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THE BLACK SEA REGION IN GLOBAL POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION'S ROLE IN SHAPING SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGIES IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract
The Black Sea Region (BSR) has re-emerged as a pivotal arena in global geopolitics, functioning as a strategic crossroads linking Europe, Asia, and the Middle East through critical energy corridors, maritime routes, and security frameworks. Historically shaped by great power rivalries, from Ottoman–Russian confrontations to Cold War bipolarity and NATO's post-Soviet expansion, the region now reflects renewed competition between Western alliances and emerging Eurasian institutions. This study analyzes the evolving role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in influencing the security and geopolitical strategies of East-Central Europe (ECE). Using a qualitative, case-based approach based on secondary data, policy documents, and academic literature, the research applies the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Geopolitical Realism to interpret the SCO's strategic influence. The findings reveal that while the SCO's institutional presence in ECE remains limited, it exercises soft and symbolic power through its member states, particularly Russia, China, and Türkiye via economic integration, energy linkages, and strategic coordination. These dynamics have repositioned the Black Sea as a zone of overlapping spheres of influence, compelling East-Central European states to balance between Euro-Atlantic commitments and Eurasian engagement. The study concludes that the SCO's expanding Eurasian outlook contributes to strengthening regional interconnectivity, reinforcing the multipolar transformation of international politics, and gradually challenging Western strategic predominance in the Black Sea region.

INTRODUCTION

The Black Sea Region (BSR) occupies a central position in the geopolitical and strategic landscape of Eurasia. Geographically located at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the region serves as a vital corridor for trade, energy, and military movement. Its strategic waterways connect the Mediterranean through the Bosporus Strait, providing maritime access crucial for global commerce and security logistics. This geographical placement has made the Black Sea a contested geopolitical space throughout history, where empires and major powers have vied for influence to secure

access routes, resources, and regional dominance. In the contemporary era, the region's importance has intensified as it has become a focal point for energy transportation networks, economic connectivity, and great power rivalry (King, 2004).

Historically, the Black Sea has been an arena of continuous geopolitical competition. During the imperial and Cold War eras, it functioned as a strategic buffer zone between East and West, hosting rivalries between the Ottoman and Russian Empires, and later between the Soviet Union and NATO. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the regional power vacuum encouraged the expansion of Western institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), both seeking to integrate the newly independent states bordering the Black Sea. This westward expansion, however, triggered renewed Russian assertiveness, most notably reflected in its actions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), reshaping the regional security dynamics and reviving the politics of containment and counter-containment (Hamilton & Mangott, 2015).

Amid this shifting balance of power, the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has added a new dimension to Eurasian geopolitics. Established in 2001, the SCO, comprising China, Russia, and several Central and South Asian states has evolved into a significant regional organization focusing on security cooperation, economic development, and political coordination. While its institutional presence in the Black Sea region remains indirect, its strategic reach through member and partner states such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and Iran have gradually influenced the broader Eurasian security environment. The SCO embodies an alternative model of regionalism, promoting multipolarity and non-Western approaches to global governance (Bailes et al., 2007).

Consequently, the Black Sea region today represents a complex intersection of competing geopolitical visions. It has become not only a theater of Western and Russian confrontation but also a space where the SCO's Eurasian strategies increasingly intersect with European security concerns. Understanding this evolving dynamic is crucial to grasp how emerging power structures are reshaping the global political order in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study integrates Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Geopolitical Realism to explain the evolving strategic significance of the Black Sea Region (BSR) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) role in shaping East-Central European geopolitics. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional lens to examine how regional and global security structures interact in a multipolar world.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, posits that security dynamics are often clustered within geographically proximate regions where the security of states becomes interdependent. According to this framework, regional security complexes form when threats and vulnerabilities among neighboring states are closely linked, making regional interactions more influential than global ones. The Black Sea Region exemplifies such a complex, as its security environment is deeply affected by interactions among regional actors—Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria, alongside the broader involvement of external powers such as the EU, NATO, and increasingly, the SCO. The annexation of Crimea, NATO's eastern expansion, and the development of energy corridors illustrate how regional issues are both localized and globally entangled (Sadurski, 2022).

Applying RSCT to this study helps conceptualize the BSR as a security intersection between the European and Eurasian regional complexes, where the SCO's expanding influence represents a reconfiguration of boundaries between these complexes. The SCO's Eurasian outreach, through Russia and China, indirectly reshapes the regional security order by altering the balance of influence, introducing new norms of cooperation, and challenging the Western-centric frameworks that have traditionally dominated the area. Thus, RSCT allows for an analytical understanding of how local security interactions are embedded within overlapping the regional systems (Waltz, 1979).

Complementing this, Geopolitical Realism provides the power-political perspective essential for understanding state behavior in the Black Sea and East-Central Europe. Rooted in classical realist thought from scholars like Hans Morgenthau and

Kenneth Waltz, Geopolitical Realism emphasizes the primacy of power, national interest, and survival within an anarchic international system. From this viewpoint, states act rationally to maximize security and influence. In the Black Sea context, Russia's military assertiveness, NATO's strategic deployments, and China's economic penetration through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) all reflect realist calculations aimed at maintaining or expanding spheres of influence. The SCO, in turn, embodies a collective mechanism for regional powers—particularly China and Russia, to balance against Western dominance and promote a multipolar international order (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Integrating RSCT and Geopolitical Realism enables this research to interpret the Black Sea as both a regional security complex and a strategic geopolitical arena. While RSCT explains the spatial and interdependent nature of security interactions, Geopolitical Realism highlights the underlying power competition driving those interactions. Together, they provide a coherent analytical foundation for understanding how the SCO's evolving engagement contributes to reshaping security structures and geopolitical alignments in East-Central Europe and the wider Eurasian landscape.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach based primarily on secondary data, including academic literature, policy papers, institutional reports, and strategic analyses from credible international sources. The research focuses on interpreting geopolitical patterns, security interactions, and institutional developments rather than quantifiable outcomes. A case-based approach is adopted to examine the roles of key regional and global actors—Russia, China, Türkiye, and selected Eastern European states—to assess how their strategic orientations influence the Black Sea security complex. Through comparative interpretation and theoretical application, the study aims to identify the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) evolving role in reshaping the geopolitical and security dynamics of East-Central Europe.

The Black Sea Region: Strategic and Geopolitical Context

Geographical and Strategic Overview

The Black Sea Region (BSR) occupies a central position in Eurasian geopolitics, functioning as a geographic and strategic junction between Europe, Asia, and the Caucasus. Its location offers both a natural barrier and a corridor linking the European mainland to the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caspian Basin. The region's littoral states—Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, and Bulgaria—are surrounded by diverse political systems, security alliances, and economic frameworks, making the Black Sea one of the most complex geopolitical spaces in the contemporary world (Cinemre et al., 2020).

The Black Sea's strategic importance stems from its maritime routes and access to critical waterways. The Bosporus and Dardanelles Straits, controlled by Türkiye, serve as gateways between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, granting their controller immense geopolitical leverage. These maritime passages are vital for global commerce, energy transit, and military logistics, connecting Eastern Europe and Eurasia with broader international markets. Additionally, the region functions as an energy corridor, facilitating the transportation of oil, gas, and goods between Russia, the Caspian region, and Europe. Major energy pipelines, such as the TurkStream, Blue Stream, and prospective Trans-Caspian projects, underscore its relevance in ensuring Europe's energy security and diversifying supply routes (Boland, 2011).

Militarily, the Black Sea serves as a strategic chokepoint and an area of increasing contestation. Russia's naval dominance, consolidated after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, allows it to project power across the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. NATO's presence in Romania and Bulgaria, along with Türkiye's control over maritime access, contributes to an evolving balance of power where the region has become a pivotal frontier between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security systems.

Historical Geopolitics of the Region

The geopolitical history of the Black Sea is marked by enduring rivalries and shifting alliances. During the imperial era, the region was primarily shaped by the Ottoman–Russian rivalry, which spanned several centuries and determined the political and cultural contours of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Russia's pursuit of "warm-water ports" and the Ottoman Empire's efforts to defend its territorial integrity turned the Black Sea into a recurring battlefield. The 19th century Crimean War (1853–1856) epitomized this struggle, involving not only Russia and the Ottoman Empire but also European powers such as Britain and France, reflecting the region's broader international significance (Clinton et al., 2010).

During the Cold War, the Black Sea once again assumed a central strategic role as a boundary between the NATO and Warsaw Pact blocs. Türkiye, as a NATO member since 1952, stood as the alliance's southern bulwark, countering Soviet maritime dominance. The Soviet Black Sea Fleet, based in Sevastopol, symbolized Moscow's capacity to project influence toward the Mediterranean and beyond. This period entrenched the militarization of the region, transforming it into a site of persistent surveillance, deterrence, and ideological confrontation between East and West (Colton, 2012).

The post-Soviet period introduced a new phase of geopolitical flux. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 fragmented the region into multiple independent states, creating a strategic vacuum that external actors, particularly the EU and NATO, sought to fill. The subsequent NATO enlargement—incorporating Romania and Bulgaria (2004), and EU expansion into Eastern Europe brought the Euro-Atlantic institutions directly to Russia's borders. These developments, while strengthening Western influence, also provoked Moscow's perception of encirclement, setting the stage for renewed confrontation. The Russia–Georgia War (2008) and the annexation of Crimea (2014) reflected Moscow's determination to reassert dominance in its near abroad, re-establishing the Black Sea as a core theater of great power competition (De Haas, 2015).

Contemporary Regional Actors and Interests

In the contemporary era, the Black Sea Region remains a focal point of interaction among multiple regional and global powers, each pursuing distinct strategic, economic, and security objectives.

Russia continues to view the Black Sea as a strategic lifeline for its national security and global power projection. The annexation of Crimea significantly enhanced Moscow's control over the northern coastline and expanded its naval capabilities in the region. Beyond military considerations, Russia leverages energy dominance—notably through natural gas exports, to maintain influence over neighboring states and European energy markets. Its naval presence in Sevastopol and Tartus (Syria) allows it to maintain operational depth extending into the Mediterranean, consolidating its status as a resurgent Eurasian power (Germanovich, 2014).

Türkiye occupies a uniquely pivotal position due to its geographic control over the Turkish Straits and dual alignment between NATO membership and growing Eurasian aspirations. Ankara's foreign policy underlines a strategic balancing act: maintaining its NATO commitments while expanding cooperation with Russia and China through mechanisms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Türkiye's regional policy emphasizes autonomy, energy transit partnerships, and maritime security, positioning it as both a stabilizer and a competitor in the Black Sea **(Gaspers, 2017)**.

The European Union (EU) and NATO seek to consolidate their influence by promoting Euro-Atlantic integration and regional stability. Their strategic initiatives, such as NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and the EU's Eastern Partnership—aim to strengthen defense coordination and political reforms among Eastern European states. However, these policies have also intensified geopolitical friction with Russia, particularly over Ukraine and Georgia, where Western engagement challenges Moscow's traditional sphere of influence.

China, though geographically distant, has emerged as an increasingly relevant actor through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which envisions the Black Sea as a critical junction linking the Central Asian–Caucasus corridor to European markets. Beijing's investments in infrastructure, energy, and logistics

projects in Eastern Europe and the Balkans serve both economic and strategic interests, complementing the SCO's broader Eurasian framework. Through economic penetration and strategic partnerships, China enhances its soft power in a region traditionally dominated by Euro-Atlantic and Russian influences (Khan, 2024).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Structure and Strategic Vision

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) emerged from the Shanghai Five framework established in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, initially aimed at resolving border disputes and promoting regional confidence-building. Its formal establishment in 2001 marked a strategic evolution from a limited security arrangement into a comprehensive regional organization with political, economic, and security objectives. The inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, and later India and Pakistan in 2017, significantly expanded its geographical and strategic scope, transforming it into one of the world's largest regional organizations in terms of population and territorial reach. The admission of Iran as a full member in 2023 further consolidated its Eurasian identity and geopolitical weight (Hanova, 2019).

The SCO's objectives extend beyond traditional security concerns to encompass a multidimensional strategic vision. It prioritizes cooperation against terrorism, extremism, and separatism through mechanisms such as the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). Economically, it aligns closely with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing connectivity, infrastructure development, and energy collaboration across Eurasia. Politically, the SCO promotes the principles of mutual respect, non-interference, and multipolarity, offering an alternative to Western-led global governance models.

Geopolitically, the SCO represents a Eurasian-centered alliance that bridges Asia and Europe, functioning as a platform for Russia–China strategic coordination. While it is not a military bloc, its growing influence reflects a collective attempt to counterbalance NATO and Western alliances. Thus, the SCO embodies a framework for fostering regional stability while advancing the broader vision of a multipolar world order (Iqbal, 2022).

The Black Sea Region and SCO: Expanding Eurasian Influence

China's Strategic Outreach

China's growing engagement with the Black Sea Region (BSR) reflects its broader strategy to consolidate Eurasian connectivity under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through land and maritime corridors, Beijing seeks to link Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, establishing trade routes that reduce dependence on maritime channels dominated by Western powers. The China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor and related infrastructure projects, such as railways, ports, and logistics centers, extend toward the Black Sea's periphery, integrating states like Georgia, Ukraine, and Türkiye into a web of transcontinental connectivity (Khan, 2019).

This strategic outreach is not merely economic but also geopolitical. China's economic diplomacy in Eastern Europe—manifested through investment in transport, energy, and digital infrastructure—serves to expand its influence within regions traditionally aligned with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Initiatives like the "17+1" cooperation mechanism between China and Central and Eastern European countries exemplify Beijing's intent to cultivate strategic partnerships and shape political goodwill through development incentives. Although China maintains a cautious approach to regional conflicts, its growing economic footprint in the Black Sea corridor strengthens its strategic position and complements the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) broader vision of Eurasian integration.

Russia's Role within the SCO and Black Sea Security

Russia remains the principal power in the Black Sea Region and a core member of the SCO, using both platforms to pursue overlapping yet distinct strategic goals. Within the SCO, Moscow promotes a vision of Eurasian integration that aligns with its long-term objective of countering Western geopolitical expansion. The organization provides Russia a multilateral forum through which it can enhance strategic coordination with China while maintaining its leadership in post-Soviet spaces (Bashir, 2018).

In the Black Sea, Russia's strategy centers on military dominance and maritime control. The annexation of

Crimea in 2014 fundamentally altered the regional balance of power, granting Moscow full command of the Sevastopol naval base and greater capacity to project force into the Mediterranean. This assertiveness is complemented by the modernization of the Black Sea Fleet, deployment of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, and control over critical maritime routes. These measures ensure Russia's strategic depth and leverage over neighboring states. Simultaneously, Russia uses its SCO membership to institutionalize its Eurasian orientation, integrating economic and security initiatives that reinforce its leadership within both the Black Sea and wider Eurasian security architectures.

Türkiye's Emerging Linkage

Türkiye plays a unique and increasingly complex role in connecting the SCO with the Black Sea Region. As a NATO member and a dialogue partner of the SCO since 2012, Ankara embodies a dual alignment—balancing its Western commitments with its aspirations for deeper engagement in Eurasian political and economic frameworks. Türkiye's growing relations with SCO members, particularly China and Russia, highlight its pragmatic approach to diversifying partnerships amid shifting global power structures (Khan, 2024).

Ankara's participation in regional infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative and its cooperation with Russia on energy pipelines, such as TurkStream, demonstrate its commitment to enhancing Eurasian connectivity while safeguarding national interests. Türkiye's engagement with the SCO serves both symbolic and strategic purposes: symbolically, it reinforces its identity as a Eurasian power; strategically, it offers leverage in negotiating with Western partners. By maintaining open channels with both blocs, Türkiye has positioned itself as a bridge between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian systems, playing an essential role in shaping the Black Sea's evolving geopolitical equilibrium (Lalrinfel & Tripathi, 2018).

Energy and Economic Connectivity

Energy and economic interdependence are at the heart of the Black Sea Region's growing relevance within Eurasian geopolitics. The area functions as a vital node connecting energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Caspian Basin to European markets. Major pipeline projects—such as TurkStream, Blue Stream, and the Southern Gas Corridor—illustrate the convergence of Russian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani energy interests, supported by Chinese financing and strategic investment. These routes not only enhance Europe's access to diversified energy sources but also embed the region more deeply into the Eurasian economic network envisioned by the SCO and the BRI (Ghulam, 2017).

Beyond energy, the Black Sea serves as a logistical corridor for trade and transport. Infrastructure investments in ports, highways, and digital connectivity have transformed the region into a gateway between Asia and Europe. Initiatives like the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor) connect China through Central Asia and the Caucasus to Türkiye and Europe, bypassing Russia and offering alternative trade pathways that reinforce regional interdependence.

This growing web of economic and energy connectivity underlines the Black Sea's role as a strategic hinge in Eurasia's emerging multipolar order. The convergence of interests among SCO members—China's investment ambitions, Russia's strategic depth, and Türkiye's transit potential—illustrates how the region has become integral to the institutional and geopolitical expansion of the SCO. In essence, the Black Sea Region represents both a corridor and a contest—linking economies and powers while simultaneously reflecting the broader competition shaping Eurasian geopolitics in the twenty-first century.

SCO's Influence on East-Central Europe's Security and Geopolitical Strategies

Changing Strategic Alignments

The geopolitical landscape of East-Central Europe (ECE) is undergoing a gradual yet profound transformation, shaped by the expanding Russian–Chinese strategic partnership and the institutional frameworks of Eurasian cooperation, particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Although the SCO's direct institutional presence in ECE remains limited, its political and economic influence has grown indirectly through its key members—Russia and China, whose policies collectively promote a multipolar global order. This

has led to a reconfiguration of strategic alignments, with several East-Central European states recalibrating their foreign policies between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian orientations (McClellan, 2013).

The growing Russian–Chinese influence is visible in overlapping domains: energy cooperation, infrastructure investment, and political dialogue. Moscow's assertive military posture and China's economic diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have converged to shape an alternative narrative to Western liberal hegemony. This has encouraged some regional actors to adopt a pragmatic approach toward multipolar engagement, emphasizing sovereignty, non-alignment, and economic diversification. As a result, the perception of multipolarity—once a theoretical discourse—has become a tangible factor influencing national security and foreign policy choices across the region.

Regional Security Challenges and Responses

The expansion of Russian and Chinese influence has prompted NATO and the European Union (EU) to reinforce their strategic posture in East-Central Europe. NATO, in particular, has prioritized the eastern flank as a critical front for deterrence and defense. The deployment of multinational battlegroups in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, alongside large-scale military exercises, underscores a collective response to perceived threats emanating from Russia's assertive regional policy. These developments have heightened the militarization of the region, reintroducing Cold War-era security anxieties.

Simultaneously, the European Union's Eastern Partnership initiative seeks to integrate post-Soviet states into its political and economic framework, providing financial assistance, institutional reform support, and democratic governance incentives. However, while the EU's strategy is developmental and normative, it often clashes with the SCO's and Russia's geopolitical interests, which emphasize state sovereignty and non-interference. The competing models of integration Euro-Atlantic versus Eurasian have intensified the security dilemma within East-Central Europe, forcing states to balance security dependence on the West with economic opportunities from the East.

The region's responses have been varied. NATO-aligned countries such as Romania and Poland continue to support a robust transatlantic presence, while others, including Hungary and Serbia, pursue policies of strategic flexibility, engaging with both Western and Eurasian actors to maximize national benefit. Thus, the SCO's indirect influence is manifested through a dual dynamic: it challenges Western strategic dominance while simultaneously offering an alternative avenue for regional cooperation and economic diversification (Steven et al., 2017).

Case Studies

The case of Ukraine epitomizes the geopolitical contest between Western and Eurasian alignments. Following the 2014 crisis and Crimea's annexation by Russia, Ukraine has become a geopolitical battleground symbolizing the clash between Euro-Atlantic integration and Eurasian reassertion. While Ukraine is not part of the SCO, the organization's principles especially Russia's advocacy of multipolarity and non-Western governance models have influenced Moscow's regional policies. The ongoing conflict underscores the limits of both Western deterrence and Eurasian expansion, making Ukraine a testing ground for future European security arrangements.

Romania and Bulgaria represent another dimension of the evolving balance. As NATO's southeastern outposts, both states have heightened their defense cooperation with the alliance, hosting multinational forces and supporting maritime security initiatives in the Black Sea. Yet, they remain economically tied to Eurasian markets through energy dependencies and trade. The presence of Chinese investment in infrastructure and logistics sectors often aligned with the BRI illustrates how economic interdependence coexists with strategic rivalry.

In contrast, Serbia and Hungary embody the hybrid orientation emerging in East-Central Europe. Serbia, traditionally close to Russia and increasingly engaged with China, participates in infrastructure projects financed by Chinese institutions and promotes a narrative of strategic autonomy. Hungary, while an EU and NATO member, maintains close economic relations with both Russia and China, supporting projects such as the Budapest–Belgrade railway under

the BRI framework. These examples reveal that the SCO's influence operates through economic instruments and political narratives rather than formal membership or security integration.

Implications for European Security Architecture

The SCO's influence in East-Central Europe is indirect yet strategically consequential. Through Russian military assertiveness and Chinese economic engagement, the organization contributes to reshaping the regional balance of power. Its core principles multipolarity, sovereignty, and regional cooperation—resonate with several East-Central European governments seeking alternatives to Western dependency. This evolving environment complicates the traditional European security architecture, which has long been dominated by NATO and the EU.

The emerging strategic dilemma for East-Central European states lies in reconciling security commitments to Western institutions with the pragmatic need to engage Eurasian powers for economic growth and political leverage. The simultaneous presence of NATO defense structures, EU economic mechanisms, and SCO-aligned initiatives creates overlapping spheres of influence, resulting in a fragmented but interconnected regional order. The region is thus becoming a geopolitical bridge and buffer zone—a space where global power centers intersect rather than separate (Khan, 2019).

The SCO's expanding Eurasian vision—projected through Russia and China—has introduced new strategic variables into East-Central Europe's geopolitical calculus. While the organization itself does not operate as a dominant regional actor, its indirect influence contributes to the erosion of unipolarity and the rise of plural security alignments. This transformation signifies not only a redefinition of regional geopolitics but also a broader shift in the global balance of power toward a multipolar international order.

Findings and Discussion

SCO's Limited but Symbolically Significant Role

The findings indicate that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) exerts a limited yet symbolically meaningful influence in the Black Sea and East-Central European context. While the organization does not maintain a formal institutional presence in the region, its soft influence is exercised through its major members—China and Russia—whose policies align with the SCO's overarching objectives of multipolarity, regional stability, and non-Western cooperation. This indirect form of influence demonstrates the SCO's strategic capacity to project its principles beyond its geographical boundaries.

Rather than establishing direct control or security mechanisms, the SCO contributes to shaping regional narratives through economic engagement, diplomatic coordination, and strategic signaling. China's connectivity projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's dominance in energy and security affairs exemplify this indirect approach. Together, they create an environment where Eurasian perspectives gain legitimacy as viable alternatives to Western frameworks. Hence, the SCO's impact in the Black Sea region is not institutionalized but discursive and strategic, promoting a shared sense of Eurasian identity and cooperation within a multipolar order.

Regional Balancing Dynamics

The study also highlights the complex balancing behavior of East-Central European states in response to competing geopolitical influences. Most regional actors adopt a cautious engagement with Eurasian institutions, recognizing the benefits of economic cooperation while maintaining their security dependence on NATO and the European Union. This dual strategy reflects the practical realities of navigating between Euro-Atlantic commitments and Eurasian opportunities.

The Black Sea region emerges as a crucial geopolitical intersection where these competing interests converge. Russia's military assertiveness and China's economic presence overlap with Western efforts to reinforce the eastern flank of NATO and expand EU connectivity initiatives. Consequently, the region has evolved into a zone of overlapping spheres of influence, where strategic competition coexists with selective cooperation. For instance, countries such as Türkiye and Hungary pursue pragmatic engagements with both Western and Eurasian blocs, while others, like Romania and Poland, remain firmly aligned with transatlantic security structures.

This balancing dynamic underscores the Black Sea's role as a strategic corridor of contestation and convergence, rather than a fixed geopolitical frontier. The SCO's framework emphasizing sovereignty, mutual respect, and non-interference provides a conceptual counterweight to Western interventionist models, further diversifying the region's strategic calculus.

Implications for Global Politics

At the global level, the SCO's activities and its expanding normative influence contribute to the consolidation of a Eurasian identity and the emergence of a multipolar world order. By facilitating dialogue and economic cooperation among major Eurasian powers, the organization enhances regional self-reliance and collective agency. The Black Sea region, situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, thus serves as a symbolic frontier where this multipolar vision takes practical form.

The rise of the SCO's Eurasian framework presents an implicit challenge to Western strategic dominance, particularly in regions historically governed by Euro-Atlantic security paradigms. Although the SCO's influence remains predominantly soft, its cumulative effect undermines the unipolar order that emerged after the Cold War. The combination of China's developmental diplomacy and Russia's strategic assertiveness reflects a complementary mechanism of power projection that counters Western political and military primacy.

The findings suggest that the SCO's influence in the Black Sea and East-Central Europe is more ideological than institutional, yet increasingly significant in redefining regional and global geopolitical alignments. The organization's contribution lies in fostering Eurasian interconnectedness and promoting a pluralistic balance of power, reshaping not only the contours of Black Sea security but also the broader architecture of global politics.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as a symbolically significant yet strategically evolving actor within the wider Eurasian geopolitical landscape. Although its direct institutional footprint in the Black Sea and East-Central Europe remains limited, its growing engagement reflects an expanding Eurasian identity anchored in economic connectivity, strategic dialogue, and the pursuit of a multipolar world order. The Black Sea region, historically contested by great powers, now functions as a geopolitical interface between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian spheres, where the SCO's principles—mutual respect, non-interference, and collective security—offer an alternative discourse to Western-led governance structures.

The study underscores that East-Central Europe (ECE) is at a strategic crossroads, facing the dual challenge of preserving security through NATO and the European Union while engaging pragmatically with Eurasian initiatives for economic and infrastructural gains. The geopolitical realities of the region, intensified by Russia's resurgence and China's economic outreach, compel states to navigate a complex web of alliances and dependencies. While NATO and the EU maintain their dominance in the region's security architecture, the SCO's soft power projection and economic initiatives increasingly shape strategic perceptions and policy orientations.

Ultimately, the SCO's evolving engagement highlights the growing importance of the Black Sea in the broader matrix of Eurasian geopolitics. The region's stability and security will depend on how regional and extra-regional powers manage competing ambitions within a shared strategic space. The research suggests that a sustainable balance requires inclusive dialogue, institutional cooperation, and the avoidance of zero-sum rivalries that risk militarizing the region further.

Policy Recommendations

For Regional States:

East-Central European and Black Sea littoral states should adopt balanced and multi-vector foreign policies to safeguard sovereignty, economic growth, and political stability. Strategic pragmatism rather than strict alignment can help these states leverage benefits from both Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian partnerships. By engaging selectively in initiatives like the Belt and Road and regional energy projects, while maintaining commitments to NATO and EU frameworks, states can enhance economic diversification and security resilience. Furthermore,

regional cooperation mechanisms, such as the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), should be revitalized to promote inclusive dialogue and mitigate the risks of great power confrontation.

For the SCO:
To strengthen its role as a legitimate Eurasian actor, the SCO should pursue institutional deepening and operational transparency. Expanding its engagement beyond Central and East Asia to include structured partnerships with European and Black Sea states could enhance its credibility as a cooperative security organization. Establishing permanent working groups on energy, trade, and non-traditional security threats would help transform its symbolic influence into tangible policy outcomes. Additionally, fostering dialogue with EU institutions could open avenues for complementary rather than competitive cooperation, reinforcing regional stability and reducing misperceptions about the SCO's strategic intent.

For the EU and NATO:
Western institutions must recognize the changing geopolitical environment in Eurasia and adapt their strategies accordingly. Instead of viewing the SCO solely as a rival framework, the EU and NATO should explore cooperative security mechanisms to prevent escalation in the Black Sea and ECE. This may include confidence-building measures, joint maritime monitoring, and economic connectivity projects that align with both Western and Eurasian interests. A shift from containment to engagement could transform the Black Sea into a zone of interaction rather than confrontation, aligning with broader European security objectives.

Future Research Directions
Future scholarly inquiry should explore comparative analyses of the SCO's influence in other European border regions, such as the Balkans and the Caucasus, to assess the consistency and depth of its strategic outreach. Examining how SCO-led or SCO-aligned initiatives interact with Western integration models could provide valuable insights into the emerging dynamics of regional pluralism in global politics.

Moreover, there is a growing need to investigate the SCO's engagement in non-traditional security sectors, including cybersecurity, energy transition, and climate resilience. These domains represent new frontiers where cooperative mechanisms between Eurasian and European institutions could evolve beyond traditional geopolitics. By studying the SCO's role in these emerging areas, future research can contribute to understanding how soft power and functional cooperation may redefine the global order.

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