himself had previously come to power via a coup against former President Askar Akaev in 2005.¹⁵⁸ The State Department’s Assistant Secretary of South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake told Congress in May that these countries to various degrees face similar dynamics – such as little economic opportunity for youth and endemic corruption – as do the Arab Spring countries, but their populations generally do not have as widespread access to technology or exposure to democratic examples, making it more challenging to replicate the recent citizen protests. He noted, however, that these governments will be presented with considerable challenges in coming years if they do not address the chronic lack of political, religious, and economic opportunities for their publics.¹⁵⁹

The presence of U.S. military facilities and transit routes in these Central Asian states increases the need for earlier Washington awareness of factors affecting regime stability. The Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan has been a critical location for fueling Coalition tankers and has served as a hub for U.S. and Coalition troops entering and departing Afghanistan since it was established in December 2001.¹⁶⁰ According to testimony in November 2010 by a U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense, the U.S. ships over 1,000 containers a week to Afghanistan via Uzbekistan and the Northern Distribution Network in support of U.S. and Coalition forces there, which makes stability a continuing concern for Washington.¹⁶¹ This is a turnaround in support from Uzbekistan, which evicted the U.S. from the Karshi-Khanabad airbase in 2005 after four years of previous cooperation in support of Coalition activities in Afghanistan. The

Central Asian SCO states are vulnerable to unpredictable triggers for change. Through better engagement with the SCO, Washington could be more aware of signs of mercurial behavior in this region, and attempt to avoid or counter it, and anticipate the impact on U.S. interests.

Chapter Seven:

Risks Exist for the U.S.

With potential benefits to be gained from enhanced cooperation with the SCO, what's been holding the U.S. back from consistent engagement? Washington likely is wary of being viewed as supportive of repressive regimes, of its overtures being publicly dismissed, and of being relegated to an ineffective role within the SCO if it moves to engage. Enhanced U.S.-SCO cooperation could start on a smaller scale to establish trust and results, and start with a variety of activities, including representatives at ministerial-level subject matter meetings, jointly sponsoring conferences, senior-level attendance on the sidelines of summit meetings, hosting SCO delegations on fact-finding missions or cultural exchanges, or even agreeing to pilot projects of scientific or economic cooperation. But, as with any policy formulation, the U.S. would need to consider the potential negative outcomes of such cooperation.

A. Unintentionally Endorsing Repressive Regimes.

A key concern for Washington, especially in this post-Mubarak, Arab Spring environment, would be that engaging more consistently with the SCO would be interpreted by others as overlooking and thereby implicitly endorsing the authoritarian regimes involved in the organization. When the Bush Administration adopted a position of active democracy promotion as a foreign policy priority, however, it complicated, but did not prevent, cooperation with governments characterized by independent organizations as less than free, such as some of the SCO's participants. After 9/11, prosecuting the war on terror meant that Washington sought out SCO members – even autocratic ones – as partners, but only on a bilateral basis. Even this strategic cooperation, however, was not immune to disruption when SCO members' regimes felt threatened by Washington's democracy promotion, as evidenced by the U.S. eviction from the K2 airbase by Uzbekistan. Although the balance was not always perceived as perfect, the Bush Administration demonstrated that promotion of human rights and democracy can co-exist with cooperation with less-than-free regimes.

The Obama Administration would need to define a space where it can support human rights and democratic values without triggering fearful reactions by foreign leaders concerned about regime change in SCO nations. The Atlantic Council's November 2010 Eurasia Task Force report on transatlantic strategy in Central Asia and the OSCE noted that engagement with Central Asian states should be viewed "as an investment and a mechanism for better embedding what Washington wants to talk about in a broader context that more visibly includes the interests of Central Asians and their leaders," as opposed to endorsement of good behavior.¹⁶² The U.S. might use the participation of more democratically free countries such as India and Mongolia in the

SCO as a useful entry point for such an investment and to model how U.S. involvement could be consistent with its values.

Susan Ball, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, wrote in March 2011 about the U.S. challenge of supporting human rights and democracy while acknowledging the need to work with authoritarian regimes. Ball's succinct tenets might be a useful starting place to help reconcile this challenge if Washington chooses to engage the SCO. She urged that U.S. officials:

- Avoid double standards (be consistent in our words and actions)
- Temper rhetoric (be stirring, but realistic)
- Elevate the rank and role of U.S. officials responsible for democracy and human rights
- Focus on civil society (instead of just ruling elites)
- Get back to the basics (make use of existing international and regional organizations to set norms and hold ourselves and others accountable)¹⁶³

The international, nongovernmental advocacy group Human Rights in China (HRIC) released in March 2011 its report on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights: The Impact of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.¹⁶⁴ The white paper's authors expressed concern that the SCO's counterterrorism policies and practices have been unexamined by others, particularly the UN, as international attention has focused instead on marshaling regional groups' local experience and expertise against terrorists and SCO-UN cooperation has expanded. The HRIC provided extremely useful and specific recommendations on how the UN and others might better use principled engagement to promote attention to human rights conditions in the SCO states and to try to create a more accountable relationship with the SCO, including:

- UN documentation of SCO states' efforts to promote compliance with privacy safeguards and to ensure accuracy of information shared
- UN reporting on SCO states' progress on implementation of various UN human rights recommendations
- UN inclusion of human rights-related benchmarks, oversight, and expert consultations when expanding technical or security cooperation with the SCO
- UN human rights monitoring and follow up on cases of concern involving extradition, forced returns, and disappearances related to regional cooperation within the SCO
- The UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism initiation of a dialogue with the SCO and request for a mission to the SCO Secretariat headquarters in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terror Structure headquarters in Tashkent, Uzbekistan

If the U.S. decides to explore partnering with the SCO, getting behind these recommendations would go a long way to help keep America's values and interests aligned.

B. Subject to Rejection and Fickleness.

This administration was invited and welcomed to participate in the March 2009 SCO conference on Afghanistan hosted by Moscow, but could the provisional welcome mat for the U.S. disappear? A risk in reconsidering engagement with the SCO is the chance that Washington will be ignored, put off, or outright rejected. Moreover, officials may believe it would be unseemly for the sole superpower to appear as a supplicant, especially one that might be unsuccessful in its overtures for a relationship. A potential approach to mitigating these possibilities might be to have an agreed set of criteria within the U.S. government and between the U.S. and the SCO governing such engagement from the outset, particularly on the pace of activities, the level of representation in events, the objectives desired, and regular assessments of effectiveness. This approach would take time and patience to begin, probably in informal channels, and to see through, given the SCO's consensus operating style and the multiple players involved. In the end, however, accomplishing important and complex objectives requires taking such measured risks.

C. No Seat at the Big Table.

Given the SCO's recently promulgated guidelines on adopting new members – in particular, that they must be a state located in the region – means that Washington should not expect full membership status in the foreseeable future. Membership, however, probably is not desired by the U.S. in any event at this time, given Washington's hesitancy to engage thus far. The question, then, is whether the U.S. can accept a limited official relationship with the group or whether it believes it must hold a leadership or more central spot in the group in order to achieve its objectives within the SCO and its participants.

The U.S. could consult SCO observers and possibly dialogue partners to gain insights and possible suggestions on ways to achieve progress on non-member goals. The SCO has pledged to better integrate observers into the group's processes, but it is not clear how this might extend to other associated players. The U.S. could also review its new participation in the East Asia Summit for a possible precedent in successfully beginning a relationship with a group originally intended to omit Washington as a member.¹⁶⁵ The U.S. and Russia both attended the East Asia Summit as observers in 2010, and have been invited to attend 2011's summit as official partners. Some analysts have speculated that East Asia Summit participants chose to invite them to help balance against a rising China in that forum, and a similar situation might exist in the SCO, helping Washington to gain traction for participation there as well.¹⁶⁶ The U.S.-EU

relationship provides another example of U.S. cooperation with an organization without formal membership status. The U.S. has maintained diplomatic relations with the EU and its forerunners since 1953, with a U.S. mission to the group established in 1961. However, it did not formalize cooperation until 1990, when it agreed to a Transatlantic Declaration which laid out principles of cooperation and set up a series of joint summits and ministerial meetings.¹⁶⁷ Again, U.S. officials would need to calculate how much engagement Washington would be comfortable with and what role it requires to achieve its goals.

Chapter Eight:

Strategies for a Future U.S.-SCO Relationship

The SCO exists in a region of U.S. interests and challenges, but official membership status in the SCO probably is neither preferred nor attainable for Washington, given each party's lingering suspicions of the other's long-term intentions. The pace and depth of any engagement likely will be slow and limited at least in the beginning. When assessing the potential benefits and risks, however, the U.S. basically has three approaches to consider for Washington's future relationship with the SCO. The U.S. could adopt a position of active opposition to or benign neglect toward the SCO, or move toward more active partnership.

A. Active Opposition.

The U.S., as the most powerful nation in the world, has tremendous hard and soft power at its disposal that it could bring to bear to actively confront and sideline the SCO and its goals. Washington might adopt this strategy if it concluded that the group's ulterior objective was to undermine U.S. interests in the region. Further, especially given recent events in the Middle East and North Africa, the U.S. might want to take this stance to demonstrate that it will not take action supportive of authoritarian governments. While this strategy would serve to inhibit the SCO, the U.S. would still find it necessary to engage bilaterally with its members' governments to protect American interests, particularly in Afghanistan for the next few years, resulting in a engaged/not engaged, bifurcated foreign policy. Soft power steps might include U.S. requests for other countries or organizations, like the EU or OSCE, to refrain from engagement that could further exclude the SCO's external legitimization and present a united front against non-democratic norms. Though there exists this possibility, such requests might be met with resistance as others could see value in engagement with the SCO, setting up uncomfortable choices for others and potential defeats for Washington.

B. Benign Neglect.

In this instance, the U.S. could deem bilateral ties with SCO countries sufficient to achieve American interests in the region and decline to seek out further cooperation with the group. Washington's actions would effectively deny the SCO the legitimacy that engagement would impart, similar to the previous strategy, but the U.S. would not actively work against the group or seek to deter others from cooperation. Washington might judge that any missed opportunities to cooperate would be acceptable and that the SCO is not worth taking action against, or just assess that it would be counterproductive to array the U.S.'s resources against it. One commentator's proposal that aligns somewhat with this view suggests that the U.S. could use a select few allies,

such as Afghanistan or Turkey, to act as an informal U.S.-SCO conduit, to gain insider information without Washington having to interact itself with the group. Such a plan, however, would require these states to enhance their own activities with the organization (Turkey does not have any official membership role and Afghanistan attends as part of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, not as an official observer or member).¹⁶⁸ Having an undeclared source of insight into the SCO instead of an official presence probably would be viewed with suspicion and mistrust by the group if found out and jeopardize any future relationship if the U.S. changed its mind about engaging with the SCO.

C. Positive Partnership.

An alternative strategy the U.S. could pursue might be one of partnership with the group on issues of common concern, such as counterterrorism and counter narcotics. This strategy could be complementary to existing bilateral ties Washington has with SCO participants, provide an additional forum for the U.S. to promote cooperation on regional and critical transnational issues, lessen the chances for negative surprises emanating from the area, and avoid the dangers of a zero-sum “great game” approach to the region. This type of approach is much like that proposed more generally by Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2009, who asserted that “a successful foreign policy should also seek to integrate, rather than exclude, autocratic and rising great powers,” primarily by jointly addressing “real and shared problems rather than focusing on ideological differences...looking for alignments based on interests rather than regime type.”¹⁶⁹ Former U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE, Stephan Minikes, in April 2010 urged the U.S. to use the OSCE to reach out to the SCO as a way to encourage both organizations to cooperate on issues of “common cause.” With this strategy, the U.S. likely would find it necessary to consistently raise democratic and human rights norms to avoid the appearance of endorsing authoritarian regimes.

Current U.S. officials already have raised the question of whether the U.S. is best served relying solely on bilateral ties or whether engagement on additional fronts is necessary. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, speaking to an audience in Japan in 2007, noted that the U.S. security relationship in Asia after World War II consisted of a “hub and spoke” model, reflecting the primacy of bilateral relationships. He commented that these relationships are enduring and indispensable, but stated the U.S. desire to complement them with more multilateral ties. Gates judged that the threats the U.S. faces cannot be successfully handled by one or two nations, but by several, cooperating and contributing their own special capabilities. The Secretary also mentioned that earlier that year he had challenged East Asian leaders to play bigger roles in integrating Central Asia and South Asia into their security architectures.¹⁷⁰ A positive partnership with the SCO would seem to follow Gates’ suggested approaches.

Engagement with the SCO also might provide a forum within which the U.S. could interact with SCO participants not currently in Washington's favor, such as Iran. In the Chicago Council on Global Affairs' 2010 national survey of American public opinion, 62 percent of those polled favored U.S. leaders meeting and talking with Iran's leaders, although 54 percent opposed establishing diplomatic relations, suggesting the public sees some maneuvering room for Washington to engage more positively with Tehran.¹⁷¹

Some experts have raised the question of whether the SCO's new dialogue partner status would be suitable for the U.S., but Washington may not view the current roster of SCO dialogue partners – Belarus and Sri Lanka – as one desirable for the U.S. to join.¹⁷² A more promising and less formal (and entangling) venue of engagement could be project oriented, particularly on the most pressing topic in the SCO region for Washington – Afghanistan.

Chapter Nine:

Recommendations for Forward Progress

Changing the U.S. approach to the SCO is fraught with challenges and requires the administration's study and due consideration. Should the United States opt for a strategy of partnership as a potentially more effective means to gain cooperation and influence on regionally-based national security issues, the next decisions likely would involve specific bureaucratic and policy steps to try to ensure enhanced engagement results in positive outcomes. Coordinated departmental communication to support outreach to this multilateral and multifunctional organization and specific action plans for positive and tangible deliverables would be a priority. The administration could consider some of the following concrete actions by the primary executive branch organizations charged with formulating and executing foreign policy: the State Department, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council.

A. Department of State.

Statements by officials now at the State Department suggest the potential for action in support of engagement with the SCO has increased since the last U.S. administration. Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, co-authored a June 2008 think tank report that concluded a lack of U.S. engagement with Asian regional groups is an obstacle to achieving U.S. interests.¹⁷³ The report noted that while many experts judge groups like the SCO as talk shops, the lack of U.S. presence with them "carries real costs." Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg, when asked about the SCO at a public conference in June 2010, answered that he thought it was "important that we continue to interact with the SCO" citing "different ways in which non-members can engage."¹⁷⁴ And most recently, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake publicly stated during a visit to China in March 2011 that while the U.S. had not decided whether to seek an official role within the organization, "we think the SCO is a good platform for discussions on how to improve stability and prosperity in the region."¹⁷⁵

These senior State Department officials' apparent support for engagement with the SCO and other similar groups may have helped set in motion at least one bureaucratic change which would better facilitate such cooperation. The State Department established in late 2009 an Office of Policy, Regional, and Functional Organizations under the International Organizations Bureau.¹⁷⁶ According to State's Foreign Affairs Manual, the office guidance includes three mandates: systematic policy reviews on multilateral issues, focus on coherence and direction of U.S. government engagement as a whole, and working closely with regional bureaus in interagency policy discussions on multilateral engagement. This last directive is especially crucial

because of the broad geographic scope of the SCO. Indeed, the SCO is a regional grouping, but its participants do not align with any one of the specific regional bureaus in the Department. As State currently is organized, SCO participants fall under three different regional bureaus (European and Eurasian Affairs, East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and South and Central Asian Affairs). Speaking at a January 2011 public event, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization (IO) Affairs Esther Brimmer noted that the office was intended to help more consistently integrate the U.S.'s bilateral, regional, and multilateral diplomacy.¹⁷⁷ The State Department's first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) noted that this new office would serve as a "clearinghouse for best practices and ways to leverage expertise" regarding multilateral organizations.¹⁷⁸

Possible next steps for this new office include creating a desk-level working group to specifically reach across the three different regional bureaus and numerous other functional initiatives within the State Department (such as counter narcotics, counterterrorism, human rights, economics) and with forward-deployed officers to ensure consistent, comprehensive, and coordinated approaches to the SCO. Regular interaction could help establish goals, maintain momentum, and conduct timely assessments of progress in such outreach and cooperation. The working group could maintain databases on the SCO's organization, officials, activities, and seek to identify opportunities for the U.S. to engage on issues of concern. This desk-level group would be responsible for putting forward proposals and reporting to more senior-level groups, such as the one outlined in the QDDR of regional office directors and the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the IO bureau. Setting up a functioning and successful working group undoubtedly is an incremental, bureaucratic step, however, the diplomatic complexities of outreach to a group like the SCO, crossing multiple bureaus and offices, encompassing challenging relationships with China and Russia, and in a region where the U.S. currently has deployed combat troops, would benefit from a solid institutional footing and process.

B. Department of Defense.

If the U.S. were to decide to more consistently engage with the SCO, the Defense Department could also consider additional steps to facilitate such cooperation. With senior DOD support, the various regional unified commands associated with SCO states, as well as their associated Pentagon-based officials, could parallel the State Department's efforts to form a SCO working group with the same objectives, but in different policy areas than State – to better integrate bilateral, regional, and multilateral defense and security policies.

Much like the State Department, the Defense Department's current regional organization means that SCO participant countries fall into three separate commands in the field (European, Pacific, and Central).¹⁷⁹ In addition, at the Pentagon, under the

Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, there are two Assistant Secretaries of Defense offices which are responsible for countries that participate in the SCO (International Security Affairs and Asian and Pacific Security Affairs). Organizationally below those offices are Deputy Assistant Secretaries of Defense, five of which cover the different SCO states regionally (European and NATO, South and Southeast Asia, Afghanistan/Pakistan/Central Asia, Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia, East Asian and Pacific), not to mention others who cover functional areas like counter narcotics.¹⁸⁰ This structure means that coordination of activities and proposals and sharing of best practices is critical to a coherent outreach program for a complex organization such as the SCO.

Beyond bureaucratic alignment for cooperation with the SCO, the U.S., if it chose to further engage the SCO, might also consider next steps on military-to-military familiarization. The Defense Department maintains various attaches around the world who also could serve as liaison or act as observers to SCO activities such as security exercises. Members of the SCO, including China and Kazakhstan, already have participated bilaterally in military exercises with NATO or NATO members, suggesting a preliminary precedent for either U.S.-SCO or NATO-SCO activities. China for the first time participated in joint air exercises with a NATO member – Turkey – in late September and early October at Anatolian Eagle-2010. Chinese fighters operated alongside Turkish ones in mock dogfights and other maneuvers which, along with Beijing's participation in anti-piracy activities off the coast of Africa alongside NATO countries and others, could provide a starting point for future U.S. or NATO cooperative security engagement with the SCO as an organization, which the Defense Department could help facilitate.¹⁸¹

The U.S. (and Great Britain) has joined with Kazakhstan on Partnership for Peace (PfP) exercises for the last several years, called Steppe Eagle, held under NATO auspices. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have also engaged in these PfP defense training and exercises.^{182,183,184,185} The Russia-NATO relationship also could be considered a precedent for organization-to-organization cooperation. Under a NATO-Russia Council pilot project, Russia (along with Turkey and Finland) hosted counter narcotics training for close to 1,250 officers of Afghanistan and Central Asia in 2010.¹⁸⁶

The Defense Department might also consider ways to better familiarize SCO participants with its ongoing activities in Afghanistan via the Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan, to increase awareness of the base's security and local humanitarian efforts, and to help alleviate regional suspicions of the base's intentions. Earlier this year, the U.S. for the first time hosted Russian officers from the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan for a visit to Manas, reportedly after nine years of invitations.¹⁸⁷ The base has hosted international ambassadors before and other officials, but future efforts could focus on inviting a group of political, military, and business professionals from SCO countries.¹⁸⁸

C. National Security Council (NSC).

Former National Security Advisor General James Jones was asked in a March 2009 press conference about the SCO and whether the U.S. was “willing to work with them and partner with them” on Afghanistan, and if Presidents Obama and Medvedev would have such cooperation on their agenda for an upcoming meeting in London. General Jones replied that “the answer to all those questions is yes,” according to the official transcript of the conference.¹⁸⁹ If the current NSC leadership continues to agree with that view, the Departments of State and Defense would be important players for implementing a policy decision to enhance engagement with the SCO, but the NSC would be critical in guiding the process and ensuring senior-level administration approval and oversight.

NSC officials’ main role is to help take the President’s goals and implement them through coordinated and focused policy steps. For outreach to the SCO, the NSC could collaborate with newly-formed SCO working groups of the State and Defense Departments to create an action plan for positive, tangible deliverables. Such a plan would need to be informed by intelligence assessments of the SCO’s development, interests, and potential, and aimed at building trust between the U.S. and the SCO. Given the common priority of stability in Afghanistan for both the SCO and the U.S., deliverables in the near term likely would focus on that country, although other areas, particularly less problematic issues such as disaster relief, could be considered as opportunities and needs arise.

One specific and positive deliverable from the SCO, for example, could be assistance to the U.S. effort to stop the transit into Afghanistan of chemicals used in making roadside bombs. Operation Global Shield aims to halt precursor chemicals such as ammonium nitrate and potassium chloride from reaching insurgents by tightening customs procedures at Afghanistan’s borders. These chemicals are already banned by Afghanistan, but neighboring Pakistan does not have a prohibition, although it claims that such legislation is under consideration. Washington reportedly is working on this issue with Interpol, the World Customs Organization, and the U.N.’s Office on Drugs and Crime, but, as U.S. Senator Robert Casey acknowledged in a New York Times article, “You’ve got to have a whole series of pressure points.” In testimony before the Senate in November 2010, Department of Defense officials stated that “the best way to obtain results is through engagement with the international community, including with...multinational partners...”¹⁹⁰ Involving SCO participants would capture all but one of the nations bordering Afghanistan, including Iran – which also is suspected of shipments, but which has little official interaction with the U.S.¹⁹¹ The lone non-SCO neighbor, Turkmenistan, has been a guest at SCO summits, however, and might be open to assisting on this issue, too. Cooperation would be challenging because of corruption and lax security at some border points, and it would be subject to bilateral tensions which sometimes close border crossings, so why would SCO nations be willing

to tackle those issues in order to help the U.S. and Coalition forces on a chemical ban or regulation? Beyond the public relations appeal to be seen as helpful against terrorists, the states would likely understand that they are not immune to the scourge of insurgent-placed bombs and that practices directed now at Coalition forces could easily be redirected at them.

Counter narcotics is another specific area of potential cooperation between the U.S. and the SCO. In late October 2010, Russian participants joined with U.S. and Afghan forces in a successful raid on drug labs in Afghanistan, destroying more than a ton of heroin and four opium-refining labs, according to the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics.¹⁹² Despite Afghan leaders' criticism about the Russian involvement "without prior authorization" – a reaction probably primarily aimed at domestic audiences nervous about the return of Russians to Afghanistan after their occupation of the country from 1979 to 1989 – the successful operation showed a potential for future U.S.-SCO joint law enforcement-military activities against the drug trade in Afghanistan. U.S. officials characterized the raid as a sign of international counter narcotics cooperation, acknowledging the necessary role of other neighboring nations in this fight.¹⁹³ A foundation of multilateral cooperation that would be complementary to bilateral moves already exists. U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency officers in the past have observed the CSTO's Operation Canal, which since 2003 has included most of the SCO states in drug trafficking interdiction efforts.¹⁹⁴ The NATO-Russia Council's counter narcotics project also has included training courses for Afghan and Central Asian counterparts, involving all SCO members except for China. The Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center (CARICC), an UN-led organization, became fully operational in 2009 to jointly combat narcotics and includes all SCO members, except China. Establishing direct cooperation with the SCO would add to the coordination of counter narcotics efforts in the region by including China in the discussions and exchange of information.¹⁹⁵

Additional potential action, which the SCO could help sponsor and encourage, includes those drawn from the November 2010 Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) independent task force on Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁹⁶ The CFR report's authors recommend that the U.S. encourage private-sector investment in Afghanistan's natural resources and vital infrastructure needs to help Kabul build a sustainable national base for trade and jobs, which some SCO members like China have already taken steps to do and that the SCO could partner with the U.S. to further enhance.¹⁹⁷ Chinese firms have invested heavily in copper and iron mines, roads, digital telephone switches, and power plants.¹⁹⁸ The U.S. also could partner with SCO members to underscore Kabul's need to tackle corruption and over dependency on natural resources, possibly helping Afghanistan use other nations' experiences by providing lessons learned on creating a sovereign wealth fund to manage such revenue and investment, an idea suggested by Oxford Sovereign Wealth Fund co-director Ashby Monk in August 2010.¹⁹⁹ Regional

tensions might also help convince SCO states to help in this way, if only to ensure one country does not benefit from corrupt practices more than others.

The NSC also could consider including the SCO as a partner if the administration takes up some of the recommendations from a February 2011 Senate Foreign Relations Committee's majority staff report about Central Asian regional water resource management.²⁰⁰ Hydropower resources are a source of enduring tension between SCO participants. The staff report recommends that the U.S. consider such activities to promote regional cooperation by targeting comprehensive assistance to both upstream and downstream projects, recognizing that partial solutions can unintentionally increase tensions. Sharing U.S. technical expertise on water use and monitoring, and encouraging dialogue between communities are among some of the report's specific suggestions, which the U.S. could try to facilitate through SCO channels as a way to simultaneously reach key stakeholders. The NSC could be the focal point to bring together U.S. government expertise from across civilian agencies and private enterprises.

Other infrastructure, specifically regional transportation, may also hold promise as an area for U.S.-SCO cooperation, given demonstrated interest and activities from both parties, particularly in Afghanistan, as a sort of revived Silk Road effort. Regional expert S. Frederick Starr, in a January 2011 paper, argued that the U.S. should consider making transportation improvements in Afghanistan a government-wide priority that he believes would complement and facilitate the military and other economic initiatives there. Starr concludes that only a regional solution will ensure success.²⁰¹

If the U.S. decides to pursue a course to enhance engagement with the SCO, it will need to carefully manage the multi-track relationship, too, ensuring that the bilateral relationships with SCO participants are not damaged inadvertently through interaction with the SCO as a whole. Just as exclusive bilateral relationships are not sufficient to handle transnational issues, neither are solely multilateral relationships. The U.S. already has templates for this through its relations with other multilateral organizations like NATO, the EU, and the UN. The administration has taken steps to solidify bilateral communications with individual SCO states, which provides the necessary foundation for continued cooperation overall. For example, in 2010, the U.S. launched an annual bilateral dialogue with Central Asian states meant to identify and promote common priorities.²⁰² The Obama-Medvedev Presidential Commission has also been established to help solidify U.S.-Russian interaction. Its external proposals have suggested that the commission include increased cooperation on drug abuse treatment and prevention in its counter narcotics working group, and leverage U.S. and Russian disaster relief expertise in other countries via the commission's emergency situations working group, both issues the SCO has also delved into that could be areas of dialogue and partnership.²⁰³

Conclusion:

Like all organizations, particularly multilateral ones, the SCO has had its ups and downs in its relatively short ten-year lifespan. It has operated on the fringes of most policy experts' attention, with a few watching it intermittently and most others ignoring it.²⁰⁴ The group at this point, however, is accomplishing its objectives of organizational development, outreach to other multilateral groups, and broadening and deepening its scope of effort in the region. Despite persistent challenges brought on by bilateral tensions amongst its participants, the SCO has proven it is here to stay, bolstered by the participants' perception of value in association and by the global rise in acceptance of regional actors. This year's ten-year anniversary of the SCO invites a new assessment of it by non-participant states and organizations.

For most of the SCO's existence, the U.S. has tentatively approached it, unsure of the group's legitimacy and wary of its intentions. But now Beijing and Moscow – the SCO's power players – seemingly have secured their stakes in the organization and its future, and most of the participants appear eager to continue, if not deepen, their role in it. Washington has pursued bilateral relationships with most SCO participants, and key executive branch players appear to support multilateral and regional-based engagement, but there is yet to be attention given to a relationship with the SCO itself. Policy on such a relationship has the potential to impact important U.S. interests, such as a rising China, the Russian reset, and unstable regimes throughout the SCO region. But the risks to the U.S. of appearing to endorse repressive regimes, or of being rejected, sidelined, or negatively used by the group are real and require serious consideration.

If the U.S. chooses to move forward with the SCO, there are steps Washington should consider to assess the prospects of and begin realistic engagement and enhance its position in a region where trust is hard to come by and where U.S. interests look to endure. Much of the process at the outset would be bureaucratic in nature, but would progress to more substantive steps as engagement decisions are made.

Specifically, the U.S. must consider:

- Charging the State Department's new Office of Policy, Regional, and Functional Organizations with the lead role on evaluating various U.S. approaches toward the SCO, including potential benefits and risks
- If outreach is approved, creating a desk-level working group within the State and Defense Departments to specifically reach across the different regional bureaus, commands, and numerous other functional initiatives at headquarters and with forward-deployed locations to ensure consistent, comprehensive, and coordinated approaches to the SCO

- Establishing a focal point at the NSC to ensure incorporation of national-level intelligence analytic support, as well as senior-level policy engagement, and to collaborate with newly-formed SCO working groups of the State and Defense Departments to create a coherent action plan for positive, tangible deliverables aimed at building trust between the U.S. and the SCO

Tin is the traditional ten-year anniversary gift according to lists compiled by wedding and etiquette experts, but, for Washington, turning a “tin ear” to the SCO in the future may have negative consequences for its broader interests in the Eurasian region.

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