



November 12, 2020

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Testbed for Chinese Power Projection

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Key Findings

- In recent years, Beijing has increased security cooperation with Central Asian countries under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to insulate itself from perceived threats in the region. Beijing is using the SCO to enhance its ability to project power beyond its borders.
- SCO military exercises offer a unique opportunity for the Chinese armed forces to practice air-ground combat operations in foreign countries, undertaking a range of operations including long-distance mobilization, counterterrorism missions, stability maintenance operations, and conventional warfare.
- Beijing has used the SCO to gain experience establishing the diplomatic relationships and arrangements necessary to support power projection. Beijing is already using its diplomatic relationships to facilitate an active military presence in Central Asia, such as through its military outpost in Tajikistan and counterterrorism patrols in the China-Tajikistan-Afghanistan border area. Beijing may be able to replicate these diplomatic and military efforts and expand them to other parts of the globe in the future.

Introduction

In 2001, Beijing established the SCO along with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan with the stated objectives of combatting terrorism and instability, promoting border security, strengthening political ties, and expanding economic cooperation.¹ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in particular feared that separatist movements in the minority-dominated autonomous region of Xinjiang could find support in the newly independent Central Asian states.² To shore up control in those areas, it made combating the perceived threats of “terrorism, separatism[,] and extremism” a central calling of the new organization.³ Since that time, the SCO has evolved into an organization Beijing views as increasingly critical to its security interests. China has used the organization to extend its defensive perimeter into Central Asia, carrying out military exercises and developing key diplomatic relationships that facilitate power projection. In recent years, Beijing has leveraged these ties to deploy its security forces into the region to patrol beyond China’s borders. In the future, the PLA is likely to build on its experience in the SCO to extend its defensive perimeter elsewhere in Asia.

This issue brief examines Beijing’s efforts to use the SCO as a strategic platform to protect its interests at home and abroad. It then assesses the power projection capabilities China is developing through the SCO, including through active deployments of Chinese security forces in the region, diplomatic arrangements facilitating the transit and care of Chinese forces, and military exercises. The issue brief concludes with an analysis of the implications of these activities for the United States.

A Strategic Platform for Securing China’s Interests

China established the SCO along with Russia and the four Central Asian countries to expand engagement on a variety of issues and to protect against cross-border threats.⁴ Central to Beijing’s motives were its fears of Central Asia becoming a conduit through which violence and unrest could spread to China, and particularly to its western Xinjiang region, home to the Uyghur ethnic group.⁵ Upon Beijing’s insistence, the SCO agreed from the beginning to oppose the so-called “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.⁶ Since that time, Beijing has come to view the organization as increasingly critical to its security interests.⁷ The group has also expanded its reach by granting membership to both India and Pakistan in 2017 and establishing relationships with other countries and regional organizations.⁸ (See Figure 1 below for a map of SCO countries.)

Evolution of the SCO: Border Settlement to Comprehensive Regional Framework

In 1996, the governments of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan founded the Shanghai Five, the predecessor of the SCO, to decrease military tensions and resolve border disputes left over after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[†] On April 26, 1996, the five countries signed the Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area, which identified Russia and the three Central Asian states as a single “Joint Party” and China itself as the other party.¹⁰ The text of the agreement covered regulation of military activities along China’s borders, with the stated goal of promoting “good-neighborliness and friendship.”¹¹ A second agreement in 1997 built upon the success of the first in strengthening mutual trust and laying a foundation for future cooperation.¹²

* Since its formation, the SCO has expanded to admit India and Pakistan as members (both joining in 2017) and to add four observer countries (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia) and six dialogue partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey). Furthermore, Turkmenistan and members of multiple international organizations, such as ASEAN and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) have attended SCO meetings as guests. China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (上海合作组织), May 2020. Translation. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gjhdqzz_681964/lhg_683094/jbqk_683096/t528036.shtml; *Xinhua*, Joint Communiqué of the 18th Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Members’ Heads of Government (Premier Council) (上海合作组织成员国政府首脑(总理)理事会第十八次会议联合公报), November 3, 2019. Translation. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2019-11/03/c_1125185470.htm; *Xinhua*, “Press Communiqué on the Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of State Council” (上海合作组织成员国元首理事会会议新闻公报), June 25, 2016. Translation. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-06/25/c_129088767.htm; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2015 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2015, 406.

† Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia and the newly independent Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan inherited portions of the highly militarized and unstable China-Soviet Union border, along with lingering disagreements over border demarcation that had helped fuel Sino-Soviet conflict. In 1992, the five countries launched nearly four years of talks to address the targeting of nuclear forces, reduction of troop levels, and joint demarcation for settlement of the new borders. Talks culminated in April 1996 with the signing of the so-called Shanghai Accord, a collection of 14 agreements on border issues. Among them, the Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area is cited as the formative agreement in the creation of the Shanghai Five and its successor, the SCO. Gregory Gleason, “Policy Dimensions of West Asian Borders after the Shanghai Accord,” *Asian Perspective* 25:1 (2001): 107–131, 107–108, 112, 116–117; United Nations General Assembly, “Agreement between the Russian Federation, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the People’s Republic of China on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area,” April 26, 1996; Shanghai Cooperation Organization, “Frequently Asked Questions,” 2015–2020. <http://eng.sectsc.org/docs/about/faq.html>.

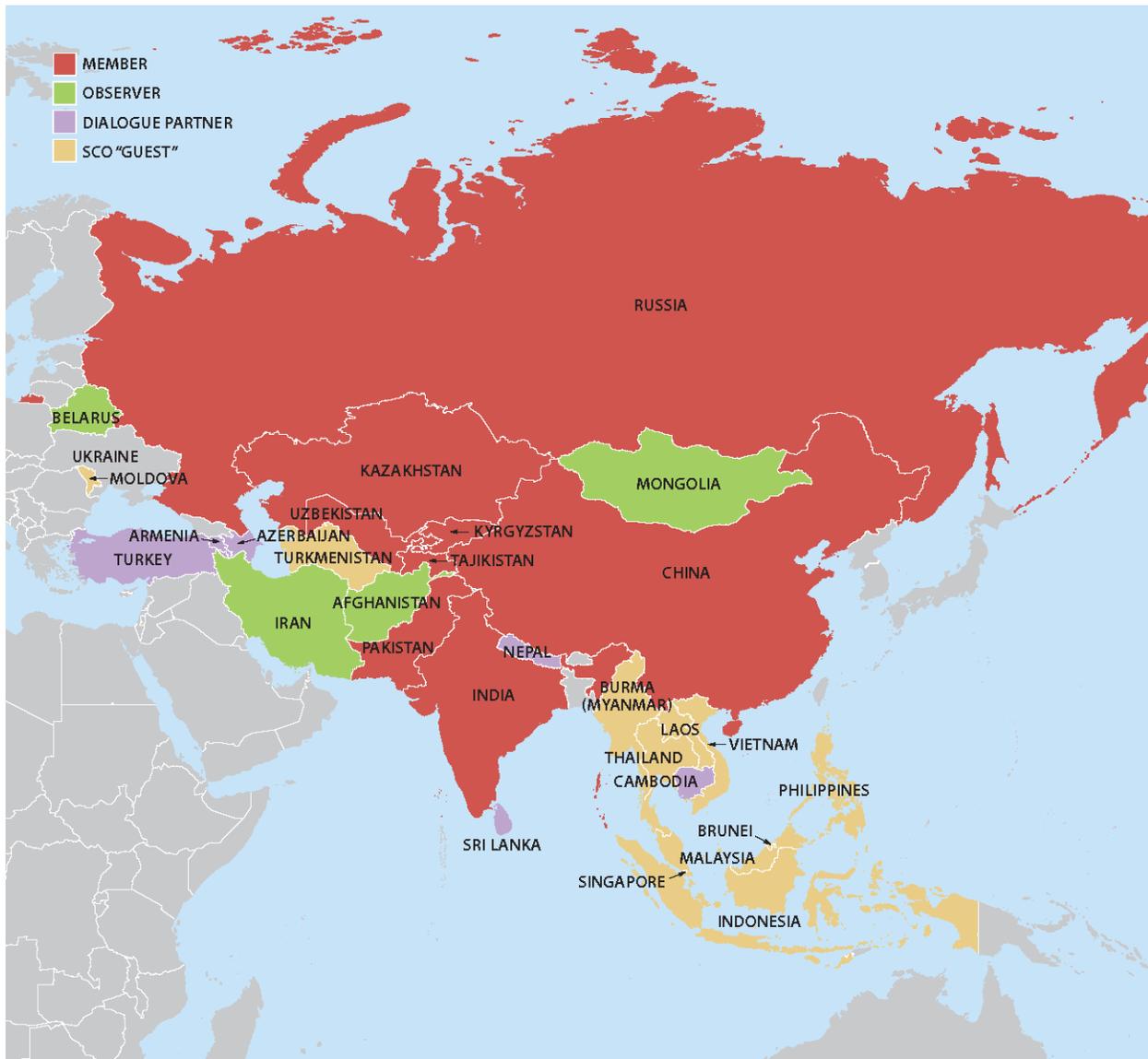
The creation of the SCO in 2001 marked both an expansion in membership and a broadening of the group's focus. On June 15, 2001, the Shanghai Five extended membership to Uzbekistan, and representatives of all six countries signed the Declaration of the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.¹³ The inclusion of Uzbekistan, the first country in the group that did not share a land border with China, signified an expansion beyond early goals of border stabilization. The same day, members of the new SCO signed a convention on counterterrorism and anti-extremism, solidifying China's concern with the so-called "three evil forces" as a priority for the new organization.¹⁴ Three months later, members further expanded the SCO's area of focus with an agreement on economic cooperation.¹⁵ The SCO charter, signed in July 2002, reaffirmed the foundational principles of the 1996 and 1997 Shanghai Five agreements while establishing the "security and stability of the region" and multifaceted cooperation in defense, politics, economics, and law enforcement as new objectives.¹⁶

Beijing's early interests in the SCO were varied, with a particular emphasis on defense against perceived cross-border threats. Counterterrorism, which featured prominently in the SCO charter, was a central concern that Beijing considered crucial for stability in China's western region.¹⁷ Other interests included enhanced military relations, access to economic growth opportunities and energy resources, and stronger political relationships with Central Asian states.¹⁸ Beijing saw the SCO as a useful framework for pursuing its interests in Central Asia without arousing a defensive reaction from Russia, which considered the post-Soviet states its sphere of influence.¹⁹

The evolution of the SCO established it as a topic of interest to the United States,^{*} although observers disagreed about its implications for U.S. interests.²⁰ Some U.S. observers considered the SCO a dangerous, nondemocratic competitor to NATO or the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe.²¹ While also expressing concerns about the SCO's potential to exclude the United States, then Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher also suggested in 2006 and 2008 that the organization could provide Central Asian states a beneficial tool for cooperation and an alternative to domination by Russia in areas such as energy.²² Some observers also predicted differences in perspective between members would prevent the SCO from challenging U.S. interests in a coordinated way, an opinion that has gained additional traction since the inclusion of South Asian rivals India and Pakistan in 2017.²³ U.S. policymakers have resolved to monitor the development of the SCO with an eye toward ensuring it does not become a vehicle for exclusion or domination in the region.²⁴

* Aware that participation in the group would imply endorsement, the United States did not seek membership in the SCO. It did, however, apply for observer status, which the SCO denied to the United States in 2005 but granted to Iran. This rejection fueled concern within the United States about the SCO's potential as an anti-Western or anti-American actor. Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, oral testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Is It Undermining U.S. Interests in Central Asia?* September 26, 2006, 8. <https://www.csee.gov/international-impact/events/shanghai-cooperation-organization-it-undermining-us-interests-central>; Ariel Cohen, written testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Role in the World – Is China a Responsible Stakeholder?* August 3, 2006, 11–12. <https://www.uscc.gov/hearings/hearing-chinas-role-world-china-responsible-stakeholder>; Yang Hongxi, "The Evolution of the U.S. Attitude towards the SCO," in Michael Fredholm, ed., *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Geopolitics: New Directions, Perspectives and Challenges*, Stockholm International Program for Central Asian Studies, 2013, 132–134. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:876570/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

Figure 1: Map of SCO Countries*



Source: Various.²⁵

Over the past two decades, Beijing’s fears of instability and terrorism have grown due to developments in China and abroad, and in response it has increased its cooperation with the SCO, among other measures. Coups and popular uprisings in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan beginning in 2005 sparked concern that these events could fuel instability, dissent, and subversion in China.²⁶ After a handful of violent incidents involving Uyghurs beginning in 2008, including clashes between Uyghur and Han residents in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, and a police crackdown in the city in 2009, Beijing increased its attention to what it believed were acts of Uyghur terrorism.²⁷

* Turkmenistan, members of ASEAN, and members of CIS are designated as “SCO Guests” because they have attended SCO meetings. *Xinhua*, “Joint Communiqué of the 18th Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Members’ Heads of Government (Premier) Council” (上海合作组织成员国政府首脑(总理)理事会第十八次会议联合公报), November 3, 2019. Translation. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2019-11/03/c_1125185470.htm; *Xinhua*, “Press Communiqué on the Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of State Council” (上海合作组织成员国元首理事会会议新闻公报), June 25, 2016. Translation. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-06/25/c_129088767.htm.

Chinese authorities responded to these perceived threats by greatly expanding their repression of the Uyghur minority.* Beginning in 2014, reports of Uyghurs joining the Syrian civil war and the stated intention of some to return to China to carry out acts of violence substantially deepened Beijing’s fears. It also perceived a rising threat of instability and violence spreading from Afghanistan to China due to the drawdown of U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan and the growing presence there of the Islamic State terrorist organization.²⁸ These latter developments, along with a 2016 terrorist attack on the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan,[†] also increased Beijing’s concern that militants connected to these foreign conflicts might target Chinese personnel and economic interests in Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Pakistan.²⁹

Beijing has consistently used the SCO as a mechanism to address these concerns. In 2002, Beijing helped to establish the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, the organization’s Uzbekistan-based clearinghouse for exchanging information on suspected terrorists and promoting common counterterrorism practices.³⁰ It is one of the two permanent bodies of the SCO, along with the Secretariat in Beijing.³¹ Beijing has sought, in the words of General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping, to “build a robust regional security barrier” through the SCO, extending China’s defensive perimeter farther to its west.³² It has pursued this objective by increasing intelligence sharing and enhancing the capabilities of the member countries’ law enforcement agencies to quell internal unrest and prevent terrorist and separatist activities. For example, since 2014, China’s Ministry of Public Security has trained SCO officials[‡] at its China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in areas such as counterterrorism and combatting transnational crime.³³ Military exercises between China and other SCO members, discussed in more detail below, also support capacity building for stability maintenance and counterterrorism.

Projecting Power into Central Asia

Beijing has used the SCO to build its capacity to project military force into Central Asia. Through diplomatic agreements with member countries, the Chinese government has been able to use the SCO to build a foundation for growing its power projection capabilities, with implications not only for a future crisis in Central Asia but also for conflicts in other regions. Central Asia’s proximity to China and the generally favorable views of Central Asian governments toward Beijing have made the region an ideal testing ground for China to practice carrying out counterterrorism as well as other more conventional military operations beyond its borders.³⁴ Under the auspices of the SCO and related agreements, Beijing has established arrangements for visiting forces participating in exercises; conducted small-scale, real-world operations; carried out a variety of bilateral and multilateral exercises; and

* Since 2017, the CCP has detained an estimated one to three million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslims in prison camps it claims are for “transformation through education” and vocational training. In fact, detainees are kept in extraordinarily poor conditions, forced to denounce their religious beliefs and culture, and subjected to brainwashing, torture, and forced labor. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2019 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2019, 88.

† During the attack, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device after ramming a car into the embassy. The driver reportedly was a Uyghur of unknown citizenship. Kyrgyz authorities alleged that the Kyrgyz leader of a militant group fighting alongside Uyghurs in Syria directed the attack. Catherine Putz, “3 Convicted for Chinese Embassy Attack in Bishkek,” *Diplomat*, June 30, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/3-convicted-for-chinese-embassy-attack-in-bishkek/>; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Kyrgyzstan Sentences Three over Chinese Embassy Attack,” June 28, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-china-embassy-jailed/28583623.html>; BBC, “Chinese Embassy Blast: Car Bomb Attack in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan,” August 30, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37217712>.

‡ The China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation claims to have trained over 300 officials from SCO member states from 2014 to 2018, an average of 67 officials per year. Dirk Van Der Kley, “China’s Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan,” in Nadège Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative*, National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019, 83–84. <https://www.nbr.org/publication/securing-the-belt-and-road-initiative-chinas-evolving-military-engagement-along-the-silk-roads/>.

dispatched its paramilitary police force, the People's Armed Police,* beyond China's borders to conduct patrols alongside military personnel from Central Asian states. From their earliest incarnation, SCO exercises have included a mix of military and these paramilitary forces, which have since been moved under the Central Military Commission as an auxiliary military force of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), in reforms that began in 2016. The People's Armed Police's participation in these earliest exercises was likely managed by the PLA and has acted as a precursor to the more robust force deployment by the PLA seen in exercises in later years. These activities have expanded China's presence and influence in Central Asia and have given Beijing experience it could use to deploy military force to other regions.

Diplomacy Lays Groundwork for Power Projection

Diplomatic engagement is a key component of China's development of power projection capabilities. Such engagement, particularly involving preparations for SCO exercises, has allowed China to gain important experience it could apply to future expeditionary operations.

The SCO's agreement on military exercises provides the essential legal authority for Beijing to deploy troops to Central Asia for military exercises. In 2007, the SCO signed the Agreement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Member States on Joint Military Exercises, which articulates the legal rights and responsibilities of a SCO member's military forces that are visiting another member country for an exercise.³⁵ Isaac B. Kardon, assistant professor at the U.S. Naval War College, noted in testimony to the Commission in 2019 that this agreement provides China with a model for at least a temporary status of forces agreement. He added that some Chinese scholars have pointed to this agreement as a template China can use for future basing agreements farther abroad.³⁶ Beijing may have established its People's Armed Police outpost and operations in Tajikistan under a similar agreement.

Beijing has also gained key experience through SCO exercises in negotiating the rights for overflight and the use of foreign airfields, the transit of a third country by land, and host country logistics support. All of these skills are essential building blocks for power projection. For example, prior to the PLA deployment to Tajikistan for a multilateral SCO exercise in 2012, China and Kyrgyzstan consulted on arrangements allowing the PLA to transit to the exercise through Kyrgyzstan by road—the first time the PLA had travelled to an exercise abroad by this mode of transport at such a distance, and the first time it had transited a third country while en route to an exercise.³⁷ Similarly, China has arranged for PLA aircraft to fly to and operate out of airfields in Central Asia or Russia during SCO exercises. In an example of a host country helping arrange logistical support to Chinese operations, Russian military aircraft appear to have helped transport supplies to PLA ground forces during a multilateral SCO exercise in Russia in 2018.³⁸ Agreements made in peacetime for training exercises do not guarantee that similar arrangements can be achieved during a crisis. Nonetheless, they provide Beijing with important experience in coordinating with third countries that is necessary for expeditionary operations. These developments also suggest some foreign capitals are growing more comfortable with Chinese forces being present in or passing through their territory—itsself a new phenomenon.

* The People's Armed Police was established in 1982 as the paramilitary wing of the CCP, with a primary responsibility for maintaining domestic stability. For most of its history, it was under the dual leadership of the State Council and the Central Military Commission, China's highest military authority. In 2017, the People's Armed Police was placed under the sole authority of the Central Military Commission. The People's Armed Police is not a regular force of the PLA, but a paramilitary force made up of demobilized light infantry divisions of the PLA Army and was then given additional internal security and policing missions and training and later moved entirely under a military chain of command. It retains its distinct organization, command, and training. For more information on the People's Armed Police, see Joel Wuthnow, "China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform," *China Strategic Perspectives* 14 (April 2019), 1–11.

Beijing Begins Real-World Operations in Central Asia

Building on its diplomatic initiatives with Central Asian states, China has taken new steps to extend its defensive perimeter by establishing a military outpost and conducting its first real-world military operations in Central Asia designed to project power.³⁹ Since 2016, the People's Armed Police, part of China's armed forces, has operated an outpost in Tajikistan near that country's borders with China and Afghanistan.* According to one Tajik observer, there could be up to hundreds of personnel operating out of the facility, which consists of about 20 lookout towers and buildings.⁴⁰ According to Dirk van der Kley, program director for policy research at the policy institute China Matters, from this facility, People's Armed Police personnel have conducted joint counterterrorism border patrols with the Afghan and Tajik armed forces.⁴¹ In particular, People's Armed Police troops have reportedly patrolled alongside Tajik and Afghan forces in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan and in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, which extends from the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan to Xinjiang.⁴² (See Figure 2 below for a map of the China-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Border Area.)

* Both China and Tajikistan deny the existence of the military outpost. In 2019, however, the *Washington Post* verified its existence through interviews of Chinese personnel and photography of the outpost. Gerry Shih, "Chinese Troops Sit on Afghanistan's Doorstep," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html; Dirk Van Der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan," in Nadège Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative*, National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019, 85. <https://www.nbr.org/publication/securing-the-belt-and-road-initiative-chinas-evolving-military-engagement-along-the-silk-roads/>.

Figure 2: Map of China-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Border Area



Source: Various.⁴³

The People’s Armed Police’s operations appear to be facilitated by the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), a four-country counterterrorism forum that was established around the time the operations were reported to have begun in 2016.⁴⁴ The QCCM, which China formed with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, enhanced coordination and intelligence sharing between the militaries of the four member countries through several agreements and regular high-level, multilateral meetings.⁴⁵ Prior to the formation of the QCCM, Beijing had been frustrated by the SCO’s inability to address its concerns that militants could flow from Afghanistan into China. Despite Beijing’s efforts, the SCO could not “deliver any direct or actionable security outcomes or tools to help manage security questions in Afghanistan,” according to Raffaello Pantucci, associate research fellow at the United Kingdom’s Royal United Services Institute.⁴⁶ It appears the QCCM, in contrast, has enabled Beijing to make progress in filling perceived gaps in border security in Central Asia through the deployment of the People’s Armed Police to the region.⁴⁷ Although the QCCM is not directly connected to the SCO, it is likely the relationships and

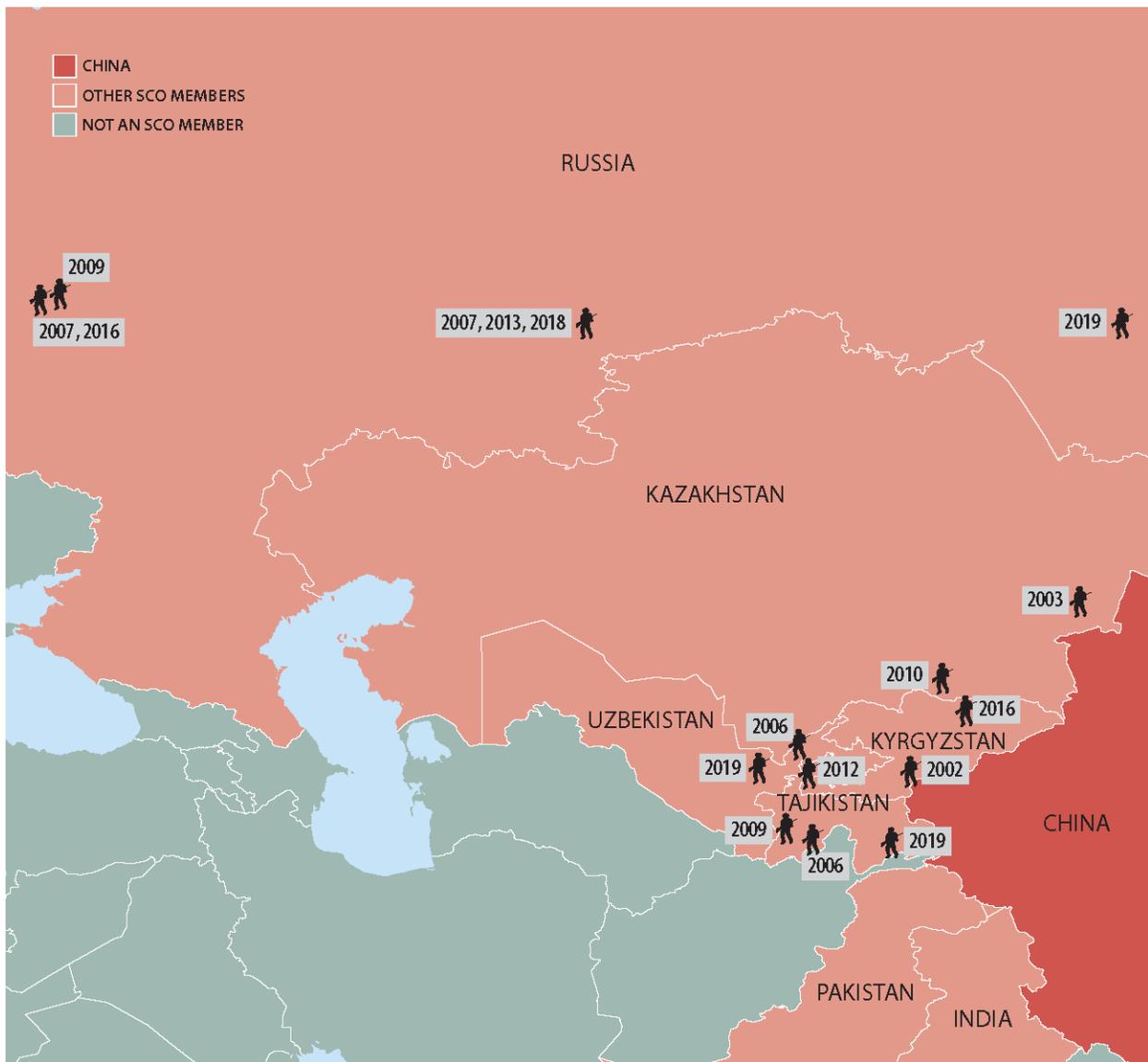
practices created through the SCO—which includes three QCCM signatories—set in place conditions that made this mechanism successful.

A Unique Training Opportunity for Expeditionary Operations

Beyond laying the groundwork for its patrolling across the China-Afghanistan-Tajikistan border area, Beijing's membership in the SCO also permits it to conduct exercises with SCO countries that provide unique opportunities for the Chinese armed forces to practice other types of expeditionary operations. China is unable to gain this experience through most of its other exercises and operations abroad.⁴⁸ In many cases, SCO exercises have provided the PLA its first opportunities to practice key power projection skills. These firsts include transporting entire units from multiple military services by rail and air, conducting cross-border airstrikes, and carrying out air assault operations from foreign airfields.

China has also significantly expanded the scale and scope of its deployments to Central Asia through SCO exercises. Beijing, which has been practicing power projection through SCO exercises for more than 15 years, has expanded its participation from the first SCO exercise in 2002 in which about 100 PLA special forces soldiers and other personnel practiced counterterrorism operations in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁹ Now, entire units from multiple services, at times numbering more than 1,000 personnel, conduct exercises abroad sometimes involving joint air-ground operations with direct application to conventional warfare. Driven by developments in the region and beyond, SCO exercises have involved a range of scenarios, including multinational forces combating terrorists, rescuing hostages, quelling social unrest, and fighting insurgents.⁵⁰ (See Figure 3 below for a map of SCO exercises outside China involving Chinese forces. See Appendix I for a table detailing each exercise).

Figure 3: Map of SCO Exercises outside China Involving Chinese Forces, 2002–2019*



Source: Various.⁵¹

Deploying across Borders by Rail, Road, and Air

One of the ways in which the SCO exercises enhance China’s power projection capability is by providing the Chinese armed forces with an opportunity to practice transporting and sustaining combat units beyond China’s borders. These exercises have involved up to 1,600 Chinese personnel—sufficient to support a multinational coalition or local security forces in counterinsurgency or conventional operations.⁵² In addition to its diplomatic utility, transport by rail and road has provided the PLA with valuable operational lessons in transporting and sustaining a land-based force abroad.

* Exercise locations are approximate.

The 2007 multilateral SCO exercise in Russia was the first time the PLA transported entire units and heavy equipment from multiple services across borders for an exercise, with multiple PLA Army units traveling by rail.⁵³ SCO exercises have required the PLA to change the track gauges on its railcars to match the railroad tracks of other countries and to build specialized platforms for loading tanks and other armored vehicles.⁵⁴ During the 2012 SCO exercise, the PLA traveled a long distance abroad by road for the first time, deploying dozens of military vehicles nearly 1,000 kilometers (km) (620 miles) to Tajikistan.⁵⁵ Road transport gives the PLA an additional option for force deployment when railroads or airfields are not available.

The PLA has also used fixed-wing transport aircraft and transport helicopters in SCO exercises, preparing the force for scenarios requiring faster and longer-range deployments than rail and road transport allow. During a 2006 exercise between China and Tajikistan, the PLA Air Force transported a special operations unit to Tajikistan—the first time it had transported a unit to an exercise abroad.⁵⁶ Since then, the PLA has sent transport aircraft and transport helicopters to two subsequent SCO exercises abroad.^{*} ⁵⁷ In the multilateral SCO exercise held in Russia in 2018, the PLA deployed two large transport aircraft, six medium transport aircraft, and four transport helicopters in what appears to be the largest PLA deployment of transport aircraft to a SCO exercise to date.⁵⁸ These aircraft could transport about 800 troops in total, approximately the size of a PLA battalion.⁵⁹ Although the PLA has executed many larger exercises within China, these cases provided the PLA with initial experience operating in airspace it does not control, coordinating with foreign authorities, and gaining familiarity with larger-scale deployment to foreign countries.

Commanding Expeditionary Operations

SCO exercises also serve as a key test bed for the role of the PLA's new theater commands in leading expeditionary operations.⁶⁰ Since 2016, when the PLA shifted from a military region to a theater command structure, it has used the new structure in at least two exercises with SCO countries.[†] For instance, the new Western Theater Command led the PLA's participation in a SCO exercise in Kyrgyzstan in 2016. This exercise appears to mark the first time a theater command led the PLA in an exercise outside China.⁶¹ Moreover, it indicated Beijing's intent to use theater commands for more than operations to defend China's territory and maritime periphery. After the Kyrgyzstan exercise, the commander of the Chinese contingent, a senior officer based in Xinjiang, stated that the theater command structure was "highly suited" to conducting expeditionary counterterrorism operations, praising its flat organizational structure and use of real-time video communications.⁶² In 2018, the Northern Theater Command led the PLA force that participated in Russia's "Vostok" exercise.⁶³ In both the 2016 and 2018 exercises, the PLA's theater commands deployed forward command posts to control Chinese forces abroad.⁶⁴

* These exercises include the multilateral SCO exercises in Russia in 2007 and in 2018.

† PLA theater commands are designed to enhance command and control by focusing on joint operational warfighting in specific regions, whereas the military regions were focused on force building. PLA theater commands were established as part of the broader military reorganization in 2016 to strengthen CCP control over the PLA and improve China's capability to carry out joint military operations. Kenneth W. Allen, Dennis J. Blasko, and John F. Corbett, Jr., "The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What Is Known, Unknown and Speculation (Part 1)," *Jamestown Foundation*, February 4, 2016. https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/The_PLA_s_New_Organizational_Structure_Part_1.pdf?x39443; Shannon Tiezzi, "It's Official: China's Military Has 5 New Theater Commands," *Diplomat*, February 2, 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/its-official-chinas-military-has-5-new-theater-commands/>.

Finding Distant Enemies, Mapping Foreign Battlefields

SCO exercises allow the PLA to practice finding and tracking adversaries and mapping the terrain of potential battlefields in unfamiliar environments. While the exercises' focus is to practice these skills on Central Asian terrain, China could apply the lessons learned from them on battlefields elsewhere.⁶⁵ Ground reconnaissance by PLA Army special operations forces and People's Armed Police reconnaissance units has been a part of SCO exercises since they first began.⁶⁶ China later began using airborne early warning and command aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), helicopters, and fighter aircraft for reconnaissance and surveillance as well. For instance, in the 2010 multilateral SCO exercise, the PLA deployed airborne early warning and command aircraft as part of an integrated air battle group alongside bombers, fighters, and tanker aircraft.⁶⁷ SCO exercises also have occasionally included satellite and electronic reconnaissance and surveillance.⁶⁸ UAV, satellite, and electronic reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities give Beijing lower-profile, nonkinetic military options for supporting Chinese or local forces in a SCO country, but could just as easily apply to supporting military or security forces in other Belt and Road Initiative countries.

Practicing Cross-Border Counterterrorism

Beijing also uses SCO exercises to improve PLA special operations forces' training for a range of long-distance, cross-border counterterrorism operations. China's special operators still lack the aircraft necessary for long-range operations, mostly train for short-range missions, and are organized to operate in proximity to a large ground force division or brigade. Through SCO exercises, however, PLA special forces are beginning to move toward a longer-range capability more in line with U.S. and Russian special forces.⁶⁹ These exercises include urban warfare and hostage rescues, with special operations forces travelling by helicopter, armored vehicles, or transport aircraft.^{* 70} One of the first SCO exercises, held in 2003, featured PLA special operators rescuing hostages aboard a hijacked airplane in Kazakhstan, and PLA special forces have practiced hostage rescues in at least two SCO exercises outside China since then.⁷¹ Recently, PLA special operators captured simulated terrorists in the 2018 multilateral SCO exercise in Russia.⁷² China also has begun to use armed UAVs for strikes in support of special operations forces in SCO exercises, doing so for the first time in the 2014 multilateral exercise in China.⁷³ In 2019, PLA special forces simulated a counterterrorism exercise with their Tajik counterparts that used Chinese UAVs to reconnoiter the battlefield and surveil the simulated terrorists' hideout. As other terrorists were coming to provide support, UAVs informed commanders of their approach; the commanders then dispatched combat aircraft and artillery units to attack them.⁷⁴

More broadly, the PLA places special importance on the SCO as a platform for future expeditionary counterterrorism operations. The 2015 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, an authoritative textbook published by China's National Defense University, indicates China's counterterrorism operations abroad will increase as "the SCO's counterterrorism mechanism strengthens."⁷⁵ According to Article 71 of China's 2015 counterterrorism law, the Chinese government can "send personnel abroad on counterterrorism missions as approved by the Central Military Commission."⁷⁶ Although the article does not specify the types of activities the law considers to be counterterrorism, according to Human Rights Watch China's vague and open-ended definition of "terrorism" raises the possibility that Beijing could use the law as a pretext to target real or perceived critics of the CCP residing in foreign countries.⁷⁷

* The PLA Army has focused in recent years on developing a "new-type army," which is smaller, more mobile, and suited for deployments abroad to protect China's global interests. To do so, it has focused on developing its special operations forces, helicopters, and light mechanized capabilities. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2018 Annual Report to Congress*, 2018, 222.

The People's Armed Police also seeks a role in counterterrorism operations abroad, and SCO exercises allow the force to train for such operations. The People's Armed Police has participated in four multilateral and bilateral SCO exercises. Most recently, in a 2019 exercise, the People's Armed Police and a Russian special operations force practiced countering a train hijacking, urban warfare, and air-ground assault.⁷⁸ Once exclusively focused on responding to domestic contingencies, People's Armed Police leadership now seek to position the force on the frontline of counterterrorism operations outside China. In 2018, the People's Armed Police's intelligence chief Zhang Xiaoqi stated the force must be "a pioneering force to protect overseas interests and an elite force for universal fighting."⁷⁹

Ground and Air Forces Training for Conventional Warfare Abroad

Finally, SCO exercises provide the PLA with unique opportunities to train for conventional warfare in foreign countries using both heavy equipment and fixed-wing combat aircraft. Scenarios in these exercises, despite being described as "counterterrorism" or other unconventional operations, sometimes involve PLA Army tanks and artillery surrounding and destroying militant camps and retaking territory seized by militants in conventional land operations, even if limited in scope.⁸⁰ For instance, during a 2018 exercise in Russia, PLA tanks were among SCO multinational forces that surrounded and took control of a village seized by simulated Islamist militants.⁸¹

The PLA is also using SCO exercises to practice air-ground operations. During these exercises, the PLA has routinely practiced conducting air strikes with bombers and fighters in support of ground troops, including two instances of long-range, cross-border bombing operations launched from within China, a unique opportunity that China does not have outside its exercises with SCO countries. In a 2010 SCO exercise, PLA bombers and fighters supported by aerial refueling attacked a simulated enemy in Kazakhstan after taking off from China, the first time the PLA had practiced cross-border bombing in an exercise abroad.⁸² PLA fixed-wing aircraft practiced cross-border air strikes again in 2016 in the multilateral SCO exercise in Kyrgyzstan.⁸³ Many SCO exercises have involved PLA aircraft conducting strikes on terrorist camps or territory seized by militants in tandem with an assault by SCO ground forces.⁸⁴

Learning from Russian and Central Asian Militaries

SCO exercises provide an opportunity for the Chinese armed forces to learn from the Russian military's recent expeditionary and other combat experience. In particular, these interactions give the PLA access to insights from Russian operations in Syria, Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia's Northern Caucasus region. In an interview following the 2016 multilateral SCO exercise, the commander of the Chinese contingent said the Russian military's combat experience provided valuable lessons for the PLA's "operational guidance, thinking, and methods" for joint counterterrorism operations.⁸⁵ Senior Chinese officers who participated in the bilateral China-Russia SCO exercise held in 2009 described valuable lessons pertaining to urban warfare and helicopter operations they learned from the Russian participants.⁸⁶

The PLA has also almost certainly been exposed to Russian and U.S. military knowhow and skills through their exchanges with Central Asian militaries. Central Asian militaries have extensive ties to the Russian military through

training, arms sales, and the presence of Russian military bases in several Central Asian countries.*⁸⁷ All Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—have received counterterrorism training and assistance from the United States in the last ten years.⁸⁸

Implications for the United States

Through the SCO, China is developing diplomatic relationships and expeditionary capabilities it could use to support power projection beyond its borders. It already appears to have begun using these relationships and skills for small-scale power projection in Central Asia, albeit in the form of patrols by the People’s Armed Police. Moreover, Beijing could use this experience to conduct a growing range of operations farther beyond China’s borders. If conducted in line with international norms and best practices, operations such as counterterrorism or the evacuation of foreign civilians could contribute to international security and align with the interests of the United States. These same operations carried out in a competitive context, however, could easily result in adverse impacts to U.S. interests. Chinese expeditionary operations and military presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan may present operational challenges for the U.S. military. In the past, the PLA has refused to coordinate with and actively interfered in U.S. operations when operating in close proximity.⁸⁹ In 2015, for instance, the PLA was unwilling to coordinate with the U.S. military during the international response to a major earthquake in Nepal, which may have contributed to the avoidable loss of some of the earthquake’s victims’ lives.⁹⁰ U.S. and PLA counterterrorism operations targeting the same terrorist organization could adversely affect U.S. operations in a similar manner.

Power projection capabilities developed through the SCO could also set the foundation for Chinese military operations beyond Central Asia and Afghanistan.⁹¹ Through its SCO exercises, Beijing has gained experience moving troops and heavy equipment by rail and air thousands of miles outside China’s borders. Beijing could use the diplomatic and military skills learned from exercises for deployments to countries farther from China, such as in Africa, where it has an established diplomatic foothold and a growing military presence.⁹² Such deployments could constrain the ability of the U.S. armed forces to respond to global crises and present the United States with the prospect of coming into contact with Chinese military forces operating beyond the Indo-Pacific region.

Moreover, there is significant risk that Beijing may be able to leverage its relationships with SCO countries to limit the ability of U.S. armed forces to operate in Central Asia. At its 2005 summit, the SCO issued a statement calling for a timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Pressure from China and Russia likely contributed to Uzbekistan’s decision later that year to evict the United States from Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, which the United States used to support operations in Afghanistan.⁹³ Despite the fact that Central Asian states desire choices and do not want to be overly reliant on either Chinese or Russian security assistance, U.S. security assistance for countries other than Afghanistan has fallen precipitously from a high of \$497 million in 2012 to \$41 million in 2020—a roughly 92 percent drop.⁹⁴ As the United States continues to draw down its forces from Afghanistan, China will be likely to continue to eclipse U.S. influence in the region. This trend is already apparent in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where a 2016 survey showed a significant percentage of respondents believing

* Russia has military bases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and is the primary source of military equipment and training for Central Asian countries. Dmitry Gorenburg, “External Support for Central Asian Military and Security Forces,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, January 2014, 26.

China already held more influence than the United States in Asia, with an even greater percentage expecting China's influence to continue growing at the expense of the United States.*⁹⁵

According to the *U.S. Strategy for Central Asia* released by the U.S. Department of State in February 2020, Washington's primary strategic interest for the region lies in promoting the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian states, while additional interests include supporting counterterrorism in the region, stability in Afghanistan, the rule of law, and human rights.⁹⁶ These goals are often in contrast with Chinese activities in Central Asia. For instance, China's 2019 defense white paper describes the SCO as dedicated to building a "community of common human destiny"—a term used to link the group with the CCP's goal of building a Sinocentric global order.⁹⁷ China may have leveraged its influence to infringe on the sovereignty of at least one Central Asian state. In 2010, Tajikistan agreed to cede over 1,158 square km (447 square miles) of land claimed by China in the Pamir Mountains, reportedly in exchange for an undisclosed amount of debt forgiveness.[†]⁹⁸ Tajikistan, which has since allowed the Chinese government to operate a military outpost on its territory, remains heavily indebted to China.⁹⁹

Beijing's use of the SCO to target opponents of the Chinese government similarly runs counter to U.S. interests. In 2010, for example, Chinese security services used SCO channels to solicit the Kyrgyz government to interrupt a film festival in Kyrgyzstan that a Chinese Uyghur human rights activist was planning to attend.¹⁰⁰ At Beijing's request, Kyrgyz authorities subsequently stopped the screening of a film made by the Uyghur activist.¹⁰¹ From these actions, it is clear China intends to continue using the SCO to advance its goals, undermining democratic governance, human rights, and state sovereignty in the process.

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This report is the product of professional research performed by the staff of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and was prepared at the request of the Commission to support its deliberations. Posting of the report to the Commission's website is intended to promote greater public understanding of the issues addressed by the Commission in its ongoing assessment of U.S.-China economic relations and their implications for U.S. security, as mandated by Public Law 106-398 and Public Law 113-291. However, it does not necessarily imply an endorsement by the Commission, any individual Commissioner, or the Commission's other professional staff, of the views or conclusions expressed in this staff research report.

* According to the 2016 survey, when asked which country currently held the most influence in Asia, 8.8 percent of Kyrgyz respondents named the United States and 34.1 percent named China (43.2 percent named Russia). Of Kazakh respondents, 8.2 percent named the United States and 65.8 percent named China (19.2 percent named Russia). When asked which country would be most influential in ten years, 4.7 percent of Kyrgyz respondents named the United States and 47.6 percent named China (24.7 percent named Russia). Responding to the same question, 5.5 percent of Kazakhs surveyed named the United States, compared to 67.1 percent naming China (16.4 percent named Russia). Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Soledad Jimenez-Tovar, "China in Central Asia: Local Perceptions from Future Elites," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 3:3 (2017): 436.

† According to the UN Development Program, Tajikistan owed China roughly \$1 billion in 2009–2010. Although it has not been clearly proven that Tajikistan ceded the land in exchange for debt relief, evidence strongly suggests China leveraged its economic influence over Tajikistan in the negotiations. More recently, in July 2020 Chinese state media began republishing an article by Chinese historian Cho Yao Lu arguing that the entire Pamir region belongs to China. According to Paul Goble, an analyst at the Jamestown Foundation, the article could signal that the Chinese government sees the 2010 agreement as "only the first step to a broader rectification [of the border dispute] in the PRC's favor." Paul Goble, "Beijing Implies Tajikistan's Pamir Region Should Be Returned to China," *Jamestown Foundation*, July 30, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/beijing-implies-tajikistans-pamir-region-should-be-returned-to-china/>; UN Development Program, "Millennium Development Goals: Tajikistan Progress Report," 2010, 123.

Appendix: Table of SCO Exercises outside China Involving Chinese Forces, 2002–2019

Name	Host country	Total Chinese Personnel	Chinese Systems and Units, if Available	Other Known Participants	Additional Details
Exercise-01	Kyrgyzstan	Around 100	Special operations forces, border troops	Unknown	First counterterrorism exercise held by SCO members.
Coalition-2003	Kazakhstan	Up to 700	Infantry, artillery, People's Armed Police personnel, and support forces	Russia, Kyrgyzstan	Counterterrorism exercises included stopping terrorist vehicles, gaining control of hijacked aircraft, helicopter landings, building climbing, clearing occupied buildings, and hostage rescue.
East Antiterror-2006	Uzbekistan	Unknown	Special operations forces	Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan (all observation personnel only)	Focused on a scenario in which terrorists were targeting national infrastructure. Participants established an operational headquarters, intervened against simulated terrorist attacks on high-risk targets, and conducted hostage rescue.
Coordination-2006	Tajikistan	150	Special operations forces, fixed-wing transport aircraft, helicopters	Unknown	Included transport to Tajikistan by the PLA Air Force, establishment of a joint command post, fire strikes, target encirclement, and hostage rescue.

Cooperation-2007	Russia	Unknown	People's Armed Police commando unit, transport aircraft	Unknown	Designed to strengthen relations between Chinese and Russian internal defense forces and improve both sides' counterterrorism capabilities. Formal exercises proceeded in three stages: joint operations planning, deployment, and joint implementation. Other activities included familiarization with the other forces' equipment.
Peace Mission-2007	Russia	1,600	Eight fighter-bombers, 32 helicopters, fixed-wing transport aircraft, and army, air force, and integrated support groups	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	Entailed long-distance transport of troops to Russia by air and rail. First deployment of PLA combined arms groups abroad. Exercise simulated the response to another state's request for intervention to prevent an international terrorist group from taking control of the state. Included conventional air-ground offensive maneuvers and coordinated airstrikes.
Nurak-Antiterror-2009	Tajikistan	Unknown	Unknown	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan	Russian and Tajik forces conducted the bulk of the exercise while Chinese forces mainly provided support.

Bogorodsk Disaster Relief Exercise (Held in 2009)	Russia	20	China International Search and Rescue Team (including PLA personnel) and China Emergency Fire Rescue Team (People's Armed Police personnel)	Kazakhstan, Tajikistan	Disaster relief exercise. Details unknown.
Peace Mission-2010	Kazakhstan	1,000	Two fighters; four bombers; tanker aircraft, airborne early warning and command aircraft; tanks; and ground force, air force, and logistics combat groups	Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan	Fighter and bomber aircraft took off from within China to launch long-distance cross-border strikes into Kazakhstan. Fighters and bombers supported by early warning aircraft and refueled by in-air tankers (even though the target was located within the aircrafts' range).
Peace Mission-2012	Tajikistan	369	Six helicopters, a motorized infantry company, an artillery squad, and communications and engineering vehicles	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia	Large-scale military operations with heavy equipment. Included a motorized infantry company and an artillery unit.
Peace Mission-2013	Russia	600	Fighter-bombers; helicopters; tanks; self-propelled guns; and army, air force, and logistics groups	Unknown	Chinese forces traveled 4,050 km (2,517 miles) by air and rail to Russia. Proceeded in three phases: troop deployment, planning operations, and campaign exercises. Exercises intended to promote armed forces' "effective use in real combat situations."
Cooperation-2016	Russia	100	Two People's Armed Police commando units, helicopters, and armored vehicles	Unknown	Two-week joint counterterrorism training including integrated tactical

					exercises, helicopter drops and aerial transfer, building climbing, unarmed hand-to-hand combat training, police dog training, familiarization with other forces' equipment, and other exchanges between forces.
Peace Mission-2016	Kyrgyzstan	270	Unknown fixed-wing combat aircraft, helicopters, artillery, and armored vehicles	Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan	Combat training focused on surrounding and destroying enemy targets through the coordination of ground operations and air support, as well as air-to-ground precision strikes. Fighters took off from Chinese territory and traveled 400 km (249 miles) to conduct airstrikes before returning to base. Exercise occurred in a maneuvering area of 510 km (317 miles). First exercise abroad for the newly established Western Theater Command.
Peace Mission-2018	Russia	743	Special operations forces, tanks, two fighters, four fighter-bombers, four attack helicopters, eight fixed-wing transport aircraft, and four transport helicopters	Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (observation personnel only), Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan	Large-scale exercise in which Russia shared experience gained through operations in Syria. Operations included battlefield reconnaissance and surveillance, aerial cover of ground forces moving along a route, and joint

					strikes. Exercises proceeded in three stages: strategic consultation, joint campaign preparation, and campaign implementation.
Cooperation-2019	Uzbekistan	Unknown	People's Armed Police personnel	Unknown	Two-week counterterrorism training between the People's Armed Police and Uzbek National Guard with the goal of deepening interactions between the two countries' forces. Included individual, group, and platoon training and activities such as hand-to-hand combat training, building climbing, and motorcycle training.
Cooperation-2019	Tajikistan	Unknown	Special operations forces, fighters, fighter-bombers, UAVs	Unknown	Operations designed to practice integrated air-ground control, including unmanned battlefield reconnaissance and surveillance, air transport, coordinated frontal assaults, sniper attacks under joint fire cover, precision air strikes, and use of anti-aircraft weapons.
Cooperation-2019	Russia	Unknown	People's Armed Police commando unit	Unknown	Eleven-day joint counterterrorism training between the People's Armed Police and Russian National Guard aimed at improving combat skills and deepening cooperation. Included

					tactical coordination training, coordinated air-to-ground strikes, training for gaining control of hijacked trains, and search and suppression operations. Also included familiarization with the other forces' equipment, seminars, and other exchanges.
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Source: Various.¹⁰²

Endnotes

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