Relations Between China and the United States Regarding to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the Basis of “Soft Power Theory”

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Abstract. After a period of conflict between Russia and the West, new signs of confrontation between the United States and China are observed. China, as the most populous country in the world with a high rate of economic growth, neither stands the hegemonic power of the United States nor has the intention of direct confrontation with it. By raising the costs of the United States’ leadership at the international level, China seeks to find a better status without direct confrontation with the US. Meanwhile, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as a soft balancing strategy against the hegemony of the United States is used as a tool to reach this goal. The authors by using a descriptive - analytical method try to explain the policies of China and the United States on SCO as well as confrontation between these two countries within the framework of “balance of soft power theory”.

Introduction

The emergence and development of the SCO is potentially a balancing measure in response to the United States’ unilateralism. According to the structural realism, strategic stability can be established when the major powers in today’s international system create a balance against the United States; however, the collapse of the Soviet Union has changed the distribution of global power in favor of the USA, as a result, the situation has been provided for the formation of a unilateral system. Since the hard balancing in a unilateral system is difficult and carries high risk, governments mostly prefer the formation of a soft balance.

China’s proposal on the establishment of the SCO is considered as a reason for its opposition to the American theory of international system and the United States’ claim about the unilateral world. The increasing presence and influence of the United States in Central Asia, especially after September 11\textsuperscript{th} and attack on Afghanistan, has become a security concern for China. This has caused China to be more seriously involved in institutionalized cooperation with neighboring countries in the framework of the SCO, and through coordination with Russia tries to create a balance against the growing influence of the United States. Beijing leaders raised the idea of a multilateralism system in opposition to American unilateralism on various occasions.

China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

China is deeply concerned about its strategic encirclement by the US and considers the United States military bases in different parts of around its territory as a fundamental threat to its security and interests. Especially considers the United States presence in Central Asia against its military security and economic interests; therefore, tries to further strengthening the SCO to use it as leverage [6]. Regarding to the security interests, China tries to ensure the territorial integrity and national unity, enforce strict measures to combat transnational crimes and stabilize its northwestern regions, and to provide the greater security in border areas and provide a suitable environment.

The United States presence to crush Islamic fundamentalists is useful for China; however, the continued presence of the United States military in Central Asia carries no positive aspects.
Chinese, who are extremely concerned about security and stability in Xinjiang province, have welcomed the US presence to crackdown radical Islamists; however, from the other hand, they also like the leaders of Russia’s idea who have been considered the continued United States presence in the region in conflict with their interests.

Many experts believe that the aim of the SCO is the integration against United States influence across Central Asia that began with the attacks of September 11th 2001 in New York and Washington. Some analysts praise the SCO in preserving stability in a strategic region and a difficult situation. However, many analysts consider SCO as a center for anti-expansionism and United States involvement in Central Asia as well.

The SCO is considered as the first international initiative of China and Russia to combat the growing influence of the United States in Central Asia which has become one of the determining factors in the region. The organization has been able to appear as a symbol of unity of Russia and China as the two emerging superpowers. The importance of SCO was new to international attention when this organization demanded a timetable for withdrawal of the United States military bases from the Central Asian republics in 2004 [7].

Achieving economic benefits is amongst the objectives of China in SCO. In this regard, importing energy is one of the most important elements in China’s long-term economic development and accordingly, economic view is an important one for China to join the SCO.

This approach is so important for China that the country considers the development of economic cooperation as a factor to provide security and its national and regional stability. After securing energy supply marketing and exporting goods and capital are amongst China’s most important economic incentives regarding to the SCO. However, in this way China has tried to pay attention to political and economic principles in recent years; first, to provide its required energy from the most cost-effective resources, second, direct their oil deals toward the countries which politically have the least incentive to use energy levers in the political equations. Accordingly, in recent years the Chinese avoided any tensions or political confrontation with the West, especially the US [8].

One of the motives of China’s strategy to form the SCO with regard to the history of relations between China and Central Asian countries was to provide an appropriate basis to broaden and deepen relations with Central Asia. The countries in the region can be a significant source of raw material for China industries [9].

In fact, the emphasis on positive relationships with neighboring countries is a part of larger policy of China, which is amongst the main considerations of China in the development of the SCO. The Chinese government has come to realize that they must focus on economic development within the intimate setting around it. China’s attitude toward the SCO is clear that not only must be an effective mechanism for regional cooperation, but also must have a good relationship with the key players in the region [10].

China hopes that all members of the SCO achieve this agreement that as long as this organization is not an actual effective mechanism cannot solve regional problems. In conclusion it should be said, China’s policy in founding of the SCO is subjected to the following factors:

1. Protect the independence and territorial integrity, economic and political development, and opposition to the domination of other countries in the region;
2. Development of the relations based on new security concepts with mutual interest approach;
3. Resolve territorial problems and disarmament at the borders;
4. Joint efforts with Russia to combat terrorism, separatism, extremism and drug and weapons trafficking in the region, particularly in relation to Muslims in Xinjiang;
5. Help to solve the ethnic and regional problems;
6. Contribute to confirm Central Asia as a region without nuclear weapons;
7. Strengthen cooperation, especially in energy and transport;
8. Promotion of tourism and cultural cooperation;
9. The balance against the United States (in fact, using the SCO as a strength lever against the United States).
In relation to the latter it must be said, despite cooperation in some cases such as the issue of Iraq’s rebuilding, nuclear non-proliferation, and war against terrorism, China considers the United States efforts for creating, maintaining and strengthening strategic alliances with Asian countries as a potential threat to its economic and military security. Also the United States will to promote individual rights and democracy from the Chinese point of view is considered as a form of political intervention which may overthrow China’s social stability and or an effort to undermine the Chinese Communist Party regime.

This fear is rooted in modern Chinese history that China was humiliated due to unfair contracts with the West and Japan. Therefore, China hopes through promoting multilateral cooperation and maintaining the principle of non-intervention among like-minded countries in regional organizations such as the SCO create a balance against United States unilateralism and interventions [11].

The United States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Today, there are three points of view about the future of the SCO in the United States: a pessimistic view on the future of SCO which believes this organization seeks to struggle with the United States and to achieve its interests in Central Asia. In fact, this view argues that SCO members use different programs on specific issues. Some observers are concerned that China and Russia are trying to use this organization as a means to oppose with the United States in Central Asia. Julia Nanay believes Russia and China have developed a Eurasian military grouping through cooperation in the SCO as a counterweight balanced against NATO [12].

Second school of thought, downplays the potential threat of the SCO to the United States and emphasizes the conflict between the SCO participants. They raised the fact that the governments of the SCO are not a threat to anyone. Some observers speak of long-term divergence of interests of Russia and China. Olcott believes that in 2006 Congress it has been established that the SCO is no direct threat to United States interests in most areas in general and in Central Asia in particular [13].

Despite West concerns about the emergence of the SCO as an alliance of anti-American, the United States officials rejected this interpretation. Feigenbaum stated that the SCO is not a new Warsaw and in fact is not a counterbalance to NATO. Therefore, there is not the slightest reason that Central Asian members of the SCO impeded from cooperation in NATO [14].

Similarly, on May 15, 2008 Secretary of Defense SCO members signed a declaration in which it was explicitly stated: activities of members include military matters as well, but it is not aimed at establishing a political or militarily union. Donald Rumsfeld also declared “that Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an exercise to send peace in the future and there is no cause for alarm and I see no threat from this organization” [15].

Further analysis of the SCO by American theorist exists who believe: although the United States currently has no concern about this organization, however, the organization’s current efforts with regard to security issues may stimulate the United States to be slowly monitoring the activities of this organization. It is also possible that the United States embarks on cooperation with this organization.

The United States officials initially downplayed this organization, but after that Uzbekistan requested the US troops to leave their air base known as K2 in 2005, began to pay more attention to the influence of the organization on the United States’ interests in Central Asia, and has expressed concern about the possibility of full integration of Iran into the SCO.

China and Russia military exercises are amongst the other factors affecting the focus of the United States on this organization. China and Russia’s first joint military exercise named “Peace Mission” held in the Jiaodong Peninsula in the Yellow Sea that included tens of thousands of soldiers and an array of modern military technologies. Peace Mission of 2005 is following the previous anti-terrorist maneuvers of SCO in Kyrgyzstan (2002) and in Kazakhstan and China (2003), but the combination and the position of Peace Mission distinguished it from other military exercises.
The question that needs to be answered is that: can SCO be a threat to the United States interests in Central Asia? In mid-1990, China and Russia and several Central Asian countries have settled a series of their border disputes that led to the formation of the security organization of Shanghai 5 and a little more than a decade after that with the membership of Uzbekistan this organization renamed to SCO. A large-scale joint military exercises have been conducted since 2003, 2005, and 2007. This means that members of the SCO military made use of military intervention to help the Central Asian governments to defeat terrorist organizations or color revolutions and the masses riots.

The United States is absent from the list of supervisors, so it seems that the influence of the United States in Central Asia has decreased and this has caused Russia and China gain their legitimate status as the dominant powers in the region. The fact that the SCO may become a short-term competitor and a long-term threat to the West is a concern which preoccupied scientists, journalists and the United States officials.

Also, after lifting the sanctions, the possibility that Iran which is already an observer becomes a full member of the organization is high. This affects the United States strategy in limiting the influence of Iran in Asia.

Russia and China both cherish American leadership in creating stability in Afghanistan privately. In fact, the connection of the Taliban to terrorists and separatist groups in the region is a serious threat to the West China, southern Russia and Central Asia; however, they will not accept the permanent presence of the United States in the region.

SCO is an organization which, for the most part, has benefits China and Russia in the region. It seems that it has no negative orientation toward any world powers. This has been issued in a statement on June 20, 2001 that SCO is not a union against another country or region. However, this organization has shown various symptoms over time that has taken international concerns.

What is clear is that the SCO at least has put United States’ strategic interests at risk in Central Asia. Despite the statements by government officials that the United States has a commitment to the spread of democratic values and human rights in the world, Eurasia is a region that the US has a specific attention to it for strategic reasons related to energy, security, and trade. Thus, some regional countries such as Kazakhstan are amongst the most important regions in terms of United States strategic interests in Central Asia, which have created a super attraction for foreign powers through their enormous energy interest.

From the American point of view joining of these countries to the SCO is in contrast to their interests and it offers an economic-political model opposed to the United States model, which is not very pleasant for them. Some American analysts have evaluated Shanghai Organization with the Holy Alliance of Austria, Prussia and Russia in 1815; a conservative and anti-liberal alliance. Others have seen this organization as a modern Warsaw Pact seeks to reduce United States global influence and deal with its expansion in Central Asia and the Middle East. At the beginning the US officials tried to deal with this organization through a peaceful manner and with offering economic proposals.

Encouraging Russia and the United States to join the World Trade Organization in cooperation with the United States in the fight against extremist Islamic organizations or Kazakhstan is an example of these measures.

They also discussed the proposal of adoption of the United States as an observer at the Shanghai Organization. The United States hoped Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan support this proposal, but it was opposed by members of the organization. Americans also referred to military security agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and welcomed to provide a timetable which was needed by Shanghai Organization for the withdrawal of their forces from Central Asia, Moldova, Georgia and, Azerbaijan in order to show the greater tendency towards the West, or even to attract countries such as Armenia and Belarus which are close allies of Russia. However, with the intensification of anti-American measures of the organization, the Americans may come to believe that a new “axis of evil” is forming within the framework of Shanghai Organization; however they have avoided expressing this view.
It was noted that the majority of concern about SCO is linked to China’s presence in it. Most United States policy makers believe that China is a competing power for their interests in East and Central Asia. The United States now understands that maintaining the security of these areas is not possible without playing a constructive role of China. China also reflects both the numerous risks and multiple opportunities in the United States security strategy. China as a nuclear power, with advanced military, and a global actor with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, plays an important role in Asian security.

The prospect for peace and stability in the region to a great extent depends on to China’s role as a responsible member of the international community. In Americans opinions, if China can continue its economic growth without losing political stability, it can become a predominant regional superpower; such a power can imperil United States interests in another way. So, while the United States is of more restraint, it is seeking to its relations with China from a position of strength in such a way that it can be confronted with the least possible risks considering its global and regional interests in the future. It seems the United States strategy against China, particularly after the September 11th attacks, can be summarized as follows:

1. Monitoring China is a basic principle to prevent the objectives of military modernization. This can be done through two ways. Involving China in disarmament and control regimes such as the NPT and the CTBT and following up schemes such as national missile defense (NMD) system and presence in peripheral margin of China such as Taiwan;
2. Expanding cooperation with China in order to prevent the emergence of regional challenges and to limit them;
3. Successive talks with the Chinese on issues they are interested in such as US-Russia relations;
4. Put pressure on China to prevent nuclear exports;
5. Negotiating with China in order to avoid developing its missiles in general and its ballistic missiles in particular aimed at maintaining stability and security in the world;
6. Using tools such as sanctions to prevent China’s cooperation with other countries that Americans refer to them as rogue countries. Despite the emergence of tensions in relations between the two sides, the West and particularly China do not tend to have tension.

Opposing to the political logical relations between Russia and the West in the last decade, it can be said that in the case of China the economy is governing the relations between China and the West and particularly the US. However, the safety of China has been a red line which both the West and the United States had no intention of approaching it while they are aware that Chinese will not sacrifice their security for economic cooperation.

Conclusion

China and the United States relation is one of the most important bilateral relationships of the 21st century. Today, this bilateral relation has exceeded to multilateral relations which affects regional and global issues. While the United States hopes China can be an important and responsible player in the international system that would not challenge the United States position, there is a deep skepticism about the future of China’s development. This has been shown in the United States criticism of China’s large and unclear military budget and insisting on political reforms in China, so, the United States concern about the SCO can be well understood in this regard.

From China’s attitude there is a concern about the entrance and presence of the United States in Central Asia in the name of war against terrorism which has limited the strategic space of China. The analysis shows that the final formation and development of the SCO is in line with the United States measures to expand its power and its influence on overseas. China and Russia are looking for soft balancing against the United States unilateralism. Shanghai 5 was formed after the United States committed measures such as NATO military operation in Bosnia in 1995, the expansion of NATO to the East in recent years, and the strengthening US alliances with Japan and Taiwan in
1996. Moreover, the final upgrade of Shanghai 5 to SCO in 2001 was due to the controversial war in Kosovo and showed the US and NATO military operations against China and Russia’s will.

From this view, it is clear that SCO is widely affected by the military expansion of the United States after the Cold War and this analysis showed that the content of official documents, declarations, and actions represented a balancing attempt by SCO, however, it does not form a sharp and clear balancing. In fact, still few signs of challenging diplomacy and geopolitical sanctions strategy can be seen within the framework of the organization against the United States. In summary, it can be concluded that the hypothesis of balancing against the United States is justified to some extent and the kind of balancing is soft so far.

Reference


