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## **Reactionary Regimes**

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## *Introduction*

When do authoritarian states create international organizations? By examining an international organization (IO) frequently dubbed a “dictators’ club” – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – I assert that authoritarian states create international organizations to reap the benefits of sustained international cooperation while avoiding the need to conform to the liberal democratic norms of governance espoused by many IOs. Rather than try to influence the norms of an IO from within, authoritarian states form new organizations, building into the organizations a tolerance for repressive and reactionary domestic policies.

## *Why Do International Organization Exist?*

In an anarchical system, IOs provide opportunities for sustained cooperation between states, decreasing transaction costs, increasing information flows providing chances to link issues which would otherwise have to be negotiated separately, etc. International organizations serve as focal points for expertise, time, political ability and the resources to smooth the road toward cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to these benefits, potential members must also weigh costs. Membership obligations may include structural adjustments. A state may be asked or expected to liberalize its governing process, move towards a market economy, strengthen its currency or greatly reduce corruption within government in order to join an international organization. If an authoritarian state tries to join an organization with these membership requirements, the costs can be dangerous, even potentially fatal to the existence of the regime. Even if a specific international organization does not demand that a potential member alter its form of government, IOs may still serve as the vehicles for socialization by diffusing certain norms of behavior.<sup>2</sup>

For states trying to move towards democracy, membership in an IO that encourages democratic government can be quite valuable. International pressures can dovetail with internal pressures to compel leaders to liberalize governing processes. Alternately, membership in an international organization could work on a purely domestic level and encourage ruling elites to loosen their commitment to autocratic rule

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<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, Darren G. et al., eds., 2006. *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Finnemore, Martha. 1993. “International Organizations as Teachers of Norm: The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization and Science Policy.” *International Organization*, 47(4).

in one of two ways. First, IO membership could encourage democratization acquiescence by lowering the risks they would face from the general public during the democratization process. Alternately, the international organization could socialize the ruling elites to believe in democratic values and government. For states with an authoritarian form of government, IO membership can be quite dangerous, but few alternatives exist to consistently solve collective action problems. Most autocrats are open to the benefits of membership in some organization, but an autocratic regime may not find it worth the considerable time and trouble to alter or influence an IO towards equal acceptance of all regime types. It is better for authoritarian states to create institutions to solve collective action problems between like-minded actors.

It is perfectly rational then, for autocratic states to create IOs among themselves to serve their personal purposes. Creating a new institution out of whole cloth allows autocratic regimes to build in norms, which support an authoritarian government, a weak secretariat that will not interfere with member states' wishes, and a network of allies that will aid other members in perpetuating authoritarian regimes. The new organization may or may not confer legitimacy to the member states, but it provides autocratic states an alternative to using an institution dominated by democratic norms. The SCO provides an example of this process.

### *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Fighting the Three Evils*

The SCO grew out of a less formal organization known as the Shanghai Five, which was a regional organization created in 1996 between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to monitor and facilitate the demilitarization process along the joint Russo-Chinese border. In 2001, the group admitted a new member, Uzbekistan, and became formally known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. By 2006, the SCO had expanded its mission to include fighting what it termed the “three evils” of terrorism, religious extremism and (most importantly for the purposes of this paper) regional secessionism. The new mission included a larger role for the SCO in preserving regional energy security, conducting more joint anti-terrorism drills and exercises, and deepening military cooperation and intelligence sharing between member states. The SCO has also welcomed several nations as observers;<sup>3</sup> the list of observer states includes Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Mongolia – not helping the SCO’s image as an autocrats’ club. Having largely resolved the issues along the Russo-Chinese border, the SCO now functions as a

<sup>3</sup> Scheineson, Andrew. “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization.” *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounders*, last revised 24 March 2009. [http://www.cfr.org/publication/10883/shanghai\\_cooperation\\_organization.htm](http://www.cfr.org/publication/10883/shanghai_cooperation_organization.htm)

security forum whose aim is to keep democracy from spreading into member states. It provides international solidarity for the member governments as they reinforce the domestic political status quo (whether the status quo is managed democracy, one party rule or dictatorship).

The SCO has a small permanent secretariat based in Beijing. The position of secretary-general is limited to proposing the annual budget and providing organizational and technical support to any decision undertaken within the SCO framework.<sup>4</sup> The member states' representatives undertake all actual decisions, and the secretary-general is appointed by the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers is the actual decision-making body of the organization; all decisions are taken by consensus and if a state does not support the proposal at hand, it is no impediment to the proposed decision being implemented.<sup>5</sup> The SCO emphasizes consensus, indicating a preference for conflict avoidance. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization firmly supports its members' rights to sovereignty. The Dushanbe Declaration, issued in July 2000, confirms the right of each state to choose its own path of political, economic, and public policy development, rejecting the notion of universal political values like democracy. The Dushanbe Declaration also specifically condemns intervention into the domestic affairs of other states under the pretext of "humanitarian intervention" and "human rights protection." This document, C. P. Chung writes, more than any other, "defines the norms of the Shanghai Five forum, and its content has been repeated in various form at subsequent SCO summit meetings."<sup>6</sup>

Freedom House, a nongovernmental organization that rates governments as Free, Partly Free, and Not Free; routinely gives SCO member countries poor rankings. In 2008, only one member, Kyrgyzstan, was ranked as Partly Free. All of the other members received the label Not Free. Thomas Ambrosio correctly points out that SCO member states have consistently negative Freedom House records on human rights and civil liberties.<sup>7</sup> For the past several years, the international media has run numerous stories reporting on human rights abuses, missing or murdered reporters, and rigged elections about SCO members. But Ambrosio's work proves correlation, not causation. If an IO is the reflection of its member states, created to serve their purposes, why would its mere existence cause state governments to strip citizens of civil

<sup>4</sup> Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. 2002. Art. 11. <http://www.sectsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=69>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Articles 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Chung, C.P. 2006. "[China and the Institutionalization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#)" *Problems of Post-Communism*, 53(5): 3-14.

<sup>7</sup> Ambrosio, Thomas. 2008. "[Catching the 'Shanghai Spirit': How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia](#)" *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60(8): 1321-1344.

rights and violate human rights? I find it difficult to believe that the SCO, a young organization with a weak secretariat, makes dictatorships out of its member states. Instead, the organization acts as a shield for the member states, allowing them to continue on their chosen path without fearing outside intervention. For members, the forum is not merely a point of solidarity but an opportunity to prepare themselves against the expected onslaught of demands for democratization. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization specifically allows, and in fact encourages, policy coordination for the threat of secession and terrorism. These two “evils” can be read as any organized or disorganized movement that threatens the existing regime.

Fighting the three evils has become the SCO’s new mission, with the threat of secession heading the list. The color revolutions especially touched a nerve for the SCO member states. For instance, following the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Georgian Rose Revolution in 2005, Russian newspaper *Pravda* ran a story outlining the responses from the heads of SCO states. “The members of the SCO share the opinion about the so-called “color revolutions.” They believe that all of them are made “by request” as part of a dirty geopolitical scheme.”<sup>8</sup> Uzbekistan President Karimov accused “scriptwriters and directors” of orchestrating the color revolutions in Eastern Europe. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev stated that the color revolutions were merely a façade for the new leaders to secretly divide state assets among themselves. The Russian military also developed a program to deal with situations like a color revolution and countermeasures for putting down grassroots demonstrations with minimum fuss. This program, which was shared with other SCO states, called for coordinated responses among military, police, government officials and foreign allies.

The SCO heads of government raced to pledge their support for Uzbekistan President Karimov during the 2005 Andijon uprising. Protestors had gathered in the town to decry poor living conditions and corrupt government; the national security forces fired on the crowd without warning. The Uzbek government originally issued a statement blaming the deaths on a terrorist plot hatched by “Islamic extremist groups.”<sup>9</sup> Later, the Uzbek government admitted its part in the massacre, but still insisted that the security forces had only shot at bandits and terrorists. Both China and Russia issued separate statements of support for

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<sup>8</sup> *Pravda*. 2005 “Neither Those Who Place Orders for “Color Revolutions” Nor Those Involved in Implementation Give Any Thought to Possible Consequences.” [http://english.pravda.ru/main/18/88/354/15761\\_sco.html](http://english.pravda.ru/main/18/88/354/15761_sco.html).

<sup>9</sup> Chivers, C.J. and Ethan Wilensky-Lanford. 2005. “Uzbeks Say Troops Shot Recklessly at Protestors.” *New York Times*.

Karimov; the SCO passed a resolution calling for nations to deny Uzbek refugees asylum. Kyrgyzstan, despite its own recent and successful color revolution, closed its border with Uzbekistan. SCO Secretary-General Zhang Deguang gave several interviews to a variety of media sources after the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan. In all the interviews, Zhang mentioned the “disturbing events” and “dangerous excesses” in Kyrgyzstan as proof of the need for the Shanghai Organization Cooperation to quell extremist forces in the region. Zhang also warned that future color revolutions would “result in extremely dangerous political consequences, seriously affecting the whole region.”<sup>10</sup> The SCO has repeatedly linked the color revolutions with terrorism and extremism in its press statements and summit rhetoric.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states hold regular training exercises, usually in advance of the SCO summit meetings every year. Military exercises take place in one of the member states, usually in harsh terrain, and troops prepare to “...help [the] frontier guards to bloc or, possibly, to destroy large armed gangs attempting to cross the border of a SCO country.”<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov did not mention defending member states from foreign armies, but from “large armed gangs.” I should also point out that these joint training exercises are indicative of how united or divided the SCO member states are in any given year. Kyrgyz and Uzbek forces have been noticeably absent in some years (such as 2007), but the two most powerful states in the SCO, Russia and China, always participate in joint training exercises. Hansen draws the following conclusion regarding Russian and Chinese commitment to the SCO: the two states cannot support changes, which will make the Central Asian states more democratic than they [China and Russia] are. The spread of democracy in the region would undermine their bases of legitimacy at home, making it hard to preserve one party rule and “managed democracy” respectively.<sup>12</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Why do authoritarian states join IOs? Political scientists usually list objectives like decreasing transactions costs, creating a framework for future interactions between states and opening channels of communication.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview by Secretary-General Zhang Deguang to Chinese magazine “Zhonhuayingcai” 25 May 2005. [www.sectesco.org/html/00468.html](http://www.sectesco.org/html/00468.html)

<sup>11</sup> Lantratov, et al. 2006. “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Acquires a Military Character.” *Kommersant*. <http://www.kommersant.com/page.asp?idr=527&id=670100>.

<sup>12</sup> Hansen, Flemming S. 2008. “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization.” *Asian Affairs*, 39(2): 217-232.

The SCO provides this service, but it also provides something much more valuable to authoritarian governments: a viable alternative to IOs dominated by Western values. The United Nations, the World Trade Organization, NATO and the European Union facilitate the spread of political values such as civil rights under the law, representative government and human rights. The SCO facilitates authoritarian norms like rule of leaders over rule of law, consolidated state media, and police-enforced political stability. Alagappa writes that for many Central and East Asian governments, “political ideas such as democracy and human rights are presently viewed...as threats to survival because of the perceived adverse consequences for political stability and economic development and because of the challenges they pose to the political legitimacy of the incumbent elites.”<sup>13</sup> Authoritarian states seek to create deeper ties with other authoritarian states, not only to resolve border disputes or integrate economically, but also to reinforce and spread their common values.

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<sup>13</sup> Alagappa, Muthiah. 1998. “Asian Practice of Security: Key Features and Explanations,” in *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*. Ed. Muthiah Alagappa. Stanford: Stanford University Press.