
SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION A DEFENSIVE REALIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *THIS ESSAY ANALYSES THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION BETWEEN 2001 AND PRESENT BY USING THE ARGUMENTS FROM DEFENSIVE REALISM, MORE EXACTLY, FROM THE BALANCE OF THREATS THEORY, AS COINED BY STEPHEN WALT. IN THIS PAPER I WILL TRY TO REVEAL THE REASONS THAT DETERMINED THESE STATES TO JOIN THE SCO, GIVEN THEIR DIFFERENT INTERESTS. IN ANALYZING THE REASONS OF JOINING THE SCO, I WILL USE THE THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF BALANCING AND BANDWAGONING, IN ORDER TO SEE IF THOSE STATES HAVE HAD DIFFERENT MOTIVATIONS TO ENTER IN THIS ORGANIZATION OR IF THEIR DECISIONS WERE DETERMINED BY THE ALMOST THE SAME REASONS. THEREFORE, I ARGUE THAT RUSSIA, CHINA, INDIA, KAZAKHSTAN, KYRGYZTAN, TAJIKISTAN, UZBEKISTAN AND PAKISTAN ENTERED IN THE SCO BASED ON DIFFERENT SECURITY CONCERNS AND SOME OF THEM ADOPTED A BALANCING BEHAVIOR, WHILE OTHERS BANDWAGONED WITH THE SOURCE OF THREAT.*

Keywords: BALANCE OF THREATS, BALANCING, BANDWAGONING, SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION, THREATS

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present essay is to analyse the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), between 2001 and up to 2017 (when India and Pakistan entered the organization), from a neorealist perspective, more exactly from the viewpoint of defensive realism arguments of the balance of threats theory, as coined by Stephen Walt. The present study is important because SCO has a multitude of members, from great powers (Russia, China, India) to small powers (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyztan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan), with different interests and priorities. Thus, it is important to see the reasons which have driven those states to enter in this organization. Therefore, a question arises: given

the multitude of actors and interests in the region, why those states entered the SCO? The hypothesis of this paper is as it follows: the member countries entered SCO based on different security concerns, thus adopting either balancing or bandwagoning strategies.

From a methodological point of view, in this paper I will use the case study and content analysis methods. I will make a mini case study for each state from SCO, in order to see the reasons (balancing or bandwagoning) behind accession in this organization. Also, I will analyse the content of different papers or official statements with regard to the SCO and its members. A methodological limitation is related to the fact that I do not possess any knowledge of the Russian, Chinese or other languages of the member states. A strategy to surpass this limitation will be to recreate the details and contexts based on secondary sources.

The paper is organized as it follows: in the first part, I will present the theoretical framework, namely the balance of threats proposed by Stephen Walt, with a short review for each alternative theory of alliances; in the second part, I will shortly present a short overview of the SCO, completed with an analysis, where, based on the theoretical framework, I will analyse each member in order to find out the reasons behind its accession to SCO; while the last part is reserved for conclusions.

TEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This part is reserved to the theoretical framework which will be used in this research paper, namely the balance of threats proposed by Stephen Walt. Before proceeding to present Walt's theory, I will offer some details about other approaches regarding the theory of alliances, more exactly, balancing and bandwagoning. After presenting Walt's balance of threats, I will also discuss some critics to his theory.

Balancing before Stephen Walt

In the realist paradigm, one of the first definitions regarding balancing/balance of power comes from Hans Morgenthau. Therefore, according to Morgenthau “the aspiration for power on the part of several nations, each trying either to maintain or to overthrow the status quo, leads of necessity to a constellation which is called the balance of power and to policies which aim at preserving it” (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 125).

In the neorealist paradigm one of the first authors who addressed the balance of power and bandwagoning was Kenneth Waltz, in his book *Theory of International Politics*. According to the view of Waltz, to balance is about joining the weaker side, while bandwagoning, as an opposite strategy to balancing, involves joining the stronger side (Waltz, 1979, p. 126).

Coming from the offensive realist perspective, John Mearsheimer sees balancing as one of the main strategies (the other one is buck-passing) used to maintain the balance of power, where the threatened state takes on itself the burden to deter or fight the aggressor (Mearsheimer, 2003, p. 101). On the other hand, bandwagoning is not a good strategy, because it involves conceding power to the source of threat, which will become more stronger (Mearsheimer, 2003, pp. 101-102).

Balance of threats theory

First of all, I have to mention that I regard an alliance according to the definition of Stephen Walt, which states that “an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states” (Walt, 1990, p. 12). With regard to balancing and bandwagoning, balancing represents the “allying with others against the prevailing threat”, and bandwagoning “refers to alignment with the source of danger” (Walt, 1990, p. 17).

In opposition with balancing, Walt sees bandwagoning more dangerous, because it involves trust in the mercy of the threatening state, increasing its resources. Therefore, balancing is a safer



alternative to bandwagoning when dealing with a potential threat than to hope that the attack will not occur (Walt, 1990, p. 29). Moreover, balancing is a more frequent strategy, while bandwagoning is more likely to be adopted by weak states (Walt, 1990, pp. 178-9).

Walt argues that states balance or bandwagon taking into account not the power solely, but the external power which is the most threatening. According to Walt, the factors that influence the level of threat are given by “aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions” (Walt, 1990, pp. 21-2). *Aggregate power* represents the totality of resources possessed by a state, namely “population, industrial and military capability, and technological prowess”. The threat is proportionally direct to the resources (Walt, 1990, p. 22). *Geographic proximity* is related to the distance from which comes the threat. The closer the distance the greater the threat and vice-versa (Walt, 1990, p. 23). *Offensive power* is connected with the aggregate power, from which is converted. It is more possible for an alliance to appear as a reaction to a strong state than to a weaker one. Moreover, there is also a relation with the precedent factor, namely that states with a short distance between them are more threatening to each other (Walt, 1990, p. 24). *Aggressive intentions* are related to how a state is perceived, in terms of aggressiveness, by others, thus provoking an alliance against it or not (Walt, 1990, p. 25).

The theoretical perspective advanced by Walt has its own critics. Glenn H. Snyder argued in favor of other alternatives to balancing and bandwagoning in dealing with the source of threat, namely neutrality (formal or informal), improving the relations (but not ally) with third parties and conciliation or compromise (Snyder, 1991, p. 128). Randall Schweller opted for an opposite side than Waltz and Walt, arguing that bandwagoning is not costly every time when it is adopted. It is employed when its usage involves some expected gains, therefore it is more common than balancing (Schweller, 1994, p. 93). Bandwagoning and balancing are not opposite strategies, but the motivations are different, especially in the first case, when it is used for profit or when some gains are expected (Schweller, 1994, p. 106). According to Schweller, there are four distinct types of bandwagoning, namely jackal bandwagoning, piling-on, wave of the future and the contagion or domino effect (Schweller, 1994, pp. 93-8). As an alternative to Walt’s balance of threats, Schweller advanced the balance of interests theory, which it applies at unit and systemic levels. The first case represents “the costs a state is willing to pay to defend its values relative to the costs it is willing to pay to extend its values and systemic“, while the second case represents “the relative strengths of status quo and revisionist states” (Schweller, 1994, p. 99).

As a conclusion to the theoretical part, the reasons for which I have chosen to use the balance of threats, as coined by Stephen Walt, is that it can explain the different motivations behind the decisions of the states to enter in an alliance by making appeal to the threats, not only to concentrations of power. The balance of threats theory is more complex than the balance of power and therefore can explain better the reasons for which the states from SCO decided to take part in this alliance

SCO overview and analysis of states’ motivations

SCO is an intergovernmental organization created in 2001, on the framework established by the Shanghai Five in 1996 (Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyztan, Russia, Tajikistan). In 2001 Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five and the organization was renamed as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Albert, 2015). The SCO members decided that India and Pakistan have become full members of the organization at the Astana Summit, on 8-9 June 2017 (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Therefore, the SCO membership comprises Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyztan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan.

According to the SCO Declaration of Establishment, the purpose of this organization is to maintain regional security, as well as combating terrorism, separatism and extremism (The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, 2001 [2022], p. 130).

According to the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, from 15 June 2001:

The purposes of the SCO are: strengthening mutual trust and good-neighborly friendship among the member states; encouraging effective cooperation among the member states in political, economic and trade, scientific and technological, cultural, educational, energy, communications, environment and other fields; devoting themselves jointly to preserving and safeguarding regional peace, security and stability; and establishing a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order (2001 [2022], p. 129).

The forthcoming analysis will be based on the four variables of the balance of threats theory, namely aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions, each of them being applied to every state that comprises the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The definition of balancing and bandwagoning will complete the picture of the motives behind each state's decision to enter into SCO.

Russia

For Russia, the SCO represents an important tool for keeping outside the West and also to control the unstable security environment at the South, especially since the color revolutions from Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, from 2003-2005, which seemed as increased Western involvement in the region, doubled by insecurity in Central Asia (Facon, 2013, p. 463). In the eyes of Russia, the Western implication in the region, through backing regime change, represented a high risky destabilization of its neighbors, entailing possible economic and military-industrial losses. By involving the Central Asian states and China in a strengthened union, Russia hoped to limit the extent of regime change and eventual regional destabilization (Facon, 2013, p. 463).

Since the fall of the USSR, Russia tried to repel the influence of “extra-regional powers” and to limit instability in the region for spreading to Russian territory (Mărcău, 2020). One of the particular threats were the NATO's enlargement in the Baltic States and the invitation addressed to Georgia and Ukraine¹ to join the alliance, and the Western energetic policy in the region. Thus, Russia used SCO to put in practice an effort to drive out the U.S. and Western interference in the region (Facon, 2013, p. 465). Another threat for Russia came from inside, namely the insurgency in Chechnya (Ziegler, 2013, p. 489), and later, the threat came out from the Al Qaeda, which allied with the Chechen insurgents (Ziegler, 2013, p. 491). Moreover, during the Bush administration, not only Russia, but all SCO members feared American effort to change the regimes in Central Asia, which were added the NATO PfP agreements in the region, and its enlargement in Europe (Ziegler, 2013, p. 495).

Based on the four variables, aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions, will follow my analysis on Russia. I argue that the most important source of threat for Russia was the Western (NATO/US) block. If the Western threat for Russia is to be analyzed from the point of view of the aggregate power, which takes into account the population, industry, technology and the military of the source of threat, the Russian part was disadvantaged. In 2001, Russia was in a recovery process from post-Soviet economic crisis (Curtis, 1996), and with a diminished

¹ Since 24 February 2022, there is an ongoing war after Russia invaded Ukraine in the morning of that day, claiming that its objectives were to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, according to the speech delivered by Vladimir Putin in his declaration of war (Putin apud The Spectator, 2022).



population and industry after the fall of the USSR, from 288 mil. people in 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991, pp. 1-2) to 144 mil. after the dissolution, also confronted with low birth rates (Chamie and Mirkin, 2014). Only United States had a population of 247 mil. in 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991, pp. 1-2).

From a geographical point of view, the situation is more complex. Some of the European allies of U.S. from NATO are very close to Russia, such as Poland, or the Baltic States, and if the invitation of Ukraine and Georgia to join the Alliance were taken into account, the situation would have been more difficult for Russia, due to the large Russo-Ukrainian border. Indeed, the U.S. is far away from Russia and Central Asia, but its influence in the region by backing regime change and the fight against the Talibans since 2001 (Ziegler, 2013, p. 491), have taken the American threat closer to Russian borders, meaning, in Walt's terms, that the threat was greater.

The offensive power of the West was tremendous. In 2000, the U.S. army was around 400.000 enlisted soldiers (Haworth Jr., 2011, p. 27), where there were added the armies of the other NATO states. Therefore, the balance was against Russia in conventional terms. However, Russia preserved its nuclear arsenal from the Cold War, with 21,500 warheads in the year of 2000 (Norris and Kristensen, 2010, p. 82).

In terms of aggressive intentions from the West, the situation looks complicate, because in 1997 was signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act, continued with the NATO-RUSSIA Council in 2002, which concerned the collaboration on security issues (NATO, 2022). The NRC can be a proof that the West did not represent a threat for Russia, meaning that NATO and U.S. did not have aggressive intentions against Russia at the time when the SCO was created, in 2001. Some aggressive intentions perceived by Russia can be the Western implication in the region, especially by regime change in Central Asia, where the states from there, once the regime would have been changed, they could have become pro-Western and hostile to Russia.

Therefore, the reason behind the Russian accession to SCO was to balance against the West, which tried to exert its influence in the neighborhood of Russia. Given the four variables, Russia had reasons to fear and to try to balance the West, by creating a block of states, which involved another great power, China. I consider that the internal threat pose by the Chechen insurgents was not a reason for balancing and form an alliance, since the Russians dealt themselves with this threat (Al Jazeera, 2014).

China

By creating SCO, China had the goal to limit the U.S. military power and democracy promotion in the region, especially after 2001, when the United States deployed troops in Central Asia for the war in Afghanistan. After 2001 China felt locked between the U.S. presence in Asia-Pacific and Central Asia and, with Russia, opposed the American implication in Iraq to democratize it. Thus, a partnership with Russia represented a useful tool to counter the U.S. presence in Central Asia (Cohen, 2006, pp. 2-3). Another security concern for China was the internal threat that come from the Islamic separatist Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, or East Turkistan, where the separatists engaged in terrorist activities in the 1990s and 2000s and close ties with the Talibans (Huasheng, 2013, pp. 437-9).

In terms of aggregate power, China stayed better than the U.S., with a population of 1,267 bln. in 2000 (Statista, 2022a), while the United States had a population of 282 mil. in that year (Statista, 2022b) but even though, when SCO when was created was larger than NATO or EU in population, surface and resources, the organization were not able, in terms of economy and military, to compete with the United States (Cohen, 2006). Therefore, in terms of aggregate power, China had a reason to balance the U.S.

In geographic terms, indeed USA is far away from China, but a threat from this point of view, could have been the regime change tried by the United States in Central Asia, or the American presence in Taiwan (Mearsheimer, 2003, p. 266), with 28, 500 troops in South Korea (Congressional Research Service, 2022, p. 19) and about 54,000 in Japan (Chanlett-Avery et al., 2019, p. 1), which are very close to China. Therefore, the geographic variable can be taken into account as a reason for China's balancing, especially that the United States deployed troops in Japan, South Korea, Afganistan and Iraq.

The offensive power of China in 2000 was about 2,5 million soldiers and 400 nuclear warheads, (Moore, 2000), compared with the U.S. 400.000 troops and 10,577 warheads (Norris and Kristensen: 2010, p. 82). The low technological quality of the Chinese military (Moore, 2000) could be another reason behind the reason to enter the SCO and balance against U.S.

Even though the U.S. did not have aggressive intentions to China in the Central Asia region, the U.S. presence in this region (and its efforts to change the regimes) or Japan and South Korea and the fact that there were U.S. troops deployed in these regions, posed a security threat for China. Moreover, the U.S. took the responsibility to protect Japan's territories, which is in conflict with China for the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (Chanlett-Avery et al., 2019, p. 45).

Taken into account all the variables, China had a lot of security concerns and reasons to feel threatened by the U.S., which deployed troops around its borders. Therefore, China tried to balance the U.S. presence and influence in the area by collaborating with Russia.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyztan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (KKTU)

I have decided to take KKTU as a cluster, because, I argue that as small powers, they have little influence on the global arena and are in the same geographical area, namely in Central Asia. KKTU, especially Kyrgyztan, which experienced a U.S. backed colored revolution, share the same fear (with Russia and China) of regime change, from one of authoritarian nature to more closed to democracy (Mărcău, 2019), this fact representing a threat to the stability of their regime (Ambrosio, 2008, p. 1321). Also, one of the reasons that driven those states in the SCO was the need to finalize the process of securing the new borders after 1991. Later on, in Uzbekistan was established a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in 2004 to deal with the common problem of terrorism, a concern shared by all the states from SCO (Cabestan, 2013, p. 424).

KKTU have a special status because they were integral parts of the Soviet Union, and there is one of the reasons why Russia felt threatened (as I have mentioned above) by the U.S. backed colored revolutions in the region. I consider that Russia has seen the U.S. involvement in KKTU region as an interference in its geopolitical space, and therefore, I will analyze these four states, with reference to the four variables, in relation with their greater neighbor, Russia.

In terms of aggregate power Russia is more powerful than all of these four states. Russia remained with 144 mil. people after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while Kazakhstan's population in 2000 was 14,9 mil. (PopulationPyramid, 2022a), Kyrgyzstan's 4,9 mil (PopulationPyramid, 2022b), Tajikistan's 6,1 mil. (PopulationPyramid, 2022c) and Uzbekistan's was 24,5 mil (PopulationPyramid, 2022d). Also, Russia, as the successor state of the USSR was superior in technology, military (nuclear power) and industry. As for GDP in 2000 Kazakhstan had a GDP of almost \$18 bln. Kyrgyzstan \$ 1,34 bln., Tajikistan \$860 mln., Uzbekistan \$13,76 and \$259 bln. for Russia (The World Bank, 2017a). Therefore, KKTU did not have the capacity to have superior industry, military or technology than Russia, which had far more greater resources and, after 2000 it experienced a rapid economic growth, while the four states did not performed very well compared to their greater neighbor (The World Bank, 2017a). Therefore, Russia had a much more capacity to mobilize offensive power than KKTU, given its overall resources, and moreover, as I have mentioned earlier, it was a nuclear power. In terms of

geography, Russia is very close to KKTU, especially that those countries were integral part of the Soviet Union and if would have been the case, a Russian aggression could have occurred very easy. I did not find any evidence to show aggressive intentions from Russia towards KKTU.

Therefore, I consider that the KKTU countries had many reasons to fear Russia and, given their disadvantageous position as compared with their greater neighbor, those four countries adopted a bandwagoning behavior, which means that they entered an alliance with the source of danger. Also, I argue, that KKTU balanced against a possible threat from U.S. which tried to change the regime in the region and backed some colored revolutions.

India and Pakistan

The relations between India and Pakistan are complex, especially that those two countries defined in opposition with each other due to their origins in the partition on British India. India is perceived by Pakistan as a power with hegemonic aims in South Asia, which has the potential to counter the Indian state in the region, especially that Pakistan has not enough power to counter efficiently India, but also not so powerless to subordinate (Sugunakararaju and Akhtar, 2015, p. 7). Moreover, their bilateral affairs are marked by the conflict in Kashmir since 1947 and by the nuclearized relation between them (The Carter Center, 2003, p. 3). At the admission summit in Astana, the Indian Prime Minister also mentioned the problem of terrorism as a great threat and expressed his hope that the cooperation with SCO on this problem will be beneficial (Bhattacharjee, 2017). Also, Pakistan, a U.S. ally in the “war on terror” from Afganistan, accused India of supporting Taliban terrorists against it, due to its relations with United States (Sugunakararaju and Akhtar, 2015, p. 9).

The tackle of terrorism is only the opportunity side of the accession to SCO for India, there is a perception of threat that comes from China, which can keep New Delhi from access to heartland by forming a coalition with Russia and Pakistan, especially in the issue of Kashmir. Moreover, through SCO, India tries to oppose the Chinese goal of regional hegemony (Talukdar, 2017).

In terms of aggregate power, the differences between India and Pakistan are enormous. In economic terms, in 2015 India had \$2 tn., compared to Pakistan’s \$271 bln., while in population 1,3 mld. people, respectively 188,9 people (The World Bank: 2022b). Also, India is a technological hub and experienced a fast growing in technology companies (Ramkumar, 2016) and had a cooperation with Russia in military and defence technology and other issues (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2014). Therefore, in terms of resources, India has a high advantage to Pakistan. But, if compared to China, the situation for India is different: even though the two countries have almost the same population number, in terms of GDP, China in 2015 had %11 tn. (The World Bank: 2022c), being able to boast superior technology and capabilities.

Geographically, India and Pakistan are neighbors, and both countries share their borders with China, meaning that the threats can easily expand between these countries. In terms of offensive power, India and Pakistan are both nuclear powers (Norris and Kristensen, 2010, p. 78), which means a greater threat and danger between them. India has an army of 1,45 mil. soldiers and invests \$49,6 bln. annually, while Pakistan, with an army of 640.000 invests \$7,69 bln. (Global Firepower, 2022a). Compared to both countries, China has an army of 3,1 mil. soldiers and an annual budget of \$230 bln. (Global Firepower, 2022b) and is also a nuclear power (Norris and Kristensen, 2010, p. 78). In terms of aggressive intentions, between India and Pakistan there is the issue of Kashmir and the nuclearisation between these two countries. In terms of behavior, I argue that India (which perceived China’s goal to regional hegemony as a potential threat) bandwagoned, as China was the source of potential danger. On the other hand, against Pakistan I argue that India tried to balance by entering in SCO and to probably be backed in the conflict of Kashmir. When it comes to terrorism, which was defined as a threat, I argue that India balanced, therefore adopted a two sided strategy, according to the threat. For



the case of Pakistan, I argue that this country bandwaged, because an Indian state in the SCO would have been more dangerous if Pakistan remained alone, while the old U.S. partner is far away.

CONCLUSION

The multitude of states that entered in the SCO have done that because of different reasons and perceive threats. Russia entered the SCO in order to balance by joining China, against the U.S. and Western influence in the ex-Soviet space, which has threatened with regime change in the region. When it comes to China, it has also entered SCO because of concerns about the U.S. involvement in Central Asia and in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Therefore, the Chinese decision to enter SCO, side by side with Russia, was motivated by a balancing strategy. To balance against the threat posed by the United States, which, 2000, was stronger than both China and Russia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (KKTU), as small powers, from the ex-soviet space, bandwaged with Russia, which represented a possible threat to them. On the other, hand KKTU adopted a balancing strategy against the United States, which tried to change the regime in the region. I argue that India bandwaged with China, which represented a source of danger, as it has the goal to regional hegemony, in the Indian perception. On the other hand, India tried to balance against Pakistan, to block a Pakistani favorable resolution of the Kashmir conflict. Also, in the case of India balancing can be taken into consideration in the case of terrorism. Pakistan adopted a bandwagoning strategy, because an Indian state inside SCO, with Russia and China on its side, would have been more dangerous than outside the organization.

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