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# Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia's Engagement With Regional Institutions

Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky

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## Summary

Over the past two decades, and especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin has intensified its engagement with international institutions. This paper evaluates the drivers of this involvement, Russian views of three of these organizations, and Moscow's success in achieving its objectives. It reaches the following principal conclusions:

- Moscow's approach to multilateralism was first articulated by former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov in the late 1990s. Russia's engagement with multilateral institutions is guided by his long-standing vision of Russian foreign policy to shift the international system away from a U.S.-dominated unipolar order to a multipolar one. In this new configuration, Russia would serve as a key pole dominating the Eurasian landmass.
- Primakov's vision was prompted by the realization that Russia could not compete toe-to-toe with the United States or its allies in the international arena. Over the past five years, his views received a further shot in the arm from two developments: the punitive U.S. and Western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and U.S. President Donald Trump's spurning of multilateralism in favor of more unilateral and nationalist policies and less global engagement.
- Yet Moscow believes the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and to a lesser extent the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) afford it opportunities to
  - shore up its clout amid shifting global power dynamics,
  - push back against Western influence in Eurasia,
  - manage relations in a more competitive landscape,
  - highlight the importance of the United Nations as the legitimate arbiter of international laws and norms and counter what it perceives as repeated Western efforts to skirt those norms,
  - thwart Western efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically and through sanctions,
  - project Russian power and influence, and
  - bolster its international standing.
- The influence of these institutions, however, should not be overstated. For Russia, their importance is more symbolic than substantive. With China's increasing economic and political power in global affairs, they also allow Russia to manage its relationship with a rising China, particularly in Russia's own backyard.

- But these successes come at a price. These organizations were created to advance cooperation among their members in dealing with regional problems and challenges that are also of concern to Moscow. Russia's behavior toward multilateral institutions is driven primarily by how they advance Russian national interests rather than broader organizational purposes and priorities. This attitude has been one important factor that has undermined the capacity of these groups to achieve their objectives. As a result, regional problems are festering, and Russia is neither serving its own interests nor those of its neighbors or other member states.

## Introduction

Russia's engagement with multilateral institutions is guided by a long-standing vision of Russian foreign policy that seeks to shift the international system away from a U.S.-dominated unipolar order. Russia wants to use these organizations to realize a new world order in which power and decisionmaking move from the Euro-Atlantic space toward emerging non-Western powers, to establish Russia as a key pole in the emerging multipolar system with the ability to dominate the Eurasian landmass, and to project Russian power and bolster its international standing.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and its interference in U.S. and European domestic electoral and political processes, the Kremlin has intensified its engagement with these organizations, particularly those that exclude Western states. Moscow seeks to counteract Western efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically and punish it with sanctions for its transgressions. Many observers tend to conflate this burst of multilateral activism with an expansion of Russia's geopolitical influence.

However, Moscow's reach has generally exceeded its grasp: in reality, the success of these efforts in advancing Moscow's geopolitical goals has been a mixed bag.

This paper evaluates the benefits and costs of Russia's deeper engagement with multilateral organizations. The first section briefly summarizes key drivers of this engagement. The following sections look at Russian views of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); and the group comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (the BRICS). The paper also examines the interplay between Russian views toward these international bodies and the goals, interests, and agendas of other members. This dynamic affects not only Russia's ability to accomplish its objectives in these bodies, but also the capacity of these institutions to achieve their mission.

## Where Is Moscow Coming From?

Moscow's approach to multilateralism is not new and dates back to the Primakov doctrine, as articulated by former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov in the late 1990s. Yet, since the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Russia has deepened its engagement with multilateral institutions, especially those focused on the Eurasian landmass where Russia once held sway. Through its participation in these institutions, Moscow has demonstrated that Western efforts to isolate Russia have failed. Substantive follow-through on summits held by these organizations is often lacking, as is the commitment to accept binding obligations that these regional organizations may impose.



Moscow's push toward multilateralism coalesced about two decades ago, prompted by the realization that Russia could not compete toe-to-toe on its own with the United States or its allies in the international arena. Now, when U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is spurning multilateralism, Russia sees opportunities to use multilateral formats to punch above its weight globally and has stepped up its outreach to regional multilateral organizations. Aware that it still struggles to present itself as a peer competitor to the United States, Moscow actively pushes multilateral initiatives and partnerships, taking advantage of Washington's current global disengagement.

Russian conceptions of multilateralism, however, are different from those in the West. In fact, there is no clear Russian translation for the English word "multilateralism." For Americans and Europeans, multilateralism implies sacrificing privilege and elements of state sovereignty for the common good of the international system. For Westerners, multilateral institutions are the primary vehicle through which international law is made and enforced. Russians, including foreign policy specialists, see many of those very institutions as dominated by the West, often excluding Russia or its interests, and favoring Western countries in the rules that the institutions dictate.

The Russian approach to multilateral engagement is geared primarily to shoring up Russian sovereignty and Russia's privileged role in the world as a great power. Russia's preferred multilateral institutions are those where member states treat each other equally and pledge neither to impinge on each other's sovereignty nor bind each other in ways that are detrimental to member state interests. Russia, therefore, favors international organizations that make decisions on a consensual basis, as opposed to institutions with supranational powers that can impose obligations on its members.<sup>1</sup>

Russia's preferred multilateral forum remains the United Nations (UN), where it holds a veto in the Security Council, has equal institutional clout with the United States, and can exert global influence on key issues.<sup>2</sup> The UN is a place where Russia can showcase great power status and where no other state can impose obligations on it without its consent, given its veto power. Yet Moscow sees smaller multilateral institutions, particularly those it has helped create like the EAEU, the SCO, and the BRICS group, as key vehicles to shore up its influence amid shifts in the global order and the underlying distribution of power. Moscow uses these organizations to highlight the importance of the UN as the legitimate arbiter of international laws and norms and to counter what it perceives as repeated efforts by the West to skirt those very norms through democracy promotion efforts, which Moscow sees as a violation of state sovereignty. Moscow uses those principles and claims of Western double standards to cultivate partners within regional multilateral institutions.

## The Eurasian Economic Union: More Than the Sum of its Parts

The EAEU is Moscow's most recent attempt to create a regional integration organization to shore up Russian political and economic interests in its immediate neighborhood and beyond. It is arguably its most successful effort to date in the former Soviet space. The EAEU has created a functioning customs union with increasingly harmonized policies on tariffs, labor mobility, and technical regulations. This success will have long-term impacts on the ability of other international organizations and private companies to do business in or trade with EAEU member states.

Yet Moscow's goals for the organization are far broader than merely investment or trade. The EAEU is also a key tool from the standpoint of Russian security interests, since it is geographically focused on Russia's immediate periphery—the territory that former president Dmitry Medvedev described as a sphere of “privileged interests.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing illustrates the territory's importance to the Kremlin more than the fact that Russia went to war over it twice—in Georgia in 2008, following that country's overtures to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and in Ukraine in 2014, after the Ukrainian Euromaidan revolution topped a Russian-friendly autocrat and led to a new government eager to sign an association agreement and free trade agreement (FTA) with the EU, which Moscow feared could be a precursor to the country's eventual NATO membership.

Thus, the Kremlin uses the EAEU to check the encroachment of outside powers into its immediate neighborhood, which effectively gives the EAEU a geopolitical agenda. Senior Russian leaders are most visibly concerned about Western integration schemes and promotion of democracy, specifically through the European Union's Eastern Partnership. The EAEU provides the region's authoritarians alternatives to Western integration schemes that promote good governance, human rights, and democratic norms. Russian leaders are also eager, albeit more quietly, to shore up Russian influence in the region as China's economic and political power grows in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Moreover, the Kremlin wants to enhance its global clout by leading a group of relatively friendly neighboring states. Moscow's leading position in the EAEU—it accounts for almost 90 percent of the body's gross domestic product (GDP)—gives it enormous economic clout within the group and enables Russia to present itself as the preeminent power in Eurasia. In 2012, then U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton criticized Moscow's decisive role in the EAEU as a Russian effort to “re-Sovietize” the Eurasian landmass.<sup>4</sup> But Moscow's goals are broader than that—the Kremlin hopes that Russia's ability to lead an emerging multilateral economic organization will enable it to enjoy a bigger impact on the global governance and trade system, where its current footprint is quite small.

This is particularly true with Moscow’s push for the EAEU to create free trade agreements with countries outside the region, such as Vietnam, Iran, and most recently Singapore and Serbia (see table 1). Such moves enable Moscow to claim that it is a proponent of global free trade at a time when U.S. protectionism is threatening the international trading system.<sup>5</sup> Moscow also envisions greater coordination between the EAEU and other multilateral regional organizations, including the SCO, the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the African Union. It sees these organizations as potential partners with a common agenda of diluting U.S. power and promoting multipolarity.<sup>6</sup> Moscow is in the driver’s seat for creating such engagements and serves as the main negotiator for the union when it comes to pushing FTAs and cooperation agreements with other regional organizations.<sup>7</sup>

TABLE 1  
**The Eurasian Economic Union’s Free Trade Agreements**

Country	Signature	Entry Into Force
Moldova	October 18, 2011	January 1, 2013
Tajikistan	October 18, 2011	March 19, 2016
Ukraine	October 18, 2011	September 20, 2012*
Uzbekistan	October 18, 2011	January 9, 2014
Vietnam	May 29, 2015	October 5, 2016
China	May 17, 2018	October 25, 2019
Iran	May 17, 2018	To be determined
Singapore	October 1, 2019	To be determined
Serbia	October 25, 2019	To be determined
Egypt	Negotiations in process	Not applicable
Israel	Negotiations in process	Not applicable
India	Negotiations in process	Not applicable

\* Russia suspended the agreement with Ukraine on January 1, 2016. Source: EAEU Legal Portal, <https://docs.eaeunion.org/>.

Finally, the Kremlin wants to enhance regional connections and solidify neighboring states dependencies on Russia, effectively limiting their ability to align too closely with outside powers. High-level pressure on Armenia, which is highly dependent on Russia for security, energy, and economic assistance, to abandon its own association agreement negotiations with the European

Union in 2013 is a clear example of Moscow's willingness to try to limit the sovereign decisionmaking of its neighbors through the EAEU. Similarly, Moscow's implied threats to limit Kyrgyzstani citizens' access to Russian labor markets if their country rejected membership in the EAEU, for example, pushed Kyrgyzstan closer to Russia and into the EAEU at a time when Chinese economic penetration of Central Asia was expanding rapidly.

### Assembling the Building Blocks

The EAEU was initially the brainchild of former Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1994 as post-Soviet chaos wreaked havoc across the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin took ownership of the idea in 2011–2012, when he made Eurasian integration, and the EAEU in particular, a central platform of his election campaign and third presidential term. Putin's decision to push the EAEU quickly changed the prevailing Russian attitude toward former Soviet neighbors that were seeking closer ties with Western political and economic structures. For years, the Kremlin had made clear that it opposed increased security ties between Eurasian states and NATO. But Moscow generally did not block European efforts to promote economic and political engagement, including good governance initiatives elsewhere in the region.

Putin's embrace of the EAEU put Russia and the West on a collision course over Armenian and Ukrainian efforts to negotiate association agreements and deep and comprehensive free trading agreements with the European Union. Russia continues to use a mixture of coercion and economic enticements to encourage its neighbors to join and current members to remain in the organization. In the wake of Russian aggression, Ukraine remains resolutely opposed to joining the EAEU, while Uzbekistan has shown little interest in it. These countries' refusal to become EAEU members hampers its ability to become a truly broad-based regional organization and denies the EAEU symbolic membership of the two most populous and strategically important non-Russian states on the Eurasian landmass.

For Ukraine, membership in the EAEU is obviously out of the question. However, Moscow has been courting Tashkent under new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who urgently needs foreign investment to jump-start his country's economy. The desire to show that the EAEU is expanding helps explain Russian Federation Council Chairwoman Valentina Matviyenko's premature announcement in October 2019 that Uzbekistan had entered into EAEU negotiations. The Uzbek government clarified a few days later that it was only weighing the potential pros and cons of joining the body.<sup>8</sup> That said, Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan has received limited traction in enticing European or U.S. attention thus far and has not yet shown a full commitment to creating a competitive investor climate. For these reasons, eventual EAEU membership for Tashkent cannot be excluded.

The EAEU builds on multiple Russian integration efforts in the post-Soviet space over two-plus decades (see figure 1).<sup>9</sup> In addition to the general frameworks of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), other Moscow-inspired integration efforts in the economic sphere include a push for the Customs Union Agreement (1995), followed by the Treaty on Increased Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Fields (1996), the Treaty on the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space (1999), and the Eurasian Economic Community (2000). The Eurasian Customs Union was established in 2010, and the Eurasian Economic Space and CIS Free Trade Area were formed in 2012. Promoting a Russian-dominated trading zone in Eurasia to facilitate free movement of goods has been a long-term goal dating back to the 1990s with each of these agreements or entities serving as building blocks for today's EAEU.

The final push to transform the Eurasian Customs Union into the EAEU occurred in November 2011, when the presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia signed an agreement announcing a target date of 2015 for the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union. They followed that initial agreement with the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union, also known as the Astana Treaty, a 200-page agreement signed on May 29, 2014. With final negotiations occurring right after Russia's annexation of Crimea and amid collapsing ties with the West, Moscow was eager to highlight that it was not isolated; it pushed hard to conclude the Astana Treaty. The treaty came into force on January 1, 2015, with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan acceding the same year.

The geopolitical drivers of Russia's pursuit of the EAEU are reflected in the minimal economic benefits for Russia from increasing trade through preferential agreements with cash-strapped Armenia, Belarus, or Kyrgyzstan (Kazakhstan, whose dominant trading partners include the EU and China, has a more diversified set of economic and political partners than the other member states). With the exception of Belarus, Russia's commercial engagement with its EAEU partners remains miniscule relative to that with China or the European Union. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia account for 3.4 percent, 0.40 percent, and 0.33 percent of Russia's exports. This is small potatoes relative to Russia's sales to China (11 percent), the Netherlands (8.1 percent), and Germany (5.8 percent).<sup>10</sup> Russia had initially pushed a more ambitious political framework for the EAEU, including a common passport and currency, a collective parliament, a common border force, and a common economic foreign policy. Such moves were rebuffed by Belarus and Kazakhstan.<sup>11</sup>

The EAEU has been hobbled by disagreements and mistrust between member states, as well as Moscow's own reluctance to give up some of its sovereign decisionmaking over trade and economic policy to supranational EAEU political bodies. Keen to shore up their own sovereignty and aware that their populations no longer look to Moscow as a major global center, other member states see the EAEU as a means of containing Russia with the help of a rules-based organization. Even though Russia comprises the bulk of the EAEU's total GDP, the treaty only gives it 20 percent of the body's

voting power. This was an important concession to other member states, made during the treaty's negotiations, when Moscow needed a diplomatic win.<sup>12</sup>

Consensus within the EAEU, as in the customs union before it, can be hard to reach. Four EAEU members refused to follow Russia's lead in imposing countersanctions on Western food products in 2014. Despite agreements on the free movement of goods, labor, and capital throughout the EAEU, Russia restored border controls with Belarus in 2017 during a gas dispute between the two countries as Minsk sought to improve ties with Europe and the United States.<sup>13</sup> Kazakhstan slowed cross-border trade traffic with Kyrgyzstan in 2017 during political tensions between the two countries.<sup>14</sup> Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia face widespread discrimination even though they are entitled to full legal protections as citizens of an EAEU member state.<sup>15</sup>

Member states have benefited unevenly from Russian bilateral incentives to join the EAEU. Belarus reportedly earned upward of \$2 billion in loan and energy concessions from Russia as enticements for joining.<sup>16</sup> Armenia risked losing free supplies of Russian arms and discounted gas prices if it did not join the body. These preferential deals highlighted how member states' EAEU accession decisions were the result of bilateral deals with Moscow rather than acceptance of general rules laid out in the Astana Treaty.<sup>17</sup> Moscow's continued threats to withdraw some of those incentives whenever relations with other member states get tense undercut the idea of a broad-based, rules-driven economic union and highlight its limitations as a special project directed from Moscow.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the accomplishments of the EAEU should not be overlooked. Since 2015, the EAEU has established a single market of roughly 180 million people with a combined GDP of around \$5 trillion that builds on the existing framework of the Eurasian Customs Union and Economic Space.<sup>19</sup> Most important for the Kremlin, however, is that the EAEU has demonstrated that Moscow can establish itself at the center of a regional multilateral organization and boost its claim to being a pole in a multipolar world. The symbolism of the EAEU is as important to Moscow as the actual integrative processes that are undoubtedly taking place, even if at a relatively slow pace.

Moscow is likely to continue to push the EAEU as an important pole and seek opportunities to expand its ties to non-Eurasian countries and multilateral organizations.

### Is the EAEU an Organization Against Free Trade?

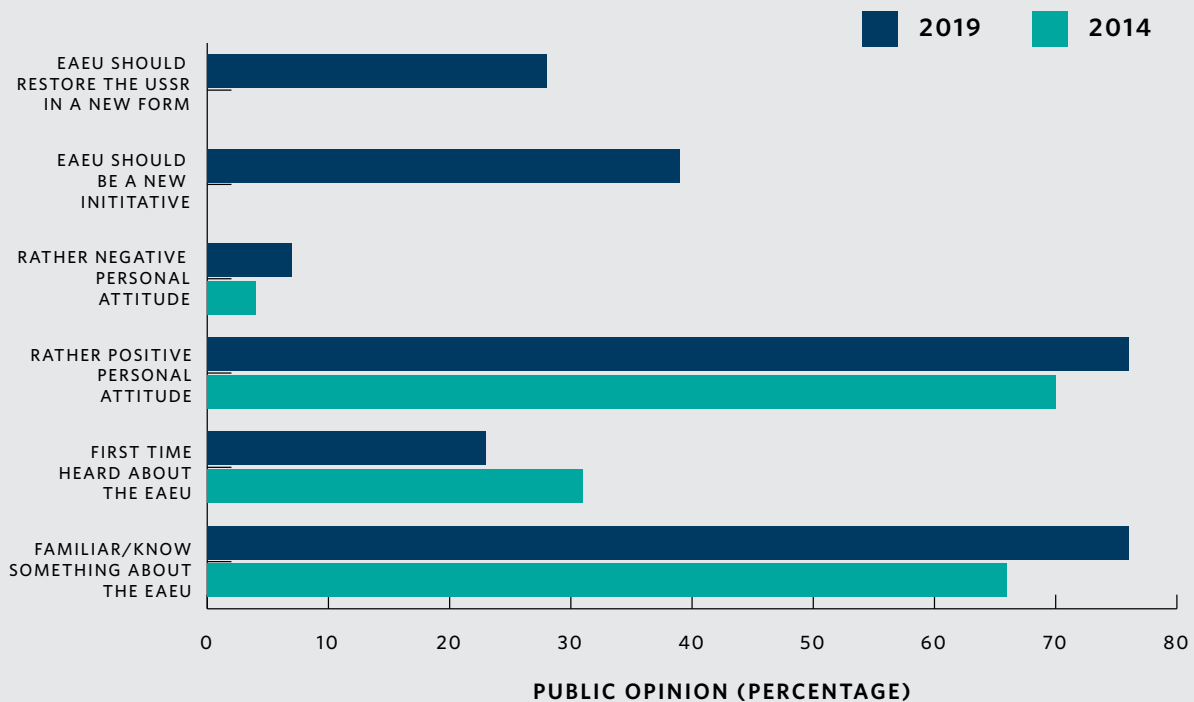
The EAEU's mission is not intended to facilitate member states' integration into global economic frameworks that promote free trade and drive the global economy. On the contrary, it prevents members' independent free trade initiatives, locks them into a Russia-dominated trading arrangement, and obligates members to pursue trade arrangements with other countries through the

Russia-dominated trading bloc. This is generally done via FTAs or outreach by EAEU officials to other regional economic groupings, such as ASEAN or the African Union. Such arrangements clearly serve Russia’s geopolitical goal of consolidating its hold on its neighbors and expanding a web of relationships beyond its immediate periphery. In pursuing these opportunities, Moscow does not

## Russian Public Opinion on the EAEU

According to a January 2019 Russian Public Opinion Research Center survey on the Eurasian Economic Union, 76 percent of Russians held positive attitudes toward the organization. Although 39 percent of respondents believed the EAEU should be a completely new integration project in both form and principle, almost a third (28 percent) saw the bloc as a project to restore the USSR in a new format, albeit with continued political independence of the member states. Finally, 51 percent indicated the EAEU’s purpose is to improve trade and economic cooperation between its member states, while 24 percent believed the organization’s purpose is to counter the influence of the United States and the West.

### Russian Public Opinion on the EAEU



**SOURCE:** “Eurasian Integration,” Russian Public Opinion Research Center, January 25, 2019, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9525>.



miss many chances to capitalize on Western policy failures. The EAEU signed FTAs with Vietnam and Singapore after the Trump administration abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The October 2019 signing of a new FTA with Serbia came shortly after French President Emmanuel Macron vetoed the opening of talks on EU accession with North Macedonia and Albania.

The EAEU's goal is to create an integrated, protected regional economic space. The ability to secure dedicated markets for member states' exports and to protect EAEU producers from foreign competitors is one of the bloc's attractions for member states. Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan, with their uncompetitive industries, benefit from EAEU membership. Belarusian machine-building producers, for example, have preferential access to the Russian market through the EAEU, as do Armenian foodstuffs and alcohol, which make up a key part of that country's exports to other EAEU states.<sup>20</sup> Free labor movement throughout the EAEU facilitates the flow of remittances to Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, the poorest member states.

EAEU membership may provide certain economic advantages but it also makes the poorer member states more dependent on Russia, enhancing its influence over those countries. Russia's hold on EAEU member states is reinforced by pervasive corruption, oligarchic monopolies in key sectors, and poor governance throughout EAEU member states. Taken together, this state of affairs renders these states unattractive to outside investors. In light of existing U.S.-EU sanctions on Russia, these EAEU features create powerful obstacles to technological innovation, job creation, and the modernization of EAEU economies.

This is hardly lost on some EAEU member states' publics and elites who have grown wary about Russia's hold on the organization and its heavy-handed policy moves in Eurasia. Kazakhstan, the second-most important economy in the EAEU, has repeatedly flouted Russia's preference for using the EAEU to negotiate with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the EU. Instead, Kazakhstan has negotiated bilateral trade and investment deals directly with Beijing and Brussels.<sup>21</sup> Other EAEU states have similarly pursued bilateral frameworks with China, the EU, Japan, and the United States. There appears to be little interest in Eurasia in deeper integration with Russia or with the Russian-dominated supranational organization. Instead, EAEU member states would prefer to use the bloc as a tool that helps them manage their complicated relationship with Russia.

## SCO: Choosing Symbolism Over Substance

Since its creation in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has not lived up to its potential, even though it counts some of the biggest economies and most powerful countries among its members and is the world's largest regional organization.<sup>22</sup> As its champions never tire of pointing out, it



comprises 43 percent of the world population and 25 percent of global GDP, and it covers about 80 percent of the Eurasian landmass. But size should not be conflated with effectiveness or influence.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the organization's record of accomplishment is meager. Its ability to promote regional cooperation has been hamstrung by mistrust between member states and an imbalance in economic power between China and Russia, its principal founding members. The SCO's importance is due largely to its utility to both Beijing and Moscow (and now perhaps India) as a mechanism for managing their competing interests in Central Asia. It also has value as a platform for Central Asian member states to balance against their far more powerful neighbors to the north and east.

### Cooperation on Domestic Security

The SCO is often referred to as the club for autocrats due to the powerful dictatorships that dominate it. There is an element of truth in that moniker. SCO members have embraced the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of other states to shield themselves from external criticism of their domestic political practices and failure to live up to international human rights norms. Yet Russia and China adhere to the principle of noninterference primarily on a rhetorical basis. In reality, both have long histories of meddling in and violating sovereignty of neighboring states, as does Uzbekistan.<sup>24</sup> SCO members routinely rely on that principle to push back at Western and local civil society efforts to promote human rights, democratic norms, and accountable governance in the region.<sup>25</sup>

The SCO's broad goal of fighting the "three evils" of extremism, terrorism, and separatism, the glue that holds the organization together, was first articulated at the June 2001 Shanghai meeting and has been a theme for the organization ever since.<sup>26</sup> It not only enables SCO member states to legitimize and find diplomatic backing for internal repression and their frequent domestic clampdowns against opposition groups, civil society activists, and ethnic or religious minorities.<sup>27</sup> These stated priorities also provide ample leeway to target opponents throughout the organization's territory, including the ability to prosecute opponents in exile and extradite them from other SCO member states. Moreover, the convention invokes the principles of the UN Charter to help cloak the organization's founding document with international legitimacy, identifying all three as equal threats to state security, public order, and the safety of citizens. It commits member states to share information about extremist threats, coordinate training to combat extremism, and make requests of one another to act against organizations or individuals an SCO state suspects of participating in illicit activities. Subsequent SCO declarations and agreements have simply added to this list (see table 2).

TABLE 2  
**Overview of Major SCO Agreements**

Agreement	Date	Main purpose
SCO Declaration	June 15, 2001	Formational declaration
SCO Charter	June 7, 2002	Fundamental statutory document
Tashkent Declaration	July 17, 2004	Focus on security and economic issues, RATS
Fifth Anniversary Declaration	June 15, 2006	Cultural cooperation
Bishkek Declaration	August 16, 2007	Energy and security threats
Ufa Declaration	July 9, 2015	Admission of India and Pakistan

**SOURCE:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization

As new surveillance technologies have developed over the last decade, member states have moved beyond simple information exchanges to sharing best practices on monitoring information space. Fears are growing in Central Asia that these technologies could also help enhance the spread of digital surveillance and control of public spaces.<sup>28</sup> The SCO is increasingly providing governing political elites across the region with tools to consolidate domestic control. The group, for example, shares a common watch list of alleged extremists, although there is no clear human rights oversight, unified criteria, or checks on who is getting labeled as an extremist. As Human Rights Watch has documented, the SCO has helped Beijing secure backing from member states for its policies in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Human Rights Watch lists all SCO countries, except India, as countries of concern where Uighur asylum seekers from China are subjected to pressure from Beijing, including threats of being deported back to China.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, the SCO has had only limited success in strengthening domestic security despite the greater convergence of interests of its members. The group’s Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, claims to have played a useful role in coordinating security service efforts to combat the “three evils,” preventing numerous terrorist attacks, and arresting hundreds of terror suspects,<sup>30</sup> although reliable data to back up these claims is not available. RATS primarily serves as a platform for member states to share intelligence and best practices on combating all forms of extremism. It has made very little progress in developing joint capacity at the regional level to combat terrorist threats or in addressing other factors that contribute to extremism in the region.<sup>31</sup> RATS has done little to build counterterrorism capacity where it is most needed in the poorest Central Asian states of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—and whatever limited capacity has been built is generally done by Russia or China on a bilateral basis, rather than via the RATS structure.

Furthermore, while information sharing is an important component of RATS, regional governments routinely exaggerate the internal terrorist threats they face from indigenous Islamic groups to justify repressive domestic policies.

### Limited SCO Regional Integration and Economic Cooperation

There were high hopes for the SCO when it was first launched in 2001. The new organization was expected to develop and implement an ambitious regional security cooperation agenda—a goal that grew in importance after the September 11, 2001, attacks focused greater international attention to terrorism. The SCO was also expected to bring about greater regional cohesion to Central Asia, which at the time suffered from a number of rivalries that stood in the way of effective economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation. At the time, China supported regional integration in the hope that it would create new opportunities for Chinese investment in Central Asia, which in turn would promote security on its Western border, enhance its political influence, and create new economic and trade opportunities.<sup>32</sup>

These hopes turned out to be premature at best. China's ambitious plans for transforming the SCO into a cohesive bloc driving regional economic integration through closer ties to China have repeatedly been met with resistance from Russia, which has relied on the institutions it dominates—the EAEU and CSTO—to counter the SCO's influence and preserve its influence in Central Asia.<sup>33</sup> Russia has also tried to dilute Beijing's power within the SCO by advocating the organization's expansion into South Asia.<sup>34</sup>

The SCO's experience with joint military cooperation mirrors the limited success of its antiterrorism efforts. The organization has conducted several combined exercises and joint military operations, but most of these have been primarily of political and symbolic value. (The one exception was the Xiamen 2015 exercise, which facilitated sharing of best practices in technical surveillance of domestic populations, under the cover of curbing extremism on the internet.<sup>35</sup>) More importantly, unlike exercises conducted by other security organizations (for example, NATO), SCO exercises are not intended to achieve any significant level of military integration at either the strategic or tactical level, interoperability in weapons and equipment, or harmonization of command, control, and communications procedures and doctrine.

Mounting any kind of multinational SCO-led military operation to address an urgent security crisis in the region will, therefore, continue to present a daunting political, operational, and logistical challenge. During the Kyrgyz unrest in 2010, for example, all the SCO managed to do was issue an anodyne statement, calling for “peace, security, and political stability” and largely replicating the CSTO's nonresponse to the crisis. The SCO's principle of nonintervention appeared to take

precedence over the urgency to act, as did the reluctance of Beijing and Moscow to get involved. Other states and organizations played a much larger role in trying to end the political crisis.

Neighboring Kazakhstan, for example, which at the time served as chairman-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, was far more influential in mediating the crisis and facilitating the departure of disgraced former Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev.

### The Clash of a Rising Titan and a Waning Power

Russia and China are in the driver's seat on the SCO but have divergent visions for the organization. Both countries share a common interest in building the organization's capacity to counter the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the region, conduct effective antiterrorist operations against potential Islamic extremist groups, and foster greater regional stability. At the same time, however, their geopolitical interests pull the SCO in different directions.

The core problem afflicting the SCO is differences between Russia and China over how the organization should evolve.<sup>36</sup> From the institution's inception, Moscow has conceived of the SCO in narrow security terms—less a partnership than a tool of Russia's larger geopolitical strategy to maintain domination over the region and prevent encroachment by outside powers (initially NATO and the United States) into Central Asia through the formation of another anti-Western organization. As the imbalance between Chinese and Russian economic power widened over the past decade, Moscow has clung ever more tenaciously to its security-first outlook. As the weaker partner in its relationship with China, Russia begrudgingly can do little about the reality of significant Chinese economic penetration of Central Asia. Nonetheless, Moscow hopes that its successful push to include India and Pakistan in the organization will help bind China to work multilaterally (vice unilaterally) in the broader region and hopefully refocus the SCO's attention on Afghanistan-related security issues, where instability remains a clear threat to all member states' interests.<sup>37</sup>

China's approach to the SCO, by contrast, is driven largely by energy, commercial, and domestic security considerations. Beijing clearly worries that instability and Muslim unrest on its borders with Central Asian countries could spill over to fuel Islamic separatist movements in China's Xinjiang region. Yet China also has begun to show well-founded doubts about Moscow's ability to act as the security manager in an area where the Chinese have invested billions of dollars and that they see as a bulwark against Afghanistan-style instability seeping into western China.

Beijing has not attempted to supplant Russia as the predominant regional security manager. However, with the expected drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and with Russia's military stretched thin between operations in eastern Ukraine and Syria and the standoff with NATO, Beijing knows it may not be able to rely on others to secure Central Asia should the regional security

environment deteriorate. Beijing's recent decision to station troops on the Afghan-Tajik border and its enhanced bilateral security training programs for individual Central Asian states appear to be hedged against growing instability in the broader region, where it has significant investments, concerns over the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan, and questions about both Russia and the SCO's inability to play a decisive security role.<sup>38</sup>

China sees economic development as the key to mitigating instability and does not share Russia's enthusiasm for transforming the SCO into a formal anti-Western alliance, preferring instead to give the SCO a greater economic dimension and to use it as a tool to promote Chinese soft power in the region.<sup>39</sup> The Central Asian states are similarly keen to prevent the SCO from becoming an anti-Western bloc and increasingly aware that they need the West to counterbalance their powerful neighbors. They too want an economic agenda. Beijing, therefore, continues to support greater investments in the economic future of the region primarily through BRI but also through the SCO. The Central Asian states are receptive to these Chinese overtures.

Having upended its relationship with the West over Ukraine and increasingly heavily invested in its partnership with China, Russia has little choice but to acquiesce to China's growing economic presence in Central Asia. However, within the SCO it will likely push back against China's attempts to expand its security role in the region. Moscow's drive to expand the organization to include India and Pakistan can be seen as a hedge against China gaining the upper hand in Central Asia. As one analyst of the region has observed, "China blocked Russian efforts to convert the organization into a military alliance, and Russia is now blocking Chinese efforts to convert the organization into a trade bloc."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the expansion of the SCO has inherently complicated the group's decisionmaking and information-sharing.

The SCO now coexists with other regional organizations or initiatives—China's BRI and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Russia's CSTO and EAEU. Russia prefers to use fora where it is the strongest member to promote power-sharing with the more influential and economically potent China. For its part, China has repeatedly pledged support for the EAEU and expressed willingness to link it with the BRI. However, it also has demonstrated a clear preference for working through institutions it dominates—the BRI and AIIB—rather than share power with Russia.

Three SCO members—China, India, and Russia—are also members of the informal BRICS group whose purpose is to give greater voice to rising economies on major global issues. Therefore, the SCO is just one of several multilateral fora Russia uses to promote its agenda of multipolarity, with the Kremlin's degree of interest in a given organization fluctuating depending on its overall foreign policy objectives. For example, Moscow's 2009 decision to hold a joint BRICS-SCO summit was driven by a desire to demonstrate to the world that it was not isolated in the wake of its 2008 war with

Georgia. The convening of another joint BRICS-SCO summit in 2015 provided a similar illustration that Russia was not isolated internationally after the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Another joint BRICS-SCO summit reportedly is in the works for 2020, since Russia is scheduled to host both groups and its relationship with the West remains tense.<sup>41</sup>

### Wither the SCO?

The story of the SCO to date is one of overpromising and underdelivering. But despite the failure to deliver on past commitments, it continues to hatch ambitious yet unrealistic plans for regional development of energy resources, infrastructure, and economic integration. The 2015 Ufa Declaration on the SCO Development Strategy through 2025 is only the most recent example of what Carnegie scholar Alexander Gabuev has described as an organization in search of a mission without any mechanisms to deliver tangible results.<sup>42</sup> The declaration calls for preserving the central role of the UN Security Council in the system of international peace and security maintenance; strictly observing the provisions of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; preventing the militarization of outer space; and stepping up the fight against terrorism, extremism, and trafficking. It was a grab-bag agenda at best, and the initiatives unveiled at Ufa have confronted the same obstacles that have sunk the SCO's more grandiose goals: that is, lack of cohesion or unity of purpose among the organization's four Central Asian members and divergent Russian and Chinese views on the purpose and identity of the SCO and how it should evolve.

The SCO faces serious structural challenges as an organization. All SCO members value their independence, sovereignty, and flexibility, which are difficult to reconcile with binding collective security obligations. Neither Russia nor China wants to see the emergence of a powerful SCO out of fear that it could be turned against one of them. Given the disparity in financial and economic clout between Moscow and Beijing, Russia has been reticent to back Chinese regional economic initiatives through the SCO, including Beijing's push for an SCO Development Bank or SCO free trade initiative.<sup>43</sup> Both countries prefer symbolism to substance and both prefer to rely on other institutional vehicles to advance their goals, thereby weakening the SCO.

The organization is hardly on the cusp of creating, as one analyst noted, "the most dramatic geostrategic transformation of the world order in a generation."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it is hard to imagine the SCO being able to deliver on its original goals—countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism through multilateral cooperation—let alone the expanded agenda of regional economic integration across the Eurasian continent, unless Russia and China reconcile their significant differences. Until that happens, the organization is likely to continue to muddle along, occasionally achieving largely symbolic successes in joint military planning and operations, combating terrorism, preventing narcotics trafficking, and containing the spillover of instability and crime from Afghanistan.

All that said, the SCO will likely endure because it serves other purposes besides enabling regional cooperation. It will remain, for example, a useful geopolitical platform for China and Russia to balance against the United States. Its existence as an international organization from which Europe and the United States are excluded will continue to cause some concern in Brussels and Washington. It will continue to provide diplomatic and institutional cover for member states to crack down on internal domestic opposition in the guise of fighting jihadist terrorism or separatism. Nonetheless, the SCO seems headed to join the ranks of other regional (and subregional) organizations—the Organization of American States, the Arab League, the African Union, and ASEAN, to name a few—that have achieved only limited success in solving regional problems through multilateral cooperation. It will neither catalyze the Sino-Russian alliance nor have a transformative impact on the region’s security and prosperity.

The SCO may, however, prove useful to foster greater regional cooperation in confronting transnational problems on those rare occasions when the interests of its members align and circumstances in the region are propitious for joint endeavors. This may prove to be the case with Afghanistan, where strengthening border security, preventing fighters from crossing borders, and combating illicit drugs and arms trafficking are all interests shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. Boosters of the SCO pin their hopes for its future on the addition of India and Pakistan in 2017 and possible membership down the road of Turkey and Iran.

Yet, growing the SCO presents both challenges and opportunities. Adding India and Pakistan may give the SCO a foothold in shaping developments in South Asia, managing the threats to regional security and stability that could accompany a comprehensive peace settlement with the Taliban, and providing a forum for India and Pakistan to join in whatever common approaches SCO members can agree upon in tackling these problems. However, the hostile Indian-Pakistani relationship is just as likely to complicate military and counterterrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing and makes it far more difficult to reach decisions by consensus. Finally, some observers have argued that a strong and cohesive SCO could evolve into another Russian-led, anti-Western military alliance.<sup>45</sup> This is a fanciful scenario as long as Russia and China remain wary of each other’s intentions in the region and Beijing maintains its adamant opposition to turning the SCO into a military organization.

## BRICS: A Useful Symbol, but Not Much More

The “BRICS” term was first coined in 2001 in a Goldman Sachs report entitled “Building Better Global Economic BRICs.”<sup>46</sup> Consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and (since 2010) South Africa, expectations were raised whether these then-dynamic, non-Western economies were



positioned to refashion the global order by 2050.<sup>47</sup> In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, Western policymakers have grown increasingly concerned about the prospect of an economic and political power shift away from the West and toward these new actors.

Global economic governance seemed ripe for a change in the early 2000s. At that point, the BRICS accounted for some 40 percent of the world's population, 30 percent of its land, and roughly 15 percent of global GDP.<sup>48</sup> This helped bolster the case that emerging economies should have a greater voice in global policymaking and that the G7 group of leading economies, which did not and still does not include any of these developing economies, was ill-equipped to make effective global policies for the twenty-first century. Such concepts held particular appeal for Moscow.

Moscow initially hoped that the BRICS, alongside the G20, would form the basis of a new post- U.S. international system, which by the middle of the twenty-first century would be less centered on the Euro-Atlantic community, its economy, and its values.<sup>49</sup> Over time, BRICS heads of state have expanded their area of focus beyond financial issues to address a range of non-economic topics such as health, food security, the environment, humanitarian issues, and emerging technologies, as well as defending state sovereignty from external interference.<sup>50</sup> Yet such moves are largely aspirational, at best. There are few concrete indications that BRICS leaders are taking on a greater role in global governance or in responding to international crises. Rather, the growing hodge-podge of agenda items has made it difficult for the group to develop concrete programs to address any of the issues it aspires to tackle.

So far, the BRICS has failed to emerge as a major actor on the world stage when it comes to a wide array of global and regional challenges.<sup>51</sup> Gatherings of BRICS members have become commonplace at think tank convenings, business councils, parliamentary forums, environmental meetings, and ministerial-level engagements.<sup>52</sup> Yet concrete policy proposals have been much slower in coming.

For Russia and some other BRICS states, the organization retains considerable symbolic importance. Yet it lacks the substantive influence of the G20 or G7, let alone a shared agenda underpinned by common interests other than presenting an alternative to the West or rhetorical calls for the rebalancing of global power away from Europe and the United States.

Over the past decade, the BRICS has made little progress in setting up parallel institutions to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 2013, it announced an agreement to set up a New Development Bank. The 2014 decision to create BRICS Contingency Reserve Arrangements to provide support and lending during financial crises was portrayed by Russia's President Vladimir Putin as a potential alternative to IMF-led rescues. But the resources allocated to this effort have been dismissed as mere "chicken feed" by analysts at the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>53</sup>



## Conclusion

This paper is not about the EAEU, SCO, or BRICS as individual entities, but rather Moscow's engagement with them and whether Moscow has been able to leverage its membership in these groups to enhance its regional—and ultimately global—power and influence. For Russia, the importance of these organizations is more symbolic than substantive. They help the Kremlin to highlight, both at home and abroad, that Moscow retains international standing, that it has the diplomatic means to counter the expansion of Western influence around its periphery and U.S. and European efforts to isolate Russia, and that Russia is a global, not just a Eurasian or regional, power. Engaging in these international organizations and groups also helps Moscow push back at Western efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically following a long series of transgressions. Russia may be isolated from the Euro-Atlantic community, but these organizations help show that Moscow is not isolated from the rest of the world.

Yet in the face of China's growing prominence in economic and political terms, there are few indications that these organizations are helping Russia manage its relationship with a rising China. That is particularly the case in Russia's own backyard, where the disparity between the two countries' economic influence is increasingly evident. While Russia has long held grand hopes of advancing its larger security and geopolitical agenda through international organizations, these efforts have been stymied by the objections and conflicting interests of the member states—some of whom do not share Moscow's agenda of transforming the EAEU, SCO, or BRICS into an anti-Western club. This includes China, India, and many countries of Central Asia. Within the BRICS, Brazil has made no secret of its desire for warmer relations with the Trump administration under President Jair Bolsonaro. Indeed, a top Brazilian diplomat publicly criticized Russia's backing of Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela during the 2019 BRICS foreign minister meeting.<sup>54</sup>

Looked at together, these three institutions constitute uneasy and at times artificial partnerships. Mistrust of Russian power, a desire to balance against it among some of Moscow's neighbors, and Moscow's habit of overreaching (be it in Ukraine, Venezuela, or South Africa), have muted support for all three organizations among their members and their publics. As a result, these organizations have made only a minor contribution, at best, to the Kremlin's paramount goals of expanding Russia's geopolitical reach and its emergence as a major pillar in an emerging multipolar world.

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