



## APPLIED ANALYSIS

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### Institutional Formation and Development of SCO Activities: Experience of Retrospective Analysis

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**Abstract.** This article examines the institutional development and evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from 2001 to the present day. The authors identify and characterize the stages and milestones of the organization's development, while also examining the SCO's regulatory framework and organizational structure. It is shown that the modern organizational structure of the SCO, formed through a process of long and contradictory evolution, includes a number of subsystems that, along with its fundamental principles of activity, ensure the SCO's viability and development in the future. Indirect thematic content analysis of 120 official SCO documents shows the main trends of the SCO's activities, the nature of the organization's evolution and, ultimately, the stages of its institutional development. The first stage (2001–2004) is associated with the organization's institutional formation, while the second stage (2004–2008) is characterized by intensive promotion and the minimal complexity of trade, economic, humanitarian and cultural initiatives. The third stage (2008–2014) shows a slight weakening of the impetus for the SCO's development, while the fourth stage (since 2015) is associated with an attempt to bring the SCO to a qualitatively new level, demonstrating an increase in the efficiency of cooperation in all spheres. A quantitative content analysis of the frequency and dynamics of the use of representative keywords in one of the types of official documents of the SCO (declarations adopted following the summits of the heads of the member states) has made it possible to substantiate a thesis about the gradual complication, detailing, and specialization of the SCO's activities, as well as to identify and characterize its priorities. In general, the content analysis shows that the SCO has gone through several stages in its development, characterized by qualitative specifics, while maintaining a clear priority on security issues, reflecting the significance of traditional and new threats. A conclusion is reached about the functioning of multilevel interaction on the SCO platform to ensure regional security and cooperation while simultaneously developing both multilateral (including with external actors) and bilateral formats: this indicates the formation of a new model of regionalism in an emerging multipolar world.

**Key words:** SCO Charter, the organizational structure of the SCO, the fields of activity of the SCO, content analysis

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**Authors' contributions.** The authors made an equal contribution to the design, research and preparation of the final article's text.

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## Институциональное становление и эволюция деятельности ШОС: опыт ретроспективного анализа

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**Аннотация.** Рассматривается институциональное развитие и эволюция Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС) с 2001 г. по настоящее время. Авторы выделяют и характеризуют этапы и вехи развития организации, а также изучают нормативную базу и организационную структуру ШОС. Показано, что современная организационная структура ШОС, сформировавшаяся в процессе длительной и противоречивой эволюции, включает ряд подсистем, которые наряду с основополагающими принципами деятельности обеспечивают жизнеспособность и развитие ШОС в будущем. Ненаправленный тематический контент-анализ 120 официальных документов ШОС позволил выявить основные направления деятельности ШОС, характер эволюции организации и в конечном итоге этапы ее институционального развития. Первый этап (2001–2004 гг.) связан с институциональным становлением организации, второй (2004–2008 гг.) — характеризуется интенсивным продвижением и минимальной сложностью торгово-экономических, гуманитарных и культурных инициатив. Третий этап (2008–2014 гг.) демонстрирует некоторое ослабление импульса развития ШОС, тогда как четвертый этап (с 2015 г.) обусловлен стремлением вывести ШОС на качественно новый уровень с ростом эффективности сотрудничества во всех сферах. Количественный контент-анализ частоты и динамики употребления репрезентативных ключевых слов одного из видов официальных документов ШОС — деклараций, принятых по итогам саммитов глав государств — членов организации, позволил обосновать тезис о постепенном усложнении, детализации и специализации направлений деятельности ШОС, выявить и охарактеризовать динамику ее приоритетов. В целом контент-анализ показывает, что ШОС в своем развитии прошла несколько этапов, отличающихся качественной спецификой, сохраняя при этом четкий приоритет вопросов безопасности, отражающий значимость традиционных и новых угроз. Сделан вывод о функционировании на платформе ШОС многоуровневого взаимодействия по обеспечению региональной безопасности и сотрудничества при одновременном развитии как многосторонних, в том числе с внешними акторами, так и двусторонних его форматов, что свидетельствует о формировании новой модели регионализма в условиях становления многополярного мира.

**Ключевые слова:** Хартия ШОС, организационная структура ШОС, направления деятельности ШОС, контент-анализ

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### Introduction

Studying the historical, organizational and political aspects of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) development is relevant for several reasons.

First, there is a growing academic and public interest in regionalism and its forms as a way of meeting the challenges of a multipolar world and the main trends in the transformation of the modern world order. An important role

here is played by the strengthening of the SCO's influence as a regional and global actor in international relations, as evidenced, in particular, by its expansion<sup>1</sup> in 2017 (accession of India and Pakistan) and 2023 (accession of Iran). The existence of the SCO for more than two decades urgently requires defining, comprehending and evaluating, which is impossible without analyzing the body's organizational structures and the nature and content of its activities. Given the availability of a significant body of academic literature (see for more details see: (Marochkin & Bezborodov, 2022)), the need for further research is determined by the disagreements on the SCO's key aspects: in the academic discourse, there are different, even opposing, points of view on the main issues of the organization's activities (the reasons for its emergence, its essence, objectives, effectiveness, problems and prospects).

The academic discourse on the SCO is characterized by the close attention of specialists to the organization's emergence, its role in the Eurasian space, its effectiveness in solving the main tasks of security and economic cooperation, and the development of integration processes.

Differences in approaches and nuances in the definition of the SCO member states' role in the organization are reflected in national academic narratives. Experts distinguish Russian, Chinese, Indian, and Western (European and American) variants of the description and analysis of the SCO's activities.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The SCO was formed in 2001 with Uzbekistan's accession to the Shanghai Five, which was established in 1996 and composed of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

<sup>2</sup> Gabuyev A., Mohan R., Training D., Henle P. Future of Shanghai Cooperation Organization: As Seen in Moscow, New Delhi and Beijing // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. June 15, 2017. (In Russian). URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/06/shanghai-cooperation-organization-at-crossroads-views-from-moscow-beijing-and-new-delhi?lang=ru&center=russia-eurasia> (accessed: 02.07.2023). (A.T. Gabuyev and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace are included in the

In the works of researchers representing post-Soviet states, attempts have been made to reveal the dynamics of integration processes in the post-Soviet space, the SCO's role in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia and the Eurasian region as a whole, the problems and contradictions in the positions of the SCO member states regarding the organization's expansion, and a number of other issues (Lukin, 2007; Muratshina, 2018; Alimov, 2018; Rakhimov & Kurylev, 2018; Luzyanin, 2019; Kulintsev, 2020; Rakhimov M., 2020; Rakhimov K., 2023). Russian researchers have identified the contradictory consequences of the organization's functional and territorial expansion. While some note that the organization has given an impetus to the formation of not only regional, but also interregional formats for discussing security, economic and humanitarian cooperation (Koldunova, 2013, p. 61), others emphasize that the problems and contradictions existing in the relations of the states joining the organization (their different foreign policy orientations) can complicate the development of joint measures and confidence-building when addressing security and stability (Luzyanin, 2017, p. 24), thus reducing the SCO's effectiveness as a regional organization. According to the well-known expert A.A. Knyazev, this is aggravated by the "multi-vector" policy of the participating countries, which deprives the SCO of the opportunity to determine its real mission.<sup>3</sup>

In a collective monograph edited by S.Y. Marochkin and Y.S. Bezborodov, the authors, representing the academic communities of six SCO member states, assess the prospects of SCO activities in the security, economic, humanitarian, and other areas of cooperation.

Register of Foreign Agents in Russia. — *Editor's note*). See also: (Koldunova, 2013, pp. 61–66).

<sup>3</sup> Knyazev A. A. Carte Blanche. Conjugation of the Undistributed in the Absence of Regional Security // Nezavisimaya Gazeta. June 21, 2016. (In Russian). URL: [http://www.ng.ru/world/2016-06-21/3\\_kartblansh.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2016-06-21/3_kartblansh.html) (accessed: 02.07.2023).

This work notes the contradictory results of the SCO's activities and cites materials indicating both effective cooperation and the declarative and decorative nature of the SCO (Marochkin & Bezborodov, 2022).

A new approach to assessing the SCO is provided by G.J.P. Honrada and S.A. Bokeriya's study of the "Shanghai Spirit" narrative (Honrada & Bokeriya, 2023, pp. 255–258). This narrative is the basis not only for the activities of the organization itself, but also for a new model of regionalism and international relations in general. The authors see the Shanghai spirit as typologically different from the liberal-Western understanding: the spirit determines the inclusive and syncretic nature of the SCO principles and the acceptance of fundamental differences as an element of regionalism and modern international relations. The authors come to the important conclusion that a new system of international relations during the formation of multipolarity can be based on the common features of the "Shanghai Spirit," defining the SCO model as "emphasized and open regionalism while preserving the Westphalian sovereignty of individual states, acceptance of cultural differences, striving for compromise and consensus in critical decisions, a somewhat paradoxical approach to strengthening state sovereignty in regional integration" (Honrada & Bokeriya, 2023, p. 255).

A special group consists of works by Chinese researchers, including both scholars from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and representatives of the Chinese diaspora. A significant number of Chinese scholars characterize the SCO as a regional organization aimed at preventing a wide range of traditional and non-traditional threats to security in Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, they

emphasize the uniqueness of the SCO as a new form of strategic partnership and cooperation among heterogeneous (civilizational, political, economic, and military) member states (Qiu, 2020; Li & Wang, 2021). "Combining some features of an alliance and a security territory" (He, 2020, p. 85), the SCO is a phenomenon that contrasts with the Western understanding of a political-military alliance: it is not directed against third countries, does not assume uniformity in terms of political regimes and is based on the principle of equality and consensus in decision-making (Bin, 2013, pp. 31, 37–39).

Western authors have analyzed the geopolitical situation in Central Asia, revealing problems of regional security and stability in the context of the SCO's activities, including the continuing instability in neighboring Afghanistan. The most common research approaches in Europe and America explain the SCO's activities in geopolitical terms from the point of view of the balance of power, viewing the SCO as a means of preserving and legitimizing authoritarian regimes in the region. The geopolitical approach involves seeing the SCO and its relations with individual countries as directed against the US and the West as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the widespread view of the SCO's anti-Western orientation, S. Aris states that the organization, unlike a traditional military-political bloc, is primarily focused on developing responses to security challenges originating from within the region. However, to explain the SCO's growth and development, it is necessary, according to Aris, to take into account the priority of internal security for the leadership of the member countries (Aris, 2011, pp. 75–76).

<sup>4</sup> Bailes A. J. K., Dunay P., Guang P., Troitskiy M. A The Shanghai Cooperation Organization // SIPRI Policy Paper. 2007 (May). No. 17. P. 58. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRI17.pdf> (accessed: 02.07.2023).

<sup>5</sup> Cohen A. The U.S. Challenge at the Shanghai Summit // The Heritage Foundation. June 13, 2006. URL: <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/the-us-challenge-the-shanghai-summit> (accessed: 02.07.2023). See also: (Koldunova, 2013, p. 64).

Thus, academic works express ambiguous and, in many respects, polarized views on the SCO's historical role, significance and development prospects. The purpose of this paper is to identify and characterize the stages of the SCO's institutional formation and development through the quantitative analysis of official documents.

This methodology involves the systematic study of written texts based on the identification of significant lexical units, the quantification of these data and the subsequent interpretation of the results. The study's initial stage includes a non-directed content analysis of a wide range of official SCO documents to identify keywords characterizing the organization's activities; the subsequent stage consists of a directed content analysis of the frequency and dynamics of the use of representative keywords in the declarations adopted following the summits of SCO heads of state; and the final stage involves the generalization of the information obtained to identify the stages of the SCO's institutional development.

### Development of SCO Activities

The analysis of the content of 120 official documents posted on the SCO's official website (declarations of the heads of state, joint statements, communiqués, information messages following the meetings of the Councils of Heads of Government and Ministers of Foreign Affairs) allowed to identify the main areas of the SCO's activities to study the dynamics of the organization's development.

During the analysis, all areas of the SCO's activities were divided into five categories:

- 1) organizational issues of the SCO's activities;
- 2) SCO interactions with international organizations (including on specific issues of international relations);
- 3) ensuring regional security;
- 4) trade and economic cooperation;

5) humanitarian and cultural cooperation.

Each category has subcategories — issues related to specific areas of the SCO's activities (see an example in Table 1). The mentioning of issues in SCO documents was calculated on a 3-point scale (1 point — the subcategory is mentioned in the document along with many other issues; 2 points — the subcategory is the main one in the document; 3 points — the document is devoted exclusively to this issue). The results of the scoring are summarized in Table 2.

On the basis of this quantitative and qualitative analysis (in particular, determining the frequency and nature of references to these areas in documents from different periods), the stages of the SCO's institutional development since 2001 have been identified (Figure 1).

The first stage (2001–2004) is associated with the organization's "institution building" (the completion of which was proclaimed in the Tashkent Declaration in June 2004) and the dominance of the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism (the so-called "three evils," the definitions of which were formulated in the Shanghai Convention of 2001).<sup>6</sup>

The second stage (2004–2008) is characterized by intensive promotion, mainly by the Chinese, of the trade, economic, humanitarian and cultural agenda, in full compliance with the SCO vision expressed by Jiang Zemin at the summit in St. Petersburg (2002), according to which "security and trade-economic cooperation are interrelated and stimulate each other" and are the "two wheels" on which the SCO moves forward.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism // The President of Russia. June 14, 2001. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3405> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

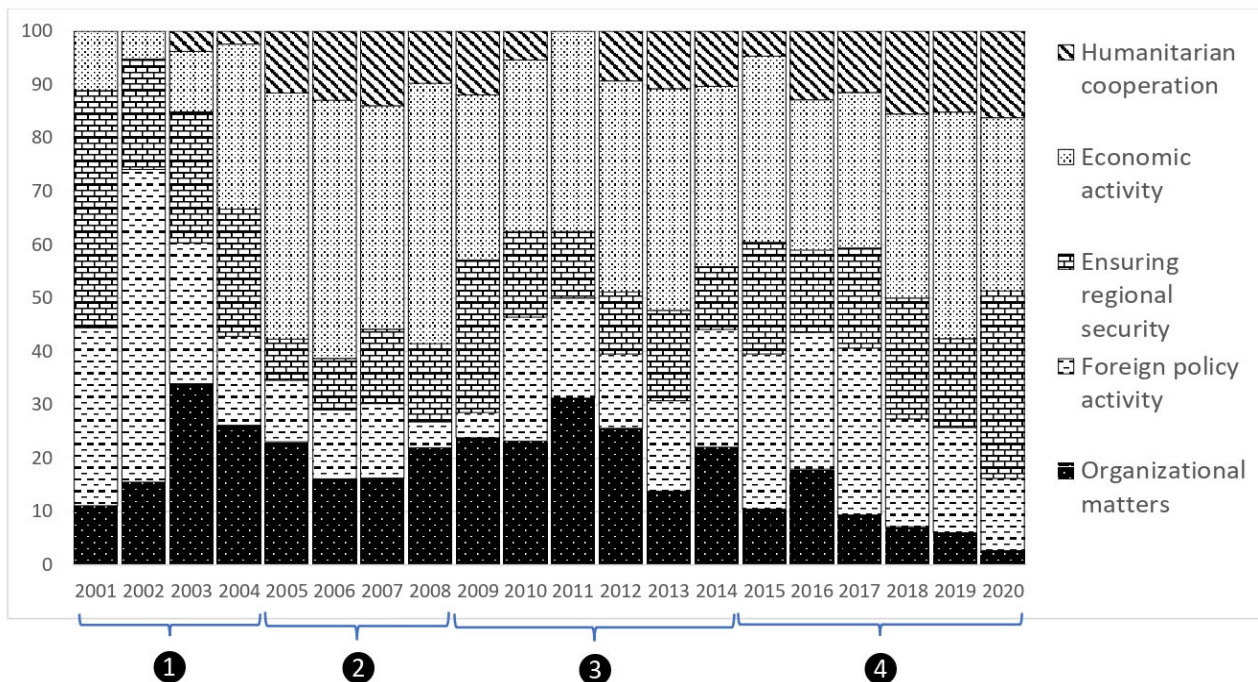
<sup>7</sup> Statement by Chinese President Jiang Zemin at the SCO Summit (2002/06/13) // Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Russian Federation. March 1, 2004. (In Russian). URL: [http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/jbwzlm/shhzzz/dsj/200403/t20040301\\_3114168.htm](http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/jbwzlm/shhzzz/dsj/200403/t20040301_3114168.htm) (accessed: 05.07.2023).

Table 1

**Example of Dissecting the Category “Organizational Issues of the SCO’s activities”**

No.	Name of subcategory	Number of references in documents
1	Declaration on promoting and deepening regional cooperation on a wide range of issues	17
2	Declaration on strengthening the role and authority of the SCO	4
3	Confirmation of the SCO’s successes and the growth of its authority in the world	16
4	The need to launch SCO mechanisms as soon as possible	5
5	The importance of implementing previously signed agreements	9
6	Regulation of the status of SCO observers and partners	14
7	Information on the admission of a new member, observer	9
8	Declaration of consistent organization building and confirmation of great organizational work	10
9	Analysis and improvement of the efficiency of working groups	4
10	Preparation of proposals on the development of the SCO’s structure and organizational aspects of strategic cooperation	10
11	Coordination of SCO structures in the implementation of joint investment and economic projects	3
12	Practical issues of staffing and maintenance of SCO structures, creation of conditions for the functioning of SCO institutions	24
13	SCO symbolism	3
14	Preparation of draft legal documents for the functioning of the SCO	12
15	Participation of SCO institutions in specific activities of international organizations	2
16	Enhancing interaction with observers and partners in the SCO	31
	<b>Total</b>	173

Source: compiled by the authors.



**Figure 1. Ratio of References in SCO Documents to the Main Areas of the Organization’s Activities, 2001–2020**

Source: compiled by the authors.

Table 2

**Ratio of References in SCO Documents to the Main Areas of the Organization’s Activities, 2001–2020**

No.	Name of category (direction)	Number of subcategories (activity issues)	Number of references in documents (points)
1	Organizational issues of SCO activities	16	173
2	Interaction of the SCO with international organizations	25	233
3	Ensuring regional security	14	194
4	Trade and economic cooperation	25	341
5	Humanitarian and cultural cooperation	7	100
	<b>Total</b>	87	1041

Source: compiled by the authors.

The specificity of this stage is marked not only by a sharp increase in the number of economic and cultural cooperation issues (55–60% of the total agenda), but also by repeated references in SCO documents to specific pilot projects of a trade and economic nature (despite the fact that some of them were launched before the SCO’s accession).<sup>8</sup> The period is also associated with the political consolidation of the SCO members, “almost impossible”<sup>9</sup> earlier, which was “almost impossible” before, and which was expressed in support for established political regimes in Central Asia (after the “tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan and the unrest in Uzbek Andijan) and the demand to set deadlines for the stay of the US military personnel and their allies on the territory of the SCO member states (July 2005).

The third stage (2008–2014) is characterized by a significant weakening of the developmental impetus and the SCO’s “bureaucratization” (Lukin, 2007), which was associated, among other things, with the

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: Joint Communiqué Following the Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers) of the SCO Member States // The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. November 2, 2007. (In Russian). URL: <https://rus.sectSCO.org/files/45322/45322> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Danilovich M. V. Approaches to SCO: China and Russia // The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia’s Security Challenges / ed. by A. A. Rozanov. Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces and Foreign Policy and Security Research Centre, 2013. P. 37. URL: [https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/DCAF\\_RP16\\_SCO.pdf](https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/DCAF_RP16_SCO.pdf) (accessed: 05.07.2023).

divergence of Russo-Chinese views on the further direction of the organization’s development (the apogee of which M. Danilovich assigns to the summer of 2008).<sup>10</sup> Thus, Song Weiqing, referring to the collective opinion of Chinese politicians and analysts, noted that the practical implementation of many Chinese initiatives was constrained by Russia, which views the SCO as a dialog club for leaders of member states rather than an executive body with practical power (Song, 2014, pp. 92–93). Although Figure 1 shows the most proportional distribution of references to the main areas of activity in the SCO documents for this period, the consideration of these issues was often general and declarative.

The fourth stage (since 2015) is associated with an attempt to bring the SCO “to a qualitatively new level, characterized by increased efficiency of cooperation” in all spheres.<sup>11</sup> An important initial milestone of the stage was the meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States in Ufa (July 2015), which approved the SCO’s long-term development strategy and announced (in addition to expanding the composition of observers and partners) the beginning of the admission of India and Pakistan to the SCO, which, as noted in the SCO Qingdao declaration (2018), was

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. P. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Strategy for the Development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization until 2025 // The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. July 10, 2015. (In Russian). URL: <https://rus.sectSCO.org/files/205938/205938> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

held to “contribute to further unlocking the potential of the organization in all areas of its activities” (India and Pakistan became members of the SCO on June 9, 2017).<sup>12</sup> On July 4, 2023, Iran officially became the ninth member of the SCO, which, according to the Iranian president E. Raisi, “will provide the country with conditions of sovereignty, security and sustainable economic development”.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the SCO is currently an influential, multilateral structure for regional, interregional and transregional cooperation: it is developing interactions with such organizations as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the United Nations (UN). More and more countries wish to strengthen their relations with the SCO and become members. As of July 2023:

<sup>12</sup> Qingdao Declaration of the Council of Heads of States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization // The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. June 10, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <https://rus.sectsc.org/files/442935/442935> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

<sup>13</sup> Iranian President Talks about Advantages of SCO Membership // RIA Novosti. July 4, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://ria.ru/20230704/iran-1882122580.html> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

— the SCO member states are India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the People’s Republic of China, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan;

— observer-state status in the organization is possessed by Afghanistan, Belarus (membership procedure launched) and Mongolia;

— the SCO’s dialog partners are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Egypt, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Türkiye and Qatar.

The total area of the SCO member states equals almost 36 million square kilometers, or about 60% of Eurasia; their population is more than 3 billion people, which is almost half of the world’s population (Rakhimov, 2020) (Tables 3, 4).

In order to verify the obtained results, the study undertakes quantitative content analysis of one of the types of SCO official documents — declarations adopted following the summits of the heads of SCO member states (Table 5). The choice of this type of document for analysis is explained by:

1) the regularity with which declarations are issued, reflecting the results of the annual meetings of heads of state;

Table 3

Basic Information about the SCO Member States

SCO member state	Year of accession to SCO	Territory area, thousand km <sup>2</sup>	Population, thousand people, 2022 estimate	Human Development Index, 2022	GDP per capita, USD, 2021	Number of armed forces, thousand people, 2020
India	2017	3,287	1,417,173	0.633	2,280	1,460
Iran	2023	1,648	88,551	0.774	18,739	610
Kazakhstan	2001*	2,725	19,209	0.811	10,306	39
PRC	2001*	9,597	1,412,313	0.768	12,562	2,035
Kyrgyzstan	2001*	200	6,801	0.692	1,283	11
Pakistan	2017	796	235,825	0.544	1,564	652
Russia	2001*	17,125	146,425	0.822	12,219	900
Tajikistan	2001*	143	9,953	0.685	906	9
Uzbekistan	2001	447	35,482	0.727	2,002	48
<b>Total</b>		<b>35,968</b>	<b>3,371,732</b>			<b>5,764</b>

Note. \* — Countries participated in the establishment of the Shanghai Five (1996).

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of: The 2021/2022 Human Development Report // UNDP. September 8, 2022. URL: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22> (accessed: 05.07.2023); IMF World Economic Outlook Database 2022 // IMF. URL: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2022/October> (accessed: 05.07.2023); Knoema. URL: <https://ru.knoema.com/> (accessed: 05.07.2023).



Table 4

**Position of the SCO Member States in the World Country Rankings**

SCO member state	Territory area	Population, 2022 estimate	Human Development Index, 2022	GDP per capita, 2021	Number of armed forces, 2020
India	7	1	132	143	2
Iran	18	17	76	48	7
Kazakhstan	9	65	56	69	70
PRC	4	2	79	62	1
Kyrgyzstan	85	106	118	159	118
Pakistan	36	5	161	156	6
Russia	1	9	52	65	5
Tajikistan	94	94	122	171	129
Uzbekistan	56	43	101	149	63

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of: The 2021/2022 Human Development Report // UNDP. September 8, 2022. URL: <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22> (accessed: 05.07.2023); IMF World Economic Outlook Database 2022 // IMF. URL: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2022/October> (accessed: 05.07.2023); Knoema. URL: <https://ru.knoema.com/> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

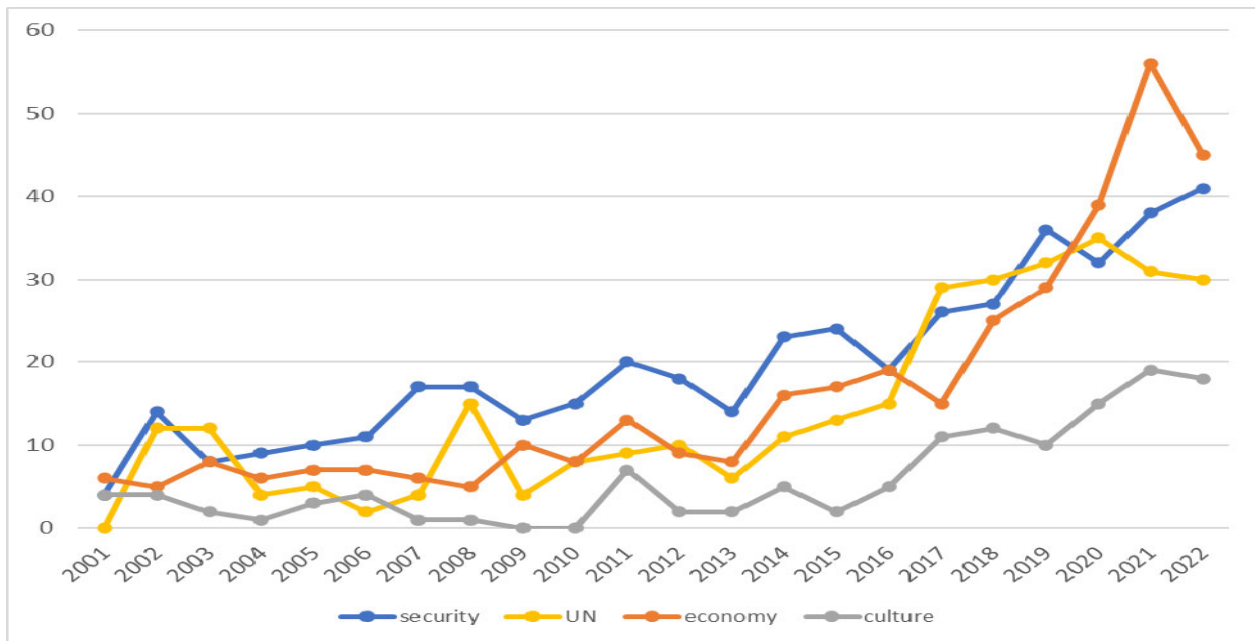
Table 5

**Declarations Adopted the SCO Heads of State Summits, 2001–2022**

Title of document	Date of acceptance	Number of words (in Russian)
Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization	June 15, 2001	954
Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	June 7, 2002	1617
Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	May 29, 2003	1313
Tashkent Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	June 17, 2004	1326
Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	July 5, 2005	1658
SCO Quinquennial Declaration	June 15, 2006	1374
Bishkek Declaration	August 16, 2007	773
Dushanbe Declaration	August 28, 2008	1200
Ekaterinburg Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	June 16, 2009	1103
Declaration of the 10th Meeting of the Council of Heads of the SCO Member States	June 11, 2010	1245
Astana Declaration of the SCO Decade	June 15, 2011	1716
Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States on building a region of long-term peace and shared prosperity	June 7, 2012	1538
Bishkek Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	September 13, 2013	1460
Dushanbe Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	September 12, 2014	2148
Ufa Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	July 10, 2015	1674
Tashkent Declaration on the 15th Anniversary of the SCO	June 24, 2016	2503
Astana Declaration of the Heads of the SCO Member States	June 9, 2017	2946
Qingdao Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States	June 10, 2018	4186
Bishkek Declaration of the Council of Heads of the SCO Member States	June 14, 2019	4868
Moscow Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States	November 10, 2020	5818
Dushanbe Declaration on the Twentieth Anniversary of the SCO	September 17, 2021	6582
Samarkand Declaration of the Council of Heads of the SCO Member States	September 16, 2022	6079

Source: compiled by the authors.

2) the significance of the content of these documents, as they come from the SCO's supreme body and reflect the agreed vision of the main directions of the organization's development in the short and medium term;



**Figure 2. Dynamics of Changes in the Frequency of Keyword in the Declarations of the SCO Summits, 2001–2022**  
 Source: compiled by the authors.

3) the complexity of the content of declarations, expressing in a concentrated and generalized form the organization’s integral agenda and all directions of its activities.

The multilingual computer program Yoshikoder<sup>14</sup> was used for machine analysis of the declarations, which counts the frequency of use of representative words and highlights their contextual environment. The analysis was carried out using the word forms of four key lexemes — categories that express the SCO’s development directions identified above (Table 6), as well as related keywords reflecting the details of the SCO activities.

Table 6

**Keyword Frequency Counting Results**

Direction of the SCO activities	Keyword category	Frequency of mention
Ensuring regional security	Safety	438
Trade and economic cooperation	Economy	359
Cooperation in the humanitarian and cultural sphere	Culture	128
SCO interaction with international organizations	UN	317

Source: compiled by the authors.

The selection of these keyword categories is explained by the high degree of frequency and periodicity of their use in declarations, as well as by their close connection with a specific area of SCO activities. At the same time, the selection process for individual categories takes into account the alignment of a lexeme with an additional keyword (e.g., “security” with the keyword “region”) or the presence of synonymous meanings (e.g., “economy,” “economic,” “trade and economic”).

The analysis of the dynamics of changes in the frequency of keywords in the declarations (Figure 2) confirms the trend of increasing SCO attention to areas related to trade, economic, humanitarian and cultural cooperation, while the problems of countering traditional and non-traditional threats to regional security remain a priority. The content analysis and the visualization of the frequency of use of additional lexemes related to the keyword category allow us to conclude that the SCO’s areas of activity are gradually becoming more complex, detailed and specialized. To a certain extent, this confirms the stages of the organization’s evolutionary development that we have identified.

<sup>14</sup> Yoshikoder. URL: <https://yoshikoder.sourceforge.net> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

The histogram, presented in Figure 3, of the distribution of the relative frequency of use of the lexemes associated with the keyword “security” includes seven types of word forms related to the category:

1) regional security (in this case, the word *region\** is found in the text of the declaration three words to the right/left of the word *security*);

2) international security (similarly, the search for two patterns *international\** and *global\** was used);

3) information security (*informational\**);

4) environmental security (*ecological\**);

5) energy security (*energy\**);

6) food security (*food\**);

7) antinarcotic security (*antinarcotic\** and *narcotic\**).

The declarations from 2001 to 2006 deal exclusively with the most general categories of international and regional security, which corresponds to the logic of the stage of the SCO institution-building. The declarations of 2007–2009 mention all seven analyzed types of security with varying degrees of frequency, while more specific categories of security

(information, food, etc.) appear sporadically, in the form of enumerations that correspond to the intensive promotion of the trade-economic and humanitarian-cultural agenda. The decrease in the frequency of specific security categories (except for information) in documents between 2010 and 2016 corresponds to the stage of “weakening development impetus,” while the intensification and differentiation of the use of all security categories corresponds to the stage of “qualitative development of cooperation in all spheres.”

### Development of the SCO Institutions

The current organizational structure of the SCO corresponds to the organization’s stated goals and activities and includes four subsystems of institutions (Figure 4):

1) supreme governing and coordinating bodies;

2) permanent working bodies — the Secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure;

3) sectoral cooperation mechanisms;

4) non-governmental agencies.

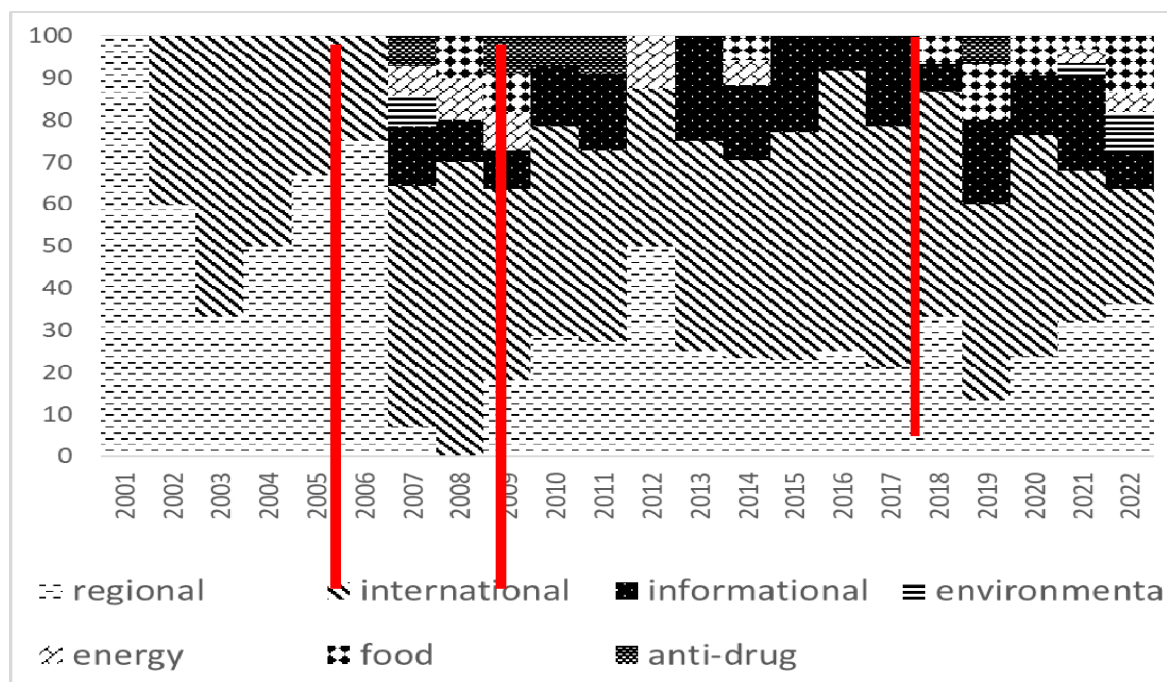
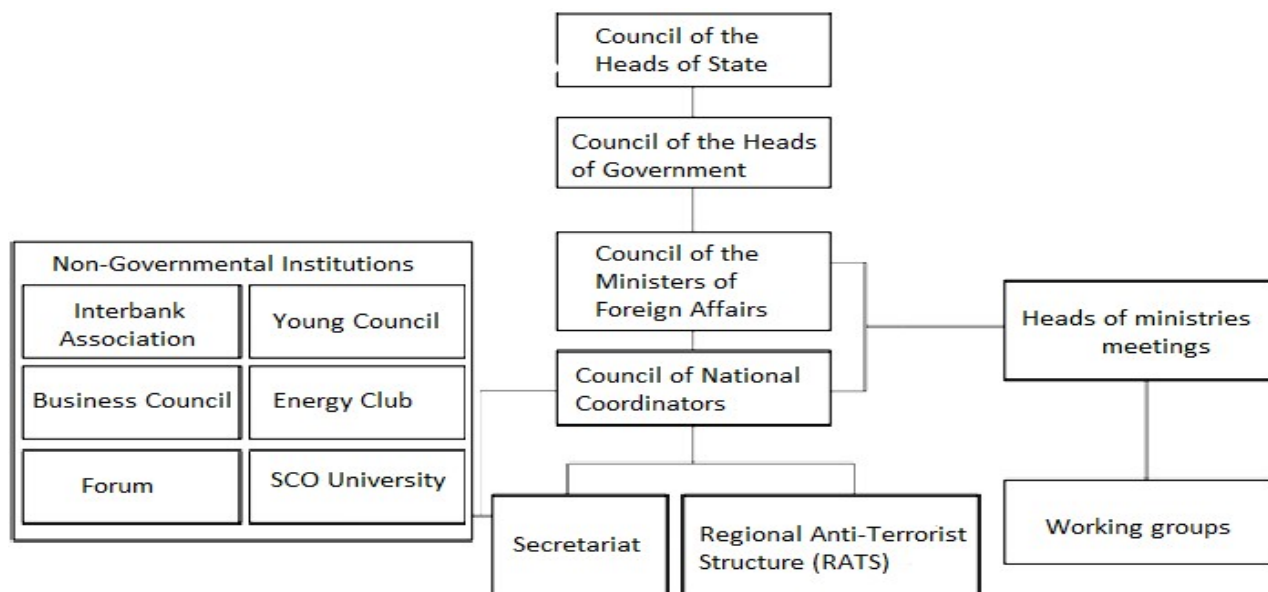


Figure 3. Detailed Use of Lexemes Related to the Keyword “Security” in the Declarations of the SCO Summits, 2001–2022

Source: compiled by the authors.



**Figure 4. Organizational Structure of the SCO**

*Source:* compiled by the authors on the basis of: Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization // The President of the Russian Federation. June 6, 2002. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3450> (accessed: 05.07.2023); The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (In Russian). URL: <https://rus.sectSCO.org/> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

The Council of Heads of State, convened annually, is the SCO’s supreme body, which determines its priorities and develops the main directions of its activities.<sup>15</sup> The annual Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers) adopts the budget and mainly considers issues of economic cooperation between SCO member states.<sup>16</sup> The Council of Foreign Ministers considers current SCO activities and prepares the meetings of the Council of Heads of State.<sup>17</sup> The Council of National Coordinators, which usually consists of high-ranking officials at the level of ambassadors-at-large, meets at least three times a year to coordinate and manage current SCO activities.<sup>18</sup>

The two permanent bodies that “symbolize the birth of the SCO as a full-fledged

international organization” (Song, 2014, p. 92) are the Secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). The Secretariat (located in Beijing) is an administrative body that “provides organizational and technical support for the activities carried out within the SCO”<sup>19</sup>; while having virtually no independent decision-making powers, it functions as an “administrative and bureaucratic center” for the implementation of decisions approved at meetings of the SCO supreme bodies (Aris, 2009, p. 476). RATS (headquartered in Tashkent since 2004) was established to promote the coordination and interaction of national law enforcement agencies in the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism.<sup>20</sup>

Sectoral cooperation mechanisms include meetings of heads of ministries (agencies), as well as meetings of special and expert working groups. The heads of sectoral ministries and

<sup>15</sup> The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Article 5 // The President of Russia. June 6, 2002. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3450> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Article 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Article 7.

<sup>18</sup> The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Article 9 // The President of Russia. June 6, 2002. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3450> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Article 11.

<sup>20</sup> The Agreement Between the States Members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, Article 3 // The President of Russia. June 7, 2002. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3864> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

agencies hold regular meetings on a basis to consider specific issues of cooperation in relevant areas within the SCO.<sup>21</sup> The Table 7 shows that regional security issues remain a priority on the SCO agenda, while interaction in the economic and cultural spheres is gradually expanding.

The joint communiqués on the results of the meetings of the Council of Heads of Government in 2013–2017 repeatedly stressed the importance of the activities of the ad hoc working groups on priority areas of cooperation, as well as the need to analyze their effectiveness and prepare proposals to optimize and intensify their activities.

*Table 7*

**Meetings and Conferences of Heads of Sectoral Ministries and Other Government Agencies of the SCO Member States, 2001–2020**

Position	Period	Packs
Secretaries of security councils	2004–2019	14
Ministers of defense	2001–2019	14
Ministers of the interior and public safety	2009–2015	3
Heads of emergency management agencies	2002–2019	10
Ministers of justice	2013–2020	7
Chief justices of supreme courts	2006–2020	15
Attorneys general	2002–2020	18
Ministers of transportation	2002–2019	7
Ministers of economy and trade	2002–2019	19
Ministers of education	2006–2018	7
Ministers of culture	2002–2019	16
Ministers of agriculture	2010–2018	4
Ministers of health	2010–2020	3
Heads of national tourism administrations	2015–2018	2

*Source:* compiled by the authors on the basis of: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (In Russian). URL: <https://rus.sectsc.org/> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

The fourth subsystem in the structure of SCO institutions is non-governmental and public organizations established to develop cooperation in the economic and educational spheres: the Interbank Association (established in 2005 to finance and provide banking services for the SCO investment projects); the Business Council

(established in 2006 to establish direct links and dialogue between the business and financial circles of the SCO member states); the Forum (established in 2006 as a consultative and expert mechanism for scientific support of the SCO activities); the Youth Council (established in 2009 for the purpose of cooperation and exchanging experience among representatives of the younger generations of the SCO countries in various areas of personal development); the Energy Club (established in 2013 as an information and discussion platform for discussing energy strategies from the perspective of their harmonization); and the SCO University (established in 2017 as an international educational program for the joint training of highly qualified personnel in priority fields).

The role of this subsystem in the functioning of the SCO cannot be assessed unequivocally. On the one hand, its development testifies to the expansion and deepening of economic and humanitarian cooperation within the SCO; on the other hand, its elements largely reflect the contradictions between China, objectively interested in creating new instruments to spread its economic influence in Central Asia (Muratshina, 2017, p. 452), and Russia, which opposes China in this regard (Zeleneva & Vlasov, 2012, pp. 153–154). The SCO Development Bank, which could have facilitated the implementation of multilateral financial and economic projects, was never established due to disagreements between China and Russia.<sup>22</sup> As a result, financial and economic cooperation between China and the Central Asian states is coordinated mainly on a bilateral basis: there has been a reorientation of the Central Asian states towards bilateral and multilateral interaction primarily with China (Muratshina, 2017, p. 453).

Establishing some SCO non-governmental institutions takes an unreasonably long time. For example, the establishment of the Energy Club

<sup>22</sup> Gabuev A. More, Yes Worse. How Russia Turned SCO into a Club Without Interests // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. June 13, 2017. (In Russian). URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/06/bigger-not-better-russia-makes-the-sco-a-useless-club?lang=ru&center=russia-eurasia> (accessed: 05.01.2021). (A.T. Gabuev and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace are included in the Register of Foreign Agents in Russia. — *Editor's note*).

<sup>21</sup> The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Article 8 // The President of Russia. June 6, 2002. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3450> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

and the SCO University was discussed for 10 years, which shows that the leadership of the SCO member states is not sufficiently capable of coordinating different approaches to their visions, given the need to maintain consensus in decision-making.

Another potential problem in the SCO's development is the substitution of the multilateral format of cooperation with the bilateral one, which is possible due to the very principles of decision-making enshrined in the foundational Charter document. In it, the provision on the sovereign equality of all member states provides for the search for joint points of view on the basis of mutual understanding and respect for the opinion of each party: decision-making in SCO bodies takes place on the basis of consensus. At the same time, in cases where some members are not interested in the implementation of certain cooperation projects of interest to other member states, the Charter stipulates that "the non-participation of said member states does not prevent the member states concerned from implementing such cooperation projects and, at the same time, does not prevent the said member states from joining the implementation of such projects in the future."<sup>23</sup>

The "Shanghai Spirit" declared by the SCO is regarded as equality, mutually beneficial cooperation, mutual respect and trust, recognition of the diversity of civilizations and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. It presupposes the principle of consensus in decision-making (Honrada & Bokeriya, 2023, pp. 255–258). However, in practice, these norms in a number of cases complicate the adoption of decisions agreed upon by all members of the organization and do not contribute to the resolution of objective internal contradictions between the SCO countries.

The SCO's institutional development has also revealed the lack of crisis management mechanisms at the organization's disposal, which

contributes to weakening the organization's ability to maintain stability in Central Asia. This is evidenced, in particular, by the SCO's largely uncertain and delayed (by a month) response to the "tulip revolution" in Kyrgyzstan and the subsequent Andijan events in neighboring Uzbekistan (2005). To some extent, as an attempt to overcome these limitations, one can consider the establishment in 2016 of the SCO's crisis response mechanisms. China, together with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, established the Quadrilateral Mechanism for Cooperation and Coordination (in 2016), which is in many respects a parallel (if not potentially competing) structure to the RATS, aimed at military and counter-terrorism cooperation among the four states (Frolova, 2020, pp. 38, 44–45).

### Conclusion

This analysis of the SCO's institutional formation shows that with the adoption of such fundamental documents as the Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, the SCO Charter, the Agreement on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure and other normative acts, the organizational and legal formalization of the newly formed international organization was generally completed.

The content analysis of the dynamics of changes in the frequency of keywords in official documents of the SCO used in the study made it possible to identify the main areas of the SCO's activities, to identify trends in the evolution of the organization's agenda, and, ultimately, to clarify the stages of its institutional development. The content analysis has shown that the SCO has passed through a number of stages in its development, characterized by qualitative specifics, while maintaining a clearly expressed priority for security issues, reflecting the significance of traditional and new threats. The latter is reflected in the diversification of perceptions of security threats and the regular appearance in the SCO documents since 2018 of new notions of security (environmental, energy, information, food), as well as measures to ensure them. At the same time, since 2008 there has

<sup>23</sup> The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Article 1 // The President of Russia. June 6, 2002. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3450> (accessed: 05.07.2023).

been a steady increase in the importance of trade and economic cooperation, most clearly presented in the documents of 2017–2021. The third most important area of activity is the SCO's interaction with the UN and other international organizations, which reflects its growing integration into the system of modern international relations and its authority as an influential actor. Positive dynamics have been observed in cultural cooperation over the past decade, but its "lag" behind other areas of the organization's activity indicates insufficient realization of the potential of cultural dialogue.

The development of the institutional structure of the SCO and its organizational and legal design reflect both the search for optimal and effective forms of interaction between the member states and its functional and territorial expansion. At present, the SCO is one of the most important formats of multilevel cooperation, which is gradually increasing its activity, expanding the scope of its activities and

finding its own place in the modern system of international relations. The organization's agendas regularly include not only regional but also global issues, and its official documents have begun to reflect issues of global stability and international security.

Assessing the prospects of the SCO's further development, it can be noted that in the modern world virtually all members of the organization are interested in jointly countering non-traditional threats in order to maintain stability and security both in the member states themselves and in the entire region, which makes the association in demand in the short and medium term. In addition, the development of multilateral cooperation within the SCO on an equal footing, based on the principles of the "Shanghai spirit," including respect for the diversity of civilizations, will contribute to the formation of a new model of regionalism that meets the challenges of a multipolar world.

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