

THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND OSCE: ORGANIZATIONAL EFFORTS VS COVID-19 IN CENTRAL ASIA

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COVID-19 has proven to be a cunning foe. Its effects have been felt at different times and, depending on measures taken and the situation on the ground, it has produced different outcomes. Months after the first outbreak came to light, we are still taking stock of the initial impact of COVID-19—and this is ignoring the fact that the shockwaves it has caused are yet to be fully felt. The unfortunate truth is that it may be some years yet before everything has settled. What is clear now at least is, while lockdowns and the closure of national borders may solve the issue on a local level, to clamp down on COVID-19 more fully, unified, and perhaps even regional responses are necessary. The EU, the poster boy for regional integration, is often used as an example, but there are certainly other actors worthy of consideration. Central Asia (CA) is one of these regions, despite being not as central in the mind's eye of many analysts.



**CENTRAL ASIA
PROGRAM**

With that being said, there are many actors and organizations that work in Central Asia. Generally speaking, many of these are devoted to security and military matters. While certainly important, those that are strictly military-focused, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), will be set aside in the context of this paper for the simple fact that they are purely military alliances. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), too, has proven to be largely quiet on COVID-19. While there are some smaller actors, that leaves us with two organizations that are worth examining: the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The two are interesting because, while both are involved in Central Asia, they also branch out to other regions. Similarly, none of them are purely Central Asian organizations per se: the OSCE has a strong emphasis on the European and Western perspective, and the SCO is a China-led organization.

How are these organizations facing up to the pandemic?¹ And, what do their responses to the pandemic say about their governing actors' influence in the region?²

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The SCO is, in the words of the most recent EU policy paper on it, "[certainly one of the less known regional organizations worldwide.](#)" Despite this, the SCO is heavily involved in Central Asia and, in fact, stretches beyond it, with various members, such as the dominant two, namely, China and Russia, but also India, Pakistan, and aspirants such as Iran. Beginning with a border demarcation focus, the SCO has since gone from being a primarily anti-terrorist organization with significant but not remarkable military aspects,³ to one which has become increasingly economy-focused. This has become more pronounced as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a point of emphasis at the yearly Summit meetings of the SCO ([2015](#), [2016](#), [2017](#), [2018](#), and [2019](#)).

The SCO has also begun to branch out into other spheres, reflecting its varied and, at times, convoluted foci. Examples include the previously-mentioned security issues, connectivity (in both the [transport](#) and [digital](#) senses of the word, with an emphasis on [post-COVID economic discussions](#)), cultural exchange efforts (such as the [promotion of holidays, children's art](#), which aims to "share their [children's] views on the spread of the coronavirus and the struggle against it"), and [tourism](#), as well as support for education and the [fostering of closer ties between universities](#) in the SCO sphere even [during the pandemic](#). This varied approach to an international organization, in contrast to a focused type, can be both a hinderance and a strength; it can mean both diversification and dilution, or a pragmatic evolution. This varied approach has continued to blossom as—very serendipitously considering the present circumstances—the SCO and its member states adopted a statement regarding their [Joint Efforts against Epidemics](#) in 2018.

This proved fortuitous as, following in the wake of China's active post-COVID diplomacy, the SCO has also demonstrated a marked interest in at least appearing to provide support to its members. The SCO's first comments regarding COVID-19 were lodged on [January 31](#), with the SCO releasing

¹ This paper was submitted in August 2020, and so reflects data received up until that point.

² While these organizations are, of course, made up of states, and are loosely institutionalized in comparison to, for example, the EU, actions on a state-by-state level will not necessarily be the focus of this article, and instead, a top down approach will be used.

³ See Marcel De Haas, "War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 3 (2016): 378–406.

an official statement on [February 14](#). The statement itself was largely one of support by the members for China (as with [this one made in March](#)). From then onwards, there has been a steady stream of SCO statements regarding COVID-19 that are often somewhat congratulatory in nature. For example, the aforementioned press release in reaffirming commitments to one another, [meetings](#) between the SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov and the former OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger, [meetings of health officials](#) from the SCO space, and other initiatives.

However, despite this active and visible media posture, the SCO itself has largely not donated aid itself, or procured experts and sent them on its behalf. Instead, it is continuing to act as it always has up until recently, i.e., a forum for its member states to popularize their actions, as well as to help foster bilateral agreements between them.

Could the SCO change its approach? The organization has recently added an [intriguing note](#) to their website, worth quoting in full:

Currently the special working group on healthcare is conducting selection of projects aimed to set up a structure in the SCO framework similar to the World Health Organisation (the working title is "SCO WHO") which would work in the interest of improving medical services in the SCO member states, developing disease-prevention capabilities, and satisfying the needs of population in high-tech medical treatments.

This obviously demonstrates a great deal of ambition, but also raises two questions. The first of these questions is related to capacity, and whether the SCO even has the aptitude to create an institution of this magnitude.⁴ The second question is rather simple on the surface, but raises others: why would the SCO want to do this? Is the WHO insufficient for the SCO sphere, and therefore member states believe that a more regionally focused health organization is necessary?

Furthermore, the SCO does not appear to have any rapid response force or any formal mechanisms to deal with emergencies like this, though there were [discussions to create one](#). This is especially disappointing considering the fact that the SCO previously mentioned in its 2018 Statement for “Joint Efforts Against the Threat of Epidemics in the SCO Space” that it recognized the threat—and yet the amount of direct, attributable aid has so far been minimal. These summits are of great importance since the SCO is one of the few regional organizations in the world that attracts the leaders of so many countries, many of which are distinctly outside the Western realm. The Summits are also important as they are often useful fora to propagate large scale projects or visions. The next one has been confirmed to occur in an online format in November, [according to Russian President Vladimir Putin](#). As the BRICS Summit will occur on [November 17](#), it is probable that the SCO Summit will also be held around that time. With months of dealing with the pandemic already, one can guess COVID-19 will take center stage in the member states’ deliberations.

Indeed, there are a number of initiatives that the SCO has brought forth that could perhaps be of use in the current situation. The [SCO Interbank Consortium](#), for example, primarily functions as a way to develop infrastructure, technology, and loans to stimulate these areas, as well as to encourage trade; it could also provide emergency funds across borders to deal with the economic aftershocks of COVID-19, and it in fact had a [conference discussing these issues](#). In addition, if economic problems linked to the slowdown of global trade continue to rise, then the resultant

⁴ Or perhaps it would be more apt to ask whether China and Russia have the ability to do so.

increase in unemployment could lead to a spike in radicalization. This point was made by the SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov at [a joint conference held with the United Nations \(UN\), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\), and other bodies](#). He stated that terrorist groups could take advantage of the instability caused by the current socio-economic crisis. Here, the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), [which collaborates with the International Criminal Police Organization \(INTERPOL\)](#), could also prove relevant; the [UN also acknowledges](#) its effectiveness.

To understand the SCO as a forum and amplifier for the policies of member states is not to diminish its importance as a regional actor. For example, despite the fact that aid in the form of equipment from the SCO seems rather limited, the organization has successfully coordinated multiple meetings of health experts, as mentioned before. They have also published [a report](#) on the actions they took to fight the pandemic. The SCO also leverages its influence as a platform to give more exposure to Chinese companies such as [Alibaba](#), and developing connections between [Alibaba and the SCO Youth Group](#) (or SCOLAR). What is also clear is the close association the SCO is trying to encourage [with the UN](#) as a way to secure its own legitimacy.

Therefore, the SCO's goals can perhaps be best understood as enhancing the ability of its member states to resolve the pandemic for themselves. This differs with how multilateral organizations are assumed to deal with problems, i.e., through their own institutions, and through aid given directly by themselves. [The UN](#) falls under this category. Viewed in this light, the SCO is, in fact, performing as it is set out to be. Enhancing dialogue by increasing the number of meetings, the SCO is, in theory, empowering member states. There are exceptions, of course, as with [Tajikistan](#) until it [could not hide the presence of the pandemic any longer](#).

However, the most useful feature of the SCO in the pandemic period may be its public outreach, and its efforts to shape the debate regarding COVID-19. Suffice it to say, the SCO figures into how Beijing is reaching out to other countries, as it is also being used as a tool to boost the profile of China. For example, while ostensibly about how to combat COVID-19, the [most recent webinar](#) the SCO organized (August 11, 2020), with experts across the region, was mostly related to public diplomacy and expounding a sense of community and shared destiny.⁵ Thus the webinar seemed to be more focused on countering negative media coverage rather than the pandemic itself.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

This paper will now look at the actions of the OSCE regarding the pandemic. To summarize, the OSCE started cold, became hot, and then, for an extended period, went completely silent on the issue.

The generally accepted date for the official, or recognized, outbreak of COVID-19 was in late December 2019 and early January 2020. While the OSCE does not, in its extensive breadth of activities, claim to be directly involved in pandemic-related issues, such issues most certainly have effects on its professed realm of responsibilities, especially on security matters. Therefore, the fact that the OSCE only began to deal with COVID officially from [March 16–17, 2020](#) is troubling. This is

⁵ The webinar itself was off the record and is not posted on common video sites.

particularly concerning because it was only when [Austria](#), where the OSCE Secretariat is located, began its [own lockdowns](#), that the OSCE sprang into action.

From this point forward, the OSCE had a fairly regular stream of aid-related offerings to Central Asia, such as to Tajikistan (in [April](#) and [August](#)), Kyrgyzstan ([April](#)), and twice to Uzbekistan (in [mid- and late April](#)). There seems to have been a clear push for action in April. These aid packages were in the form of either protective equipment, such as face masks or disinfectants. Understandably for an organization with as widespread a membership as the OSCE, these activities were interspersed with offerings to other states in Europe, such as [Albania](#) and [Montenegro](#). Furthermore, the OSCE's COVID-19 efforts were spread between other emphases, such as [minority](#) and [gender rights](#), as well as observing the conflict zones in [Ukraine](#).

The good news regarding the OSCE's COVID-19 countermeasures ends here. News relating to COVID-19, and any measures the OSCE was taking, suddenly ended on May 29 with the aforementioned delivery to Albania. This silence continues until August 4, referred to earlier in the paper, when the OSCE sent medical deliveries to Tajikistan. This is a gap of more than two months. The simplest explanation for this gap is that the OSCE was not involved with any new initiatives during this period, nor did it have any news to report regarding its activities. Having already dispersed aid to various states, perhaps the OSCE had been in the middle of restocking or re-adjusting its stance on COVID-19.

This explanation does not adequately deal with *why* the OSCE was quiet for more than two months on the subject. While the earlier efforts were laudable, why would things stop so suddenly? Furthermore, if the explanation lies with the fact that the OSCE does not deal with pandemics, why send equipment and create dialogue in the first place? Viewed in this way, the breakdown in effort that the OSCE put forth could be demonstrative of its generally overstretched nature.

Furthermore, the OSCE is devoted to human security and related causes; COVID-19 has caused massive issues, in, for example, the [return of Central Asian migrant workers](#) from Russia. These migrants are [especially vulnerable](#) to the economic problems brought on by the pandemic, and which the UN rightly sees as [considerable](#). A failure to stay at least visible, and hopefully also relevant, in supporting segments of the population in need is a misstep that may have consequences for the OSCE image in the region.

Finally, the pandemic period is most assuredly not a time to be having [a succession crisis](#) at the OSCE. This crisis officially began on July 18 but will now extend [until December 2020](#). Particularly damaging is the fact that it is not just the most senior Secretary General position that is left open, [but also three others](#), which means that all of the OSCE's senior leadership is gone. While the everyday machinery of the organization is certainly moving forward, with no leadership to take charge and provide direction during this turbulent time, the OSCE is not only rudderless but can also be perceived as less than unified in the face of a true test. Even if these positions were filled soon, the breakdown and inability to solve the problem earlier is demonstrative of rather large differences of opinion in the membership.

SCO and OSCE: How Do They Compare?

Looking at these two organizations as reflecting a competition between value systems, one can notice that the China-led SCO is more interested than the OSCE in shaping discourse on the reaction to COVID-19, as evidenced by its frequent news articles and webinars, and importantly, meetings between health ministers. This parallels Beijing's active campaign to get in front of narratives associating China with the virus, as well as its approach to present itself as the savior as, for example, through so-called [mask diplomacy](#).

In contrast to this, the OSCE, as a Western-leaning organization based on the values of democracy and individual rights, is proving to be less effective in the face of the battering it is taking in relation to COVID-19. In particular, since the OSCE is a European security-focused organization, it may reflect poorly on perceptions of European efforts. The aforementioned failure to elect a Secretary General is also particularly damaging for the OSCE in that it furthers a perception that Western countries are floundering in the face of the pandemic. If the OSCE is indeed concerned with security issues, it should be much more active, doing its best to nip these future problems in the bud now.

It is here that SCO and OSCE differences come to the fore. The SCO, while certainly lacking in some areas regarding its response to COVID-19, is nevertheless concerned with being active, a demonstration that the organization is interested in its credibility on the world stage. The SCO could certainly perform better, at least as an avenue for funds from wealthier members, such as Russia, India, and China. Its members, particularly China, are very aware that they can better project an image of efficiency in the face of this disaster through the SCO. In comparison, the OSCE appears as less concerned about its image in the region.

There are no easy solutions for the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that every day brings a new wrinkle to the difficulties that the world at large is facing. The trick will be in mitigating the ills, rather than fully cancelling them out. For while the medical side of the calamity can be largely dealt with through a reliable and properly tested vaccine, the economic damage that COVID-19 has wrought will take years to untangle. It is through efforts now, at this critical juncture, that organizations such as the SCO and the OSCE can make advances that will strongly influence the future of their security mandates, as well as their legitimacy, in Central Asia.

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Addendum: The date for the SCO Summit has since been released. It will be held on November 10.