In late 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. The five former Soviet republics of Central Asia became independent, re-linking with an older history. Immediately, Russia recognised these new countries and invited them to join the freshly formed and loose Commonwealth of Independent States and later Euro-Asia Economic Community (EEC established in 2000) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO set up in 2002). Simultaneously, China also normalised with all of these nations and rapidly negotiated border agreements with its new neighbours, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Acknowledging an unprecedented reality on the ground, the main priority of both Moscow and Beijing were already at that time to stabilise the situation and prevent it from affecting their own national interests. The Russian government was mainly busy repatriating, with the assistance of the Americans, the nuclear weapons deployed in Kazakhstan, securing the continuation of its right to use the Baikonur rocket pad, guaranteeing the rights of the ethnic Russians residing in these republics and protecting the Tajik-Afghan border. China was on its part chiefly concerned about the possible impact of these new independences on the situation in Xinjiang and quickly reached out its new neighbours, in particular the Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments, to make sure that Uighur opposition activities would be curbed on their soil.

In the same period of time, in spite of Russia’s democratisation, Sino-Russian relations improved rapidly. On 25 April 1996, Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin signed a “strategic partnership” agreement
and five years later, on 16 July 2001, both countries concluded a Treaty of Good Neighbourhood and Friendly Cooperation (Zhong ’E mulin youhao hezuo tiaoyue). Spurred by a growing military cooperation, the Sino-Russian rapprochement has had a direct impact on their relations with Central Asia. In the mid-1990s, China proposed to establish a group made of its three new Western neighbours, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well Russia in order to better coordinate policies related to border security. This group met for the first time in Shanghai on 16 April 1996 and was therefore named after this city. Two years later, in Almaty, China convinced the Shanghai Group to focus on “anti-splittist”, “anti-extremist” and as “anti-terrorist” activities (later known as the “three antis”). On 15 June 2001, the Shanghai group, also called “Shanghai Five”, welcomed Uzbekistan and was renamed Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), underscoring all parties’ intention to turn this group into a genuinely integrated multilateral body pursuing not only security but also political and economic objectives. Promoting an international policy of neutrality, Turkmenistan declined to join the SCO.

September 11, 2001, the Global War Against Terrorism (GWAT), the change of regime in Afghanistan and the US war in Iraq have of course constrained the SCO to focus a great deal on security issues and at the same time to take into account the new American (and NATO) objectives, diminishing somewhat the utility of the SCO. Nevertheless, it survived because it remained useful in the eyes of its members. And a few years later, the “colour revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia and later Kyrgyzstan as well as the repression of the Andijan riots in Uzbekistan in 2005 have conversely revived the security and even political role of the SCO, while contributing to deteriorating SCO members’ relations with the West and. The US was forced to close its main military base in Karchi-Khanabad (K2), Uzbekistan, at the end of 2005. Simultaneously, economic and trade relations among SCO members developed rapidly. In January, A SCO secretary was established in Beijing and its first chief secretary was a Chinese (Zhang Deguang). Owing to its increasing needs of energy products, China has been keen to establish a closer cooperation with the Central Asian countries rich in oil and gas, first Kazakhstan (where it is completing a long pipeline from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border), but also Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The SCO has also tried to open up to its regional environment, inviting in 2004 Mongolia, and the year later, Iran, Pakistan and India to participate as observers in its meetings. Other countries as Turkey have also shown an interest in being included in this group of observers. Though Afghanistan has not joined this latter group, president Hamid Karzai was invited on two occasions to attend the SCO summit, particularly in 2004 to better coordinate the fight against drug trafficking in the region.

In other words, in spite of September 11, the SCO has demonstrated its survivability and utility both for Central Asian countries and the two great powers surrounding the region.

How the American and European have viewed this new multilateral — and totally non-Western — organisation?

In a nutshell, the USA and to a lesser extent the European Union (EU) were in the first place wary about the establishment of the Shanghai Group. But they were not really concerned since in the 1990s the relations between Russia and the West were improving steadily and China was a weaker power mobilised above all by its application to the World Trade Organisation. The creation of the SCO may have alarmed some American conservatives. However, rapidly September 11 overwhelmed previous Western assessments about the Sino-Russia renewed “alliance” and the rise of Chinese influence in Central Asia. Though much attention has been given both in the US and in the EU to the Chinese factor in the SCO, no lesser interest was shown for Beijing’s fresh embrace of multilateral mechanisms in its own region. 2005 was for some time perceived, in particular in Washington, as a watershed for the SCO, an organisation not only set up for security and economic purposes but also for pursuing domestic political objectives that could clash with Western democratic values. Nevertheless, since then, American and European observers as well as governments have adopted a more global and long-term approach of the SCO, emphasising its stabilising role as well as its own limitations. The conflicting interests of its members, Russia’s ambition to keep a privileged position in its “near abroad”, China’s growing economic influence (cf. annexed tables) as well as the Central Asian countries’ desire to remain independent and open to all sorts of partnerships including with the US, the EU, Japan and other non-neighbours, all these factors have been conducive to calm down the anxieties about this new major non-Western multilateral regional organisation.
The SCO viewed by the United States

The United States understood the establishment of the Shanghai Group in 1996 mainly as a Chinese initiative aimed at better securing its relations with its Western neighbours but also expanding its influence in Central Asia to the detriment of Russia. As the US-China relations were then in a delicate period of time and still under the impact of the missile crisis in the Taiwan Strait (March 1996), some American analysts started to watch carefully this development. However, aware of the Russian’s close bilateral and multilateral links with the region (e.g. through the EEC and the CSTO), Washington did not see this new group as a direct threat to its own interests. The creation of the SCO in 2001 triggered more alarmist reactions in the US because observers then started contemplating the implications of the new Sino-Russian political rapprochement. But at the end of the 1990s, Washington did not really object to the fact that Moscow started to consider the Shanghai Five and thereafter the SCO as an additional and convenient leverage to recover their own influence in Central Asia

September 11 rapidly changed American priorities: every country was asked to cooperate with the US’s Global War Against Terrorism. While this new strategic situation had a direct impact on Russia, China and the SCO, it also changed the US’s view of Central Asia: this region became a “frontline in the GWAT”. Washington convinced both Moscow and Tashkent to let it open a military base in Uzbekistan in order to prepare the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. And having expressed some concern about a possible US encirclement strategy against China, Beijing found that it was in its own interest to join the GWAT and approve the US-organised regime change in Afghanistan in late 2001.

The US then perceived their military presence in Central Asia as welcomed by Russia, partly because it indirectly helped this latter country to contain China’s growing influence in the region. Washington was also aware that the new situation affected Beijing’s interests and tried to reassure it in developing a selective bilateral cooperation in the fight against terrorism: e.g. the transfer of some Uighur activists arrested in Afghanistan to the Guantanamo Detention Centre and in 2002, the acceptance to add the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), a small and rather non-representative Uighur grouping, to the UN list of terrorist organisations.

But at the same time, the US rapidly took note, with some satisfaction, of the negative impact of the GWAT on the SCO as a reliable and useful organisation. This had a lot to do with the US’s own perception of its relations with both Russia and China. For instance, in January 2003, Russia specialist Andrew Kutchins, then research fellow at the Carnegie Foundation (Washington DC) stated:

“On the part of the US, the fundament of the new Russian-American partnership is based on the revision of the US’s targets in the sphere of foreign policy and security, which include: 1) successful prosecution of war against international terrorism; 2) intensification of efforts aimed at preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and means of delivering them; 3) peaceful management of the upsurge of China as a great power; 4) stability of the world energy maintenance... Efficient achievement of these targets is only possible in cooperation with Russia. At bottom of fact, no other country can offer more for implementation of these targets than Russia”.

But a number of external and internal factors have contributed to alter the American perception of Central Asia and Russia’s role. The US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the deterioration of Washington’s relations with Moscow under Vladimir Putin, the steady development of Sino-Russian military cooperation, the anti-“colour revolution” twist of the SCO after the Andijan repression and — this was probably the last straw — the Uzbek government’s subsequent decision to close the K2 US military base have contributed to consolidating the SCO and triggered a vivid debate among American decision-makers and analysts.

For the US, the growing concern of both Russia and China about the “colour revolutions” (Georgia, November 2003; Ukraine, December 2004; Kyrgyzstan, March 2005) and their strong suspicion of a Western and American role in them had a direct impact not only on...
Sino-Russia relations but also on the SCO. Affecting directly the SCO, the Kyrgyz revolution convinced the Uzbek government to suppress the Andijan riots in May 2005 and both Moscow and Beijing to loudly support this decision, in blatant contrast to the position adopted by the US and the EU.

The Sino-Russian large-scale military exercises in Shandong in July 2005 (Peace Mission 2005) also alarmed many American observers. Though they did not take place in Xinjiang, as initially wished by Moscow, but in Shandong in order to demonstrate the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)’s growing capability to submit Taiwan and remained bilateral, they were formally conducted under the hospices of the SCO and also meant to demonstrate a concerted Sino-Russian willingness to prevent any extension of the “colour revolutions”**. In other words, they followed a double objective. In addition, these exercises were organized a month after the SCO summit asked the United States to make public a departure date from its K2 military base near Tashkent. The US’s role in the evacuation of Andijan refugees and its increasing criticism of Islam Karimov government’s human right records have been the direct cause of the SCO request to the US.

This evolution convinced the majority of American analysts, including the most liberal ones, to react. For instance, Ted Carpenter, director of the “libertarian” Cato Institute, declared in 2006: “To this point, the United States has been relatively complacent about the Russia-China rapprochement”***. In other words, the 2005 developments, in particular in Central Asia, contributed to modifying the US analysis of the Sino-Russia relations and the SCO. The US perceived the closure of the K2 base as a rather unexpected failure and since then has tried hard to guarantee and consolidate its military presence in Kyrgyzstan (the agreement regarding the US Manas base was renegotiated, not without difficulties, in July 2006). The 2005 events also persuaded the American government to become much more attentive to the energy cooperation among the SCO countries and in particular between Central Asia and China: Beijing’s increasing reliance upon Kazakhstan or Russia’s oil can but potentially decrease the efficiency of any US maritime blockade of China in case of an armed conflict over Taiwan. However, in the following years, most American analysts have continued to emphasise the limits of the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia as well as the conflicting interest among SCO member-states.

A Growing Number of US Alarming Voices

Since 2005, these American alarming voices have been concerned by two opposite trends: Russia’s intention to regain what it had lost of its domination in Central Asia and China’s ambition to use the SCO as a leverage to increase its own influence in the region.

On the one hand, the US perception of Central Asia has continued to focus on the Russian factor. As Jim Nichol, a Russia and Central Asia expert in the Congressional Research Service, indicated in 2007, Washington’s main concern is Central Asian countries’ capability to remain genuinely independent nations, in particular vis-à-vis Moscow:

“Virtually all US analysts agree that Russia’s actions should be monitored to ensure that the independence of the Central Asian states is not threatened”**.

However, this report also shows that the US is increasingly worried about Central Asia’s anti-Americanism:

“More recently, however, Russia has appeared to step up efforts to counter US influence in Central Asia by advocating that the states increase economic and strategic ties with Russia and limit such ties with the United States. Such a stance appears paradoxical to some observers, since Russia (and China) benefit from anti-terrorism operations carried out by US (and now NATO) forces in Afghanistan”***.

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** Ibid.
And, after 2005, more American analysts have underscored China’s growing interest in Central Asia’s energy products and influence in the region without considering these trends as potential factors of tensions with Russia and other SCO states. In other words, in their view, because Moscow and Beijing have elevated their bilateral relationship to some kind of anti-Western alliance, the SCO anti-US “solidarity” could but overwhelm any kind of internal rivalries*. For instance, Ted Carpenter, the Cato expert, stated in 2006: “The energy relationship (between Russia and China) is a manifestation of the larger strategic relationship between the two countries, which has the goal of containing the United States... It’s an almost perfect marriage of convenience”**.

Indeed, among the evidence put forward by these experts was Russia’s more visible readiness in 2006 to satisfy China’s requests regarding the Pacific Pipeline (from Tayshet to Nakhodka through Skorovodino), which in the first place (2004) fulfilled better Japan’s interests***. This new pipeline agreement has been perceived by this group of Americans as a defeat for Japan, which as a consequence, strengthened its strategic relations with both the US and India. Whatever one can think about this probably oversimplified analysis of the Sino-Russian relations, the growing importance of the energy factor in this relationship convinced the Bush Administration to scrutinize much more closely the Russia-China “strategic partnership”****.

Some experts went further and linked together the negative changes in the SCO and the strategic situation in the Taiwan Strait. For instance, Tim Murphy, a research fellow at the Centre for Defence Information in Washington DC, indicated in December 2006:

“It is unlikely, however, that the United States and Russia or India will go to war with each other because China invades or attacks Taiwan. The scale of such a war and the resulting damage to each party creates a situation where the costs likely outweigh the benefits. However, the possibility does exist and the SCO, by summarily backing the PRC, provides specific context for such a conflict. Victor Corpus, a retired brigadier general and former chief of the US intelligence service in the Philippines, provides an eerie prediction of a war resulting from Taiwanese separation. After illustrating examples of asymmetric tactics to neutralize the US sea fleet in the Taiwan Strait, China’s SCO allies could become involved in the fighting.

Corpus writes: ‘On yet another major front in Central Asia, Russian troops lead the other member-countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization into a major offensive against US military bases in Central Asia. The bases are first subjected to a simultaneous barrage of missiles with fuel-air explosives and electromagnetic pulse (EMP) warheads before they are overrun and occupied by SCO coalition forces’*

** Jim Nichol, Central Asia, op. cit.
*** China accepted to finance the section of the pipeline from Skorovodino to the Chinese border and then to Daqing; Leszek Buzynski, “Oil and Territory in Putin’s Relations with China and Japan”, The Pacific Review, Vol. 19, No. 3, September 2006, pp. 287—303.
**** Esther Pan, op. cit.

Most US Experts Still Emphasise the Russian-Chinese Competition in Central Asia

The majority of American experts have continuously estimated that Sino-Russian relations in particular because of their competition in Central Asia, could not renew any kind of 1950s-modeled “Auld Alliance”. The 2005 events momentarily weakened their position on “K Street” (the street in Washington DC where most strategic think tanks are located) and in the Pentagon. However, since 2006, their analysis has been clearly shared by the Bush Administration*. 

As early as 2003, experts as Matthew Oresman (then attached to the CSIS) showed optimism, from an American perspective, about the future of the SCO:

“It is extremely unlikely that there will be any sort of mutual defence clause. There will be a renewed commitment to combat trans-national threats and increased economic cooperation. Priority will be given to security over economics by focusing on building practical links before attempting a larger, all encompassing strategic union, a major fear for alarmists who see the SCO as China’s Warsaw Pact.

However, there is considerable worry that China and Russia will use their influence to maintain a strategic environment suitable to them, sacrificing long-term political reform for short-term stability.

A success for the SCO is not necessarily a loss for the United States, especially since China, Russia, and the United States share the same basic interests in the region.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is on track to becoming a formal international organization, moving beyond its days as a talk shop. Still, many obstacles remain, not least of which is internal rivalry and a constant need to justify its existence in light of a US presence in the region***.

* One can actually doubt that the Bush Administration ever supported the most alarmist views on the SCO and the Sino-Russian relations.
** Italics added by us; Matthew Oresman, “The SCO: A New Hope or to the Graveyard of Acronyms?”, PacNet, No. 21, 22 May 2003; after having studied Chinese at Tsinghua University in 2003—2004, Oresman created the China-Eurasia Forum, within the “Central Asia Caucasus Institute” at the Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. This institute identifies itself as a trans-Atlantic research centre. The Forum includes American (David Finkelstein), European (Niklas Norking), Russian (Dmitri Trenin) and Chinese (Zhao Huasheng) experts.

The “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan was the occasion for Oresman to take note of China’s reserve and cautiousness. Indeed, Beijing’s priority was then to maintain a stable relationship with this country and a high degree of cooperation with its government, whatever its “colour”, in order to continue to secure its own border and prevent Uighur refugees from crossing it to Xinjiang.

Other observers, as John C. Daly, a Russia and Middle-East expert at the Middle-East Institute in Washington, were aware of China’s growing and probably irreversible influence in Kyrgyzstan but at the same time insisted on the common interests shared by great powers in Central Asia:

“For China, the agenda in Kyrgyzstan is simple — acquire access to the country’s immense natural resources while blunting the further penetration of US and Russian military power. Despite the rivalry over Kyrgyzstan, the US, Russia and China have a common interest in combating the threat of Islamic extremism, which has entrenched itself in southern Kyrgyzstan. China’s interest in its tiny but strategic Western neighbour can only increase, whether Moscow and Washington like it or not”**.

More generally, most experts have underscored the fluidity of the relations among big powers in Central Asia. Before the summer 2005 Sino-Russian military exercises, Adam Wolfe, a PINR analyst (the PINR is close to the CIA), wrote:

“China and Russia are acting in tandem to shore up support for S.C.O. policies by offering blanket support for the current regimes and implicitly calling attention to US-led efforts to undermine their governments. The states hosting the game board will continue to swing their support from China and Russia to the US, and back again, so long as they keep their hold on power. The past month has seen a flurry of activity in the Great Game, and it can be expected that things will not cool down anytime soon****.

** Italics added by us; John C. K. Daly, “Sino-Kyrgyz Relations after the Tulip Revolution”, China Brief, April 26, 2005, Vol. 5, No. 9. The Middle East Institute if close to the State Department.
Pushing further the argument, Yu Bin, a political science professor at Wittenberg University (Ohio) and research fellow a the Shanghai Institute of American Studies at Fudan University, indicated in December 2006 in Foreign Policy in Focus, the publication of the liberal democrat Institute of Policy Studies:

“As a platform from which China is seen to be able to deflect, frustrate, and neutralize America’s influence, the SCO is at best an irritant to Washington.

The SCO’s “anti-Americanism,” however, is not as strong or real as Washington perceives. The SCO’s founding had less to do with America than with deep concerns regarding instability in the former Soviet republics. For Beijing, dealing with a group rather than separate parties for the stability of the thousands of kilometres border with those former Soviet republics was both convenient and necessary. If anything, the SCO actually anticipated Washington’s war on terror by declaring its organizational goals from the very beginning to combat the perceived threats of “terrorism, separatism, and extremism” rising from the ashes of the Soviet empire. For China and other SCO members, the US war against the Taliban served, at least temporarily, to further their own individual and collective goal of countering religious extremism in central Asia”…

…”For Russia, China’s economic “intrusions” into traditionally Russian-dominated areas are part of the realpolitik game, be they in the name of geopolitics, geo-economics, or, more fashionably, petropolitik. Its economy buoyed by high oil prices, Putin’s Russia is ready and able, perhaps more than at any time in the post-Soviet era, to consolidate and perhaps expand its influence in these “near abroad” regions of Russia. Indeed, the once super military power has now become the super petro-power under Putin, whose mission is to remake Russia as a world power to be respected, if not feared.

In this context, the oil czars in the Kremlin may not particularly welcome the newly operational Kazakh-China oil pipeline with its 200,000 barrels-per-day capacity. After all, this pipeline competes with the long-talked-about-but-never-built oil pipeline from Russia’s Siberia to China’s northeast. For Beijing, this Yeltsin-initiated, Putin-stalled, and Japanese-frustrated eastern pipeline project may eventually be built. China’s thirst for energy, however, cannot wait”.

However, in Yu Bin’s eyes, this rivalry has been constantly restrained by the very fluidity of the relations among SCO member-states:

“Great power competition in Central Asia ebbs and flows in a timeless and tireless fashion. Unlike in Europe and East Asia during the Cold War and after, the fault line for the current jockeying for position in Central Asia between Washington and Beijing is not easily discernible. Instead, fluidity, uncertainty, and even outright reversal of fortunes among the major players have been the norm”.

Similarly, for Stephen Blank, professor at the US Army War College’s Institute for Strategic Studies Carlisle Barracks (Pennsylvania), the SCO has remained, if not a “paper tiger”, at least an “organisation a minima”: it is a cooperation structure but not a “security provider” because Russia, suspicious of China's objectives, have preferred to continue to mainly rely on the CSTO”.

Moreover, for Blank, China’s dependence upon Russia in Central Asia, in particular for carrying out its energy projects, should not be underestimated:

“In addition to Kazakh crude, the (Atasu — Alashankou) pipeline will carry Russian oil: there is an insufficient amount of Kazakh oil to supply the necessary volume, and Russia would otherwise block or impede the project by threatening Kazakh energy interests elsewhere if not allowed a share of exports to China. These considerations underscore China’s other recent moves in Central Asia to acquire new energy sources”****.

And Blank concludes:

“From the perspective of Beijing and Moscow, while there are solid political and military grounds for such a partnership if not outright alliance, in fact the economic foundation — and especially its energy dimension — is inherently precarious and will likely remain so for a long time to come”*****.

In other words, the cooperation between Russia and China in the energy sector will probably remain fragile because of these two countries’ rivalry in Central Asia. This viewpoint is quite representative of the mainstream opinion among Russia’s experts in the US defence community*

Having said that, the growing importance of the energy issue has been a wake up call both for the US think tanks and the Bush Administration. American military experts have been quick to establish a linkage between China’s increasing energy needs and the PLA’s new doctrine which now includes conducting “defensive actions” in enemy territory**. They have also rapidly factored in Putin’s ambition to restore Russia’s international power. In Central Asia (as in the Caucasus), this ambition has been aimed at turning the “near abroad” into a «near-near abroad», according to Rajan Menon, research fellow at the New America Foundation, a non-partisan but democrat-leaning think tank***. This reassertion of Russian influence in Central Asia can but underlines the limits of Sino-Russian partnership in the SCO and bilaterally.

More generally, challenging China’s interests, Putin’s policy has also been interpreted by Washington as a factor of weakening US influence in Central Asia as well as on Moscow. This view is shared by Russia’s experts as CSIS’ Kutchins or Brookings Institution’s Clifford Gaddy. For instance, the latter indicated in May 2007:


**Andrew Martin**, “PLA Doctrine on Securing Energy Resources in Central Asia”, China Brief, Vol. 6, No. 11, 2006. Although an Australian officer, Martin published this analysis in a well-known American publication.


“We have zero leverage. The only leverage we ever had on the Russians was the financial dependence of Russia in the late 1980s and in the 1990s... With the current oil boom, that is gone”.

The Bush Administration has belatedly reacted to this situation in implementing traditional balance of power adjustments: it has strengthened its alliance with Japan and is strategic relationship with India. Esther Pan, from the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, a respected bipartisan institution that publishes *Foreign Affairs*, has laid out very clearly both the relative passivity of the US government and its attempt to carry out a kind of “pre-emptive hedging strategy” (my own wording) towards both Russia and China:

“Many experts say US leaders have not paid enough attention to the growing Russia-China relationship. ‘To this point, the United States has been relatively complacent about the Russia-China rapprochement,’ Carpenter says. ‘At this point there is still a question over how to react to [the relationship],’ Neff says. Some critics say this indecision shows the United States sleeping on the job while the other two countries pull ahead. But others say the United States is now realizing the implications of closer Sino-Russian relations. Washington has reached out to Tokyo, and its recent nuclear deal with India shows US leaders are aware of the need to balance power in the region, these experts say***.

Nevertheless, playing down the importance of Sino-Russian and SCO joint exercises (as the ones organised in Kazakhstan in 2007), US experts have also been somewhat reassured by the fact that China’s rapid military modernisation has also become a problem for Moscow. For instance, British American Security Information Council’s David Isenberg wrote in January 2007, in the aftermath of China’s unannounced anti-satellite test (ASAT):

“It bears notice that it is not just the United States that feels uneasy about China’s ASAT test. *Russia has many of its military, intelligence and even communication satellites in low Earth orbit, somewhere between 320 and***

*Reuters, 11 May 2007.*

800 kilometres above ground. Such distance puts them within easy reach of China’s new capabilities. Furthermore, while Russia has advocated many changes to its military doctrine — including greater funding for its high-tech military assets — it still operates many satellites that were put into orbit toward the end of the Soviet Union or just after its break-up. Russia relies on these for its security; especially for the huge open spaces of Siberia and the Far East. Russia’s sparse population in that region, the need to monitor the borders, and the existence of high profile military and R&D assets in Russia’s eastern territory necessitate constant surveillance and observation. The recent economic development of the region — oil and natural-gas exploration and the importance Moscow now attaches to such industries — makes it ever more necessary to keep an eye on this expanse**.

This does not mean that Moscow and Beijing cannot co-operate, in the SCO or elsewhere. Actually their relationship has remained very close and dense as Russia’s new president Dmitry Medvedev’s first official trip abroad in May 2008 has underscored. They continue to share the same view on many international issues (from Kosovo to Iran and from missile defence to Burma and Sudan). But, for American experts, in Central Asia, Russia and China have reached and felt the limits of their “strategic partnership”, leaving to the US, the EU or other nations some space to balance these two big neighbours’ influence.

**SCO viewed from the European Union**

On the whole, EU experts and governments have developed a view about the SCO that is very similar to the US’s mainstream opinion. The Shanghai Group and then the SCO’s raison d’être have been rooted in China’s desire to secure its Western borders and Russia’s “disenchantment with their treatment by the West, in particular NATO expansion and its involvement in Bosnia”, as Peter Ferdinand indicated in a series of two seminal articles on Sino-Russian rapprochement*. The Taliban


in Afghanistan were a perceived shared threat and driving force in turning the Shanghai Five into an Organisation in June 2001. September 11 indeed plunged the SCO into a crisis, but “the benefit of having NATO actively involved in fighting the Taliban outweighed” Russia and China’s “suspicions” about the NATO’s expansion, “for a while” at least. And, as the Swiss researcher Thierry Kellner, from the Brussels Institute for Contemporary China Studies, indicated, Beijing’s desire to use the SCO as a instrument of multilateral cooperation against terrorism and non-traditional security coincided with Moscow’s “as well as Central Asian capital’s priorities”**.

What has particularly struck the Europeans — and probably to a larger extent than the Americans — has been China’s unprecedented diplomatic and economic dynamism in Central Asia***. This is not surprising: The US’s global as well as regional military responsibilities lead it to mainly focus on the strategic implications of China’s growing involvement in Central Asia.

As the US, the EU has been very attentive to the increasing political convergence between Russia and China in Central Asia after the Andijan repression in May 2005. And they also view this convergence as a factor a Russia’s renewed interest in the SCO****. However, most European experts tend also to underline the limits of this new bilateral and multilateral solidarity. The research works published by Nicklas Norling, Bobo Lo, Frank Umbach, Peter Ferdinand, Isabelle Facon or Marlène Laruelle well demonstrate these long-term competition and suspicion.

* Ferdinand, op. cit., p. 854.


**** The British Defence Department translated and published in May 2005 a research paper on China’s economic relations with Central Asia, written by Vladimir Paramonov, research fellow at the Tashkent State Institute, titled Central Asia: Present & Future of Economic Relations; this paper concludes that China should move beyond its trade relations with this region mainly based on raw material imports since its interest is to contribute to integrating Central Asia to the world economy.

For instance, Norking has insisted on Beijing and Moscow’s diverging interests in the energy sector but also from a “civilisation” point of view. Lo (Royal Institute of International Affairs in London) and Umbach (DGAP or Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik in Berlin) also consider China’s growing need for oil and gas imports from Central Asia as a source of friction with Russia**.

Similarly, the closure of the US K2 military base near Tashkent, for Alisher Ilkhamov, research fellow at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, has not triggered any kind of strategic alliance between China and Uzbekistan. Beijing’s objectives in this country have remained mainly of commercial nature. And while its assistance has not been as high as expected, its investments there continue to face many institutional and economic obstacles***.

Another limit to China’s growing influence in Central Asia, has been Russia’s control of the region’s oil and gas pipelines and exporting infrastructures. In spite of Beijing’s pipeline projects, Moscow prominent position in that sector will be hard to threaten. This basic reality also influences the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia according to experts as Andrew Neff, of Global Insight, an economic intelligence institute based in London****.

Other Russian advantages are often overlooked in the view French experts as Isabelle Facon or Anne de Tinguy: the economic integration

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**** Oil and Gas Journal, 6 March 2006.

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and complementarity between the Russian and Central Asian economies, the presence of 6 to 7 million Russians in Central Asia (against over 10 million in the early 1990s), the migration of many Central Asian workers to Russia and the large (though somewhat diminishing) use of the Russian language in the region are as many factors of Russian long-term prevailing influence and “soft power” in the region.

More generally, as in the US, in the EU there is a large awareness that the SCO is not used for the same purpose or with the same intensity by its different members, and in particular Russia and China. For instance, in Marlène Laruelle’s view, a researcher attached to the Tashkent-based French Institute for Research on Central Asia, the former does not wish to turn the SCO into a “free trade zone” because this evolution will obviously benefit the latter (cf. the two annexed tables)**. For Isabelle Facon from the French and Paris-based Foundation for Strategic Studies (FRS), Moscow continues to privilege, in the commercial realm, the Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzES) and, in the security realm, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) over the SCO***.

For example, relying more on the CSTO than on the SCO to address its main security issues in Central Asia, Moscow is not ready to share, through the SCO, as much intelligence with Beijing as the Chinese government would like. The Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) created by the SCO in 2004 and based in Tashkent is not interconnected with the Russia-controlled CSTO’s Anti-Terrorist Centre established in Bishkek****. In other words, Russia tends to minimise the relevance in terms of collective security of the SCO and continues to mainly rely on
the CSTO. And China, on its side, prefers to develop security cooperation at a bilateral level, since it has revealed itself much more reliable than the multilateral anti-terrorist cooperation within the SCO⁶.

In a sense, we can speculate that the EU may have been more influenced by Russia’s relative lack of interest in the SCO. For instance, in a research paper published by the Centre Asie Ifri in January 2005, Ilias Sarsembaev, then research fellow at the University of People’s Friendship in Moscow and PhD. Candidate at the Institute of Political Science in Paris, insisted on the rivalries between China and Russia in Central Asia as well as the divisions among Central Asian countries. On the SCO role, he wrote:

“The only positive contribution of the SCO has been the establishment of an Anti-Terrorist Convention in 1999: this convention constitutes a guarantee of Central Asian states’ territorial integrity, linking together their recognition of Tibet and Xinjiang as part of China with China’s recognition of Central Asia states as independent countries”⁷.

If there is a more substantiated difference between the EU and the US, this difference stems probably from the Bush Administration’s heavy-handedness towards Russia, and what many Europeans perceive as the direct implications of this policy for Russia-China relations as well as for the SCO. The SCO’s insistence on cultural diversity⁸ does not contradict either the EU priorities while it may be viewed by the US as restricting the influence of American “mass culture” and “soft power”.

Finally, less sensitive for obvious reasons to the possible anti-American trends existing in the SCO — there is not apparently much anti-European sentiments in the SCO, the EU experts and government do not consider this new multilateral organisation as an anti-Western force, probably to a larger degree than their US counterpart.


Conclusion

What sort of lessons can we draw from these changing perceptions of the SCO and its relations with Russia and China?

Firstly, while only a few American and European experts became interested in the Shanghai Five from the very beginning, it is fair to indicate that the establishment of the SCO, September 11, and the 2005 events were the main factors of a increasing Western shared interest in this new multilateral body.

Secondly, although on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, more alarming views could be heard in the aftermath of the 2005 developments, since then more sensible assessments of the role and the limitations of the SCO have dominated the debate. Of course, more Americans than Europeans continue to be wary about the SCO anti-democratic and anti-NATO trends. However, neither the US nor the EU consider the SCO as such as an anti-Western organisation; rather they see it as a non-Western security and political body which role has a good chance to remain restrained by both major members’ own interests and involvement in other multilateral organisations.

Thirdly, this comparison between American and European views of the SCO is directly indicative of the changing Western assessments of the Sino-Russian “strategic partnership”. The linkage between the SCO development and the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing has been underlined by most experts. And conversely, the difficulties in Sino-Russian relations can but impact of the future evolution of the SCO.

Fourthly, all in all, as the US Administration, the EU and the European governments are well aware of the fluidity of interstate relations in Central Asia as well as the long-term suspicions between Moscow and Beijing. In that region, Russia has remained the main actor while Chinese economic and trade influence has been growing steadily. But at the same time, the SCO is far from being a closed area. Since the end of the Cold War, it has developed relations with and being subject to influences from many Western and Asian countries.

Finally, it should be noted that most American and European experts and governments are pretty well informed about the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, its origins, its growth, and are therefore entitled to debate about its future.
Russia — China — Central Asia:

The comparative importance of trade relations (2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Russia’s share in the country’s foreign trade (%)</th>
<th>China’s share in the country’s Foreign trade (%)</th>
<th>Share of the country in Russia’s foreign trade (%)</th>
<th>Share of the country in China’s foreign trade (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>18.87</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>27.24</td>
<td>34.25</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>12.22</td>
<td>10.77</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>16.39</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17.47</td>
<td>12.68</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>0.607</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Trade between China, Russia and the Central Asia

Republics in 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country (Region)</th>
<th>I &amp; E</th>
<th>Exports</th>
<th>Imports</th>
<th>Increases% (Same Period in 2005)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I&amp;E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>176,068,645</td>
<td>96,907,284</td>
<td>79,161,361</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
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<td>2,799,831</td>
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<td>3,338,655</td>
<td>1,583,243</td>
<td>1,755,412</td>
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<td>475,051</td>
<td>360,727</td>
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<tr>
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<td>222,570</td>
<td>211,279</td>
<td>11,292</td>
<td>128.9</td>
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<tr>
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<td>97,209</td>
<td>40,615</td>
<td>56,594</td>
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<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>32,378</td>
<td>30,578</td>
<td>1,800</td>
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<td>17,858</td>
<td>16,257</td>
<td>1,601</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* China’s Ministry of Commerce.