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Source: *Journal of Strategic Security*, 2024, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2024), pp. 100-111

Published by: Henley-Putnam School of Strategic Security

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48766109>

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### Recommended Citation

Anadi, Anadi. "New Regionalism and Norm Creation: A Case of Shanghai Cooperation Organization." *Journal of Strategic Security* 17, no. 1 (2024) : 100-111.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.17.1.2184>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol17/iss1/7>

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# New Regionalism and Norm Creation: A Case of Shanghai Cooperation Organization

## Abstract

*This article delves into the evolution of international norms, focusing on the dynamics within Central Asia as a microcosm of broader global shifts. It begins by elucidating the concept of a "region" in international relations, emphasizing its multifaceted nature, both geographically and culturally, as well as its evolving character in the face of global transformations. The study then delineates the emergence of regionalism, encompassing the historical context of old and new regionalism, with a nuanced understanding of their continuities and distinctions. A pivotal point of analysis is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), whose genesis and transformation underscore the influence of new regional dynamics. The SCO's role as a tool for soft balancing against external hegemony, particularly that of the United States, is examined, highlighting its emphasis on shared norms that diverge from Western ideologies. The SCO's success in shaping normative preferences within Central Asia, particularly in promoting non-interference, state sovereignty, and stability, is contrasted with the efforts of Western institutions like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which prioritize liberal democratic norms. The study concludes by elucidating the implications of these normative contestations in Central Asia for the broader international order.*

## Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their meticulous review of my manuscript and the wealth of insightful comments and suggestions provided.

## Introduction

After World War II, the world entered a bipolar era, but it subsequently transitioned into a unipolar phase following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In this specific context, the influence of the liberal international order became pervasive on a global scale, with few alternative perspectives capable of challenging its foundational principles. Nevertheless, China's growing influence sparks a conversation challenging Western concepts of global interactions and collaboration with Chinese norms. In the Central Asian region, the clash between these two viewpoints is prominently unfolding, especially highlighting the tension between them. The traditional norms upheld by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are gaining prominence compared to the liberal ideals in Central Asian region. This situation raises significant doubts about the practicality and longevity of the liberal global framework not only in Central Asia but also on a global scale. It further necessitates the analysis of the implications of the acceptance of non-Western Chinese norms in this region. The article explains the conceptual understanding of the new regionalism, followed by an explanation of reasons behind the rise of new regionalism. Later, the explanation has elucidated the contestation over norm creation in the Central Asian region, emphasizing the SCO's efforts to challenge the liberal international order.

## Understanding Region in International Relations

Power rivalry has unfolded across various global regions. Yet, in contemporary times, the concept of a region extends beyond mere physical boundaries to encompass cultural, economic, and geographical dimensions.<sup>1</sup> It also pertains to the identities of individuals, notions of peace and security within that specific territorial domain, the establishment of institutions, and the functions undertaken by prominent actors, including hegemonic powers and significant regional players.<sup>2</sup> Among the newer interpretations of region is Benedict Anderson's interpretation which has viewed the region as a socially constructed concept.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Hettne and Soderbaum, delving into regionalism, have suggested that the concept of predefined or inherent regions is unfounded.<sup>4</sup> Instead, they contend that regions are brought into existence and undergo redefinition through the ongoing processes of global transformation.<sup>5</sup> Constructivists have argued that "regions come to life as we talk and think about them."<sup>6</sup>

However, this article view region as a territorial unit which is represented by regional organizations like the SCO, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This choice stems from a deliberate focus on the role of regional organizations in shaping and contesting norms within specific geographical boundaries. By emphasizing the territorial nature of regions, the article underscores the significance of geographical, cultural, and historical factors that contribute to the formation of regional identity and politics. This approach aligns with the broader context of global transformation, acknowledging that regions are not static entities but evolve over time in response to global changes. Furthermore, the article contrasts regionalism with the forces of globalization, presenting regional organizations as alternatives or golden means amid global hegemony. The decision to concentrate on specific regional organizations, particularly the SCO, allows for a nuanced case study, facilitating a detailed analysis of the dynamics of new regionalism and norm creation. Overall, the territorial representation of regions through regional organizations provides a foundational framework for examining the interplay between geography, identity, and the evolving norms within the global geopolitical landscape.

In today's global politics, regionalism has become a dominating trend. Amid the hegemony of globalization and the consequential anti-globalization sentiment, regionalism has emerged as an alternative or a golden mean. Hettne identifies two distinct waves of regionalism: Old regionalism and new regionalism.<sup>7</sup> The inception of the first wave of regionalism was entrenched in the aftermath of the tumultuous experiences of inter-war nationalism and the Second World War, spanning from the late 1940s to the late 1960s and early 1970s. In contrast, the second wave materialized in the mid-1980s. The old and the new regionalism has both similarities as well as continuities. However, Hettne argued that separating new from old regionalism is often difficult.<sup>8</sup> Hence he suggests that rather than identifying a new wave of regionalism, it is more relevant to identify the new patterns of regionalism coexisting with the older forms.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, spanning from the 1950s to the conclusion of the 1960s, a considerable part of the world contended with the repercussions of the Second World War, confronting extensive outcomes of political, economic, and societal turmoil. Simultaneously, the other half of the world was in the process of recovering from the effects of colonialism. This dual challenge underscored the imperative for maintaining global

cooperation, peace, and order, ultimately culminating in the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. Furthermore, the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community emerged as a pivotal initiative aimed at the economic revitalization of Europe. This endeavor served as a catalyst, inspiring the creation of similar regional arrangements in different parts of the world.

However, it is essential to note that during the Cold War era, these regional engagements took on distinct characteristics. The world divided along ideological lines, forced nation-states to align themselves with one of the two superpower-led camps for protection and security. As a result, in the context of the old regionalism, it becomes evident that the influence exerted by dominant states played a significant role in shaping these regions, often superseding any organic efforts from within the regions themselves.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the significance of hegemonic regionalism waned in the post-Cold War period. Regional institutions such as the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation and the North American Free Trade Agreement played a pivotal role in disseminating the neoliberal principles championed by the United States, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of US hegemony.<sup>11</sup> However, this approach became obsolete in the context of the emergence of new regionalism.

The new regionalism is a comprehensive, multifaceted, and multidimensional process. It involves not only traditional issues of trade and economic integration but also democracy, identity, culture, environment, security, and social policy. It encompasses the issues of accountability and legitimacy. The new regionalism contrasts with its Eurocentric and limited-scope predecessor, old regionalism, as it emphasizes pluralism and a global orientation. Hettne highlighted the distinction between old and new regionalism.<sup>12</sup> He posits that the focal point of old regionalism was the interactions among adjacent nation-states. Conversely, the emergence of new regionalism, intertwined with the phenomenon of globalization, entails the involvement of various non-state actors operating across different strata of the global system.<sup>13</sup> This novel form of regionalism directs attention to a myriad of actors and extends beyond the conventional state-centric approach.

However, scholars have presented multiple elucidations for the genesis of new regionalism.<sup>14</sup> First, the dissolution of bipolar power dynamics resulted in the emergence of new power centers on a regional scale, transforming the world into a tripolar (Europe, Japan, and the United

States) or multipolar configuration. This shift granted regions greater independence to establish coalitions and engage in global diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> Second, the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies accelerated the pace of globalization, fostering deeper economic interdependence and challenging the established Westphalian nation-state system.<sup>16</sup> Third, the post-1990s era witnessed the proliferation of the market democracy model and the adoption of liberal capitalist developmental strategies, accompanied by increased economic and political liberalization.<sup>17</sup> This catalyzed a surge of interest in regional collaborations.

Additionally, the growing acceptance of multilateral trade openness and the abandonment of protectionist or anti-market stances by developing countries further encouraged the rise of regionalism. Regionalism is the driving force behind the evolution of regional organizations, functioning as an ideology that prioritizes the collective interests of a specific region or a cluster of regions.

### Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Tool for Resurgent Powers

The emergence of new regional dynamics led to the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO is frequently regarded as an unconventional regional organization that has become a focal point for interactions between the East and the West in Central Asia. Its primary objective revolves around addressing global terrorism, religious radicalism, and ethnic division. Additionally, the organization formally aims to address local challenges by establishing frameworks for economic, cultural, trade, and educational cooperation. In 2001, the leaders of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, and Russia came together to establish the organization, primarily driven by the aim of addressing security challenges within the Central Asian states. However, the SCO's purpose shifted as Russia and China regained prominence in the global arena.

In this context, the SCO transformed into an institutional tool used to advance a strategy of employing soft power to counterbalance against the United States. Furthermore, an extended aspect of the SCO's broader vision involves the promotion of norms that oppose Western ideologies.<sup>18</sup> Through the SCO, Russia and China have successfully established a set of shared norms that diverge from Western normative principles. The identity shaping undertaken by Russia and China

mirrors their assertion of resurging as major global powers. While Western norms have traditionally underpinned the global order, China and Russia have adopted norms such as non-interference, upholding the political status quo, safeguarding state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and ensuring state security. Within this framework, it can be contended that these countries have actively worked toward forging a collective identity that can be construed as opposing Western ideals.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, an argument can be made that these powers possess a normative inclination toward prioritizing state sovereignty and maintaining stability in governing structures.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars had conjectured that after the Soviet Union's breakup, other major powers would challenge the United States' hegemony.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, by the late 1990s, it became evident that these significant powers lacked the capacity to engage in counterbalancing actions against the United States. Consequently, pursuing a conventional approach involving military build-up and the formation of opposing alliances as part of a hard-balancing strategy was unfeasible.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, states design the traditional balancing strategy to defend their borders and security against a hegemonic power. However, the current threat does not revolve around a state's territorial survival. Given this context, the concept of soft balancing emerged as a more pragmatic option compared to the traditional hard-balancing approach. Soft balancing, as a strategy, involves second-tier powers actively attempting to minimize the military presence and external influence of an outside power in their affairs. It emphasizes more on non-military alignments.<sup>23</sup> In this context, SCO is often seen as a tool for soft balancing, emphasizing deepening military cooperation and neighborhood diplomacy, promoting mutually advantageous cooperation by ensuring multilateral diplomacy and using rising regionalism. For instance, Russia and China, through the SCO, have sought to undermine American influence in Central Asia, such as by establishing its own election observer group and advocating sovereign democracy as an alternative to Western notion of democratization and human rights.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the SCO could be helpful in eliminating the cultural influence of external power in the Central Asian region by promoting shared norms and common values.<sup>25</sup>

Further, the SCO is perceived as one of the basic instruments for the two resurgent powers, Russia and China, to create a bloc which aims to oppose the United States led international order. It also reflects Sino-Russian strategic convergence and their increasing cooperation in

Central Asia. Additionally, within the framework of interactions among major powers, the SCO assumes three distinct functions. First, it fosters connections between Beijing and Moscow. Second, the SCO represents a type of global security collaboration where the United States does not hold a central position. Third, the SCO enables China to extend its reach beyond the Russia-China-United States dynamic and direct its attention toward the Middle East and African regions. Moreover, in the coming years, China could potentially leverage the SCO for diplomatic objectives in various global locations.

### SCO and Authoritarian Norm-Setting in Central Asia

Lewis highlights the relevance of actors' decisions informally in formulating norms in the international order.<sup>26</sup> In the international arena, he contends that the setting of norms is a continuous and perpetual practice, as demonstrated in the United Nations Security Council. The norms are in the form of “expectations and beliefs about appropriate behavior, shared ideas or values and norms provide world structure and stability.”<sup>27</sup> Contestation and conflict between different approaches to international norms are evident in Central Asia.

In this region, two significant institutions, namely the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the SCO, hold prominence. These organizations have had a substantial impact on shaping norms, and as part of their efforts, they have maintained continuous engagement with the political leaders of Central Asia. The OSCE gained international recognition in the 1990s with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, initially concentrating on promoting democratization in the Balkans and later extending its mission to facilitating democratic processes in Central Asian countries. Concurrently, international economic entities like the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development took on key roles in propelling economic development in the Central Asian region. In the realm of politics, it underscored the significance of non-governmental organizations in establishing transparency and accountability for effective governance in this region. However, one can deduce OSCE's approach to shaping norms from its goals, often described as a “toolkit for promoting democratization.”<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, OSCE objectives encompassed election monitoring and aiding the growth of democratic institutions. The organization also placed considerable emphasis on human rights as a fundamental aspect

of state administration. A defining example of its scrutiny of democratic processes in Central Asia occurred in 2002 when it activated the Moscow mechanism to investigate widespread human rights abuses by Turkmenistan's security personnel in Ashgabat.<sup>29</sup> In this manner, OSCE has harnessed its soft power to guide the Central Asian region toward adopting the norms of the liberal international order.<sup>30</sup> However, it has been widely argued that except for Kyrgyzstan, all the countries have not been able to absorb the tenets of the international liberal order.<sup>31</sup>

On the flip side, the SCO has achieved notable success in establishing norms within Central Asia by addressing key needs for the region.<sup>32</sup> It helps maintain political balance between China and Russia, ensures regional security, fosters economic cooperation, supports the status quo of Central Asian regimes, and promotes non-interference in internal affairs which aligns with the interests of Central Asian leaders. Additionally, the SCO encourages general regional cooperation, particularly on issues like water distribution and border disputes.

The authoritarian regimes that existed in the former Soviet Union were deeply concerned about countering the regional democratic trends witnessed during the color revolutions in various Central Asian countries. Russia played a proactive role in allaying these concerns by assisting autocratic rule in Belarus and destabilizing the democratic leadership in Georgia and Ukraine. Additionally, through the framework of the SCO, Russia engaged with other likeminded countries to discredit the concept of facilitating regime changes in the former Soviet states. In fact, the SCO represented more than a mere intergovernmental forum; it embodied a novel framework of norms and values shaping the trajectory of development in Central Asia. This emergent set of norms and values articulates a conceptualization of what qualifies as appropriate or legitimate within the regional context.

The charter of the SCO, signed in 2001, emphasizes the “mutual respect of sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of state border, independence, non-aggression, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations and non-interference in internal affairs.”<sup>33</sup> Frequently contended is the assertion that the values and norms endorsed by the SCO are positioned to counteract endeavors toward promoting democracy in Central Asia. Furthermore, the Shanghai spirit is perceived as a compendium of principles geared toward the preservation of autocratic regimes within the Central Asian region.<sup>34</sup> The SCO is regarded as a formidable challenge to the principles of

human rights and universal democracy, operating as an international entity prioritizing the survival of regimes over the process of democratization.<sup>35</sup> To comprehend the supportive role of the SCO in fostering authoritarianism in Central Asia, a thorough examination of the interpretation and implementation of the organization's principles becomes imperative.

The primary objective of the SCO is to propagate the Shanghai spirit on the global stage, while concurrently overseeing relations among the countries in the Central Asian region. Comprising six elements—equality, mutual benefit, mutual trust, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations, and striving for common development—the Shanghai spirit is perceived as an extension of China's New Security Concept, which challenges the prevailing American-dominated power-centric international system.<sup>36</sup> The institutionalization of the SCO through the 2001 Declaration and its subsequent 2002 Charter provides valuable insights into the normative preferences and values of the organization. Unlike the charters of organizations such as the African Union, the Organization for American States, and the European Union, the SCO charter and foundational documents do not explicitly commit to democratic values. Notably, there is a conspicuous emphasis on the primacy of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Consequently, the SCO deems any external commentary or impact on the domestic governance of its members as illegitimate.

Furthermore, the SCO places a notable emphasis on diversity, bolstering its stance of not explicitly committing to democratic values as a regional norm. Although the term diversity does not appear in the SCO's declaration or charter, it is evident in various other documents, particularly concerning the respect for the values of different civilizations and each country's prerogative to pursue its own path of development. When considering the SCO's emphasis on diversity, respect for the values of other civilizations, and distinctive socio-political development, coupled with the absence of a commitment to democracy and the prohibition of interference in internal affairs, it reinforces the norm that states hold significant authority to manage their domestic politics and safeguard their political systems.<sup>37</sup> The concept of state sovereignty assumes a fundamental role in the SCO's set of norms, prioritizing the state's involvement in economic policy, political development, and conflict management. Diverging from the approach of the OSCE, the SCO framework construes non-

governmental entities not as facilitators of security and stability but rather as conceivable destabilizing elements.

Examining SCO documents through the lens of Russian Chinese joint statements since the mid-1990s elucidates a discernible correlation between their shared worldview and the norms and values upheld by the organization. In this context, one can interpret the SCO as actively challenging the American-dominated, unipolar order, where the United States champions the cause of democracy and universal human rights. Furthermore, the United States has recurrently invoked the principles of universal human rights and democracy to interfere in the domestic affairs of states perceived to contravene these norms, exemplified by interventions in Serbia in 1999 and Iraq in 2003. Additionally, the SCO places significant emphasis on regional stability, a term open to various interpretations but often associated with constancy and the avoidance of substantial change. Consequently, one can posit that the SCO accords greater significance to maintaining the political status quo, endeavoring to limit, if not entirely curtail, the practice of regime change.

Moreover, within the SCO framework, the concept of democracy has frequently been employed to safeguard authoritarian countries from accusations of infringing upon the rights of its populace. Countries achieve it by emphasizing that it essentially practices diverse variants of democracy. This approach is not merely a rhetorical tactic; rather, the SCO envisions a novel global arrangement that places minimal significance on disparities in ideology and social framework, and instead promotes parity between democratic and authoritarian administrations.<sup>38</sup> This standpoint upholds the principles and beliefs of the SCO, advocating for an international system that is democratic in nature, without any single political norm or value holding sway. Furthermore, the assertion of diverse yet equally valid paths of progress resonate with the Asian values debates that emerged in the 1990s. This represents a cultural-oriented argument aimed at invalidating calls for individualism and liberal democracy, while also providing a shield for authoritarian governments against external censure.<sup>39</sup>

While expressing anti-Western sentiments, the SCO refrains from directly confronting the Western liberal framework. Nonetheless, the SCO strategically carves out its own policy sphere and presents an alternate paradigm to the Western-style global organizations by cultivating affiliations with governments and international entities in

both Central Asia and other regions. This approach could potentially deter the expansion of liberal institutions like North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union, and the OSCE into the Central Asian area.

## Conclusion

The primary feature of an uncertain global landscape is the disruption of established norms due to the actions of multiple states. The questioning of norms lies at the heart of contemporary international dynamics in this unstable global context. The norms that gained prominence as essential after the 1991 post-Soviet settlement are facing growing challenges. The challenges emerge from pragmatic leadership aiming to retain authority, along with various entities advocating for alternative sets of norms that hold significance at both regional and worldwide levels. The examination of regional dynamics in Central Asia, notably illustrated through the dialectical interplay between the SCO and Western-led institutions, elucidates intricate relationships among normative frameworks, values, and geopolitical power structures within the contemporary global milieu. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's success in establishing norms within the region reflects a strategic alignment of interests among member states, emphasizing principles such as non-interference, state sovereignty, and the preservation of the political status quo. In contrast to Western-led organizations like the OSCE, the SCO's emphasis on stability and diversity serves as a counter-narrative to the liberal international order, particularly in safeguarding authoritarian regimes from external criticism. Further, the significance of studying Central Asian regionalism lies in its broader implications for the future trajectory of global geopolitics. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's success in challenging Western norms and fostering a collective identity that opposes liberal ideals raises questions about the durability and adaptability of the established global framework. The region becomes a crucial battleground where conflicting normative preferences contest, revealing the limitations of Western influence and the rise of alternative visions.

This article contributes to the understanding of new regionalism, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the SCO's influence in shaping norms, not limited to economic cooperation but extending to political and security dimensions. The SCO's role as a tool for resurgent powers, particularly Russia and China, in implementing soft balancing

strategies challenges conventional notions of power dynamics, emphasizing the importance of non-military alignments. Looking forward, prospective scholarly inquiries into Central Asian regionalism may delve into the intricate interplay between the SCO and other regional organizations, scrutinize the repercussions of normative contestation on regional equilibrium, and contemplate the potential emergence of alternative global paradigms. Interrogating the complexities of norm generation, power relations, and regional dynamics in Central Asia provides invaluable insights into the shifting landscape of international relations and offers a prism through which to assess the adaptability of prevailing global norms amid the contemporary panorama of multipolarity and dynamic power reconfigurations.

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