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From the «Shanghai Five» to the SCO: The History of Regional Cooperation within the Framework of Regionalism and Regional Security Complex Theory (1996–2001)

The article examines the historical transformation of the «Shanghai Five» into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation between 1996 and 2001. Particular attention is paid to the transition from a military-border mechanism aimed at strengthening confidence and limiting armed forces to a sustainable multilateral format of regional cooperation with a gradually expanding security agenda. The purpose of the study is to identify the historical logic behind the formation of the SCO and to determine the factors that conditioned the institutionalisation of regional interaction within the frameworks of regionalism and regional security complex theory. The source base of the study consists of interstate agreements, joint statements, and declarations adopted within the framework of the «Shanghai Five» and during the establishment of the SCO. The authors analyse these documents in order to trace the transformation of cooperation from military confidence-building measures and the settlement of border-related issues to political coordination, the formation of a shared understanding of regional threats, and the institutionalisation of multilateral interaction. In addition, subsequent normative documents of the organisation are taken into account, making it possible to determine the further development of its organisational and legal structure. The methodological framework of the study is based on approaches of regionalism, including new regionalism, as well as the regional security complex theory developed by B. Buzan and O. Wæver. The authors apply historical-genetic, problem-chronological, historical-comparative, and institutional methods. The results of the study demonstrate that Russian-Chinese strategic rapprochement constituted an important and necessary, but insufficient, condition for the formation of the SCO. The authors analyse the role of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as independent participants in the process of creating regional security mechanisms, guided by their own interests in stabilising borders, reducing military-political uncertainty, and establishing predictable interaction with China. The subsequent inclusion of Uzbekistan indicated that cooperation had moved beyond the initial military-border logic and that the «Shanghai process» had acquired a broader Central Asian dimension. It is established that between 1996 and 2001 the functions of interaction expanded consistently: from border stabilisation and confidence-building measures to political dialogue, coordination of approaches to regional security, and the formation of a common mechanism for countering new transnational threats. As a result of the study, the authors propose an original periodisation of the development of the «Shanghai process» in 1996–2001, comprising three interconnected stages: the formation of the treaty and legal foundations of military-border confidence-building and arms limitations in 1996–1997; the expansion of the multilateral agenda, political coordination, and cooperation in the field of regional security in 1998–2000; and the enlargement of the membership and transition to a formal regional organisation in 2001. The authors conclude that the scholarly novelty of the study lies in interpreting the period 1996–2001 not as a mere prehistory or exclusively as a preparatory stage in the establishment of the SCO, but as an independent stage in the institutionalisation of regional cooperation.

Keywords: history of the SCO, Shanghai Five, SCO, Central Asia, history of regional cooperation, regionalism, theory of the regional security complex, border security, history of international relations.

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«Шанхай бестігінен» ШЫҰ-ға дейін: регионализм және аймақтық қауіпсіздік кешені теориясы аясындағы өңірлік ынтымақтастық тарихы (1996–2001 жж.)

Мақалада 1996–2001-жылдар аралығындағы «Шанхай бестігінің» Шанхай ынтымақтастық ұйымына трансформациялану тарихы қарастырылды. Негізгі назар әскери-шекаралық сенімді нығайту және

карулы күштерді шектеу тетігінен қауіпсіздік саласындағы күн тәртібі біртіндеп кеңейген өңірлік ынтымақтастықтың орнықты көпжақты форматына көшу үдерісіне аударылады. Зерттеудің мақсаты — ШЫҰ қалыптасуының тарихи логикасын айқындау және регионализм мен өңірлік қауіпсіздік кешені теориясы аясында өңірлік өзара іс-қимылдың институционалдануына ықпал еткен факторларды анықтау. Зерттеудің дереккөздік негізін «Шанхай бестігі» шеңберінде және ШЫҰ-ның құрылу кезеңінде қабылданған мемлекетаралық келісімдер, бірлескен мәлімдемелер мен декларациялар құрайды. Авторлар аталған құжаттарды талдау арқылы ынтымақтастық мазмұнының әскери сенім шаралары мен шекаралық мәселелерді реттеуден саяси үйлестіруге, өңірлік қауіп-қатерлер туралы ортақ түсініктің қалыптасуына және көпжақты өзара іс-қимылдың институционалдық тұрғыдан рәсімделуіне дейінгі өзгерісін айқындайды. Сонымен қатар ұйымның ұйымдық-құқықтық құрылымының одан әрі дамуын анықтауға мүмкіндік беретін кейінгі нормативтік құжаттары да ескеріледі. Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізін регионализм тәсілдері, соның ішінде жаңа регионализм, сондай-ақ Б. Бузан мен О. Вэвердің аймақтық қауіпсіздік кешені теориясы құрайды. Авторлар тарихи-генетикалық, проблемалық-хронологиялық, тарихи-салыстырмалы және институционалдық әдістерді қолданған. Зерттеу нәтижелері Ресей мен Қытайдың стратегиялық жақындасуы ШЫҰ-ның қалыптасуы үшін маңызды әрі қажетті, алайда жеткіліксіз шарт болғанын көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар Қазақстан, Қырғызстан және Тәжікстанның шекараларды тұрақтандыруға, әскери-саяси белгісіздікті төмендетуге және Қытаймен болжамды өзара іс-қимыл қалыптастыруға бағытталған өзіндік мүдделерін басшылыққа алған аймақтық қауіпсіздік тетіктерін құру үдерісінің дербес қатысушылары ретіндегі рөлі де талданған. Кейіннен Өзбекстанның қосылуы ынтымақтастықтың бастапқы әскери-шекаралық логика шеңберінен шыққанын және «шанхай үдерісінің» неғұрлым кең орталықазиялық сипатқа ие болғанын көрсетті. 1996–2001-жылдары өзара іс-қимыл функцияларының дәйекті түрде кеңейгені анықталды: шекаралық тұрақтандыру мен сенім шараларынан саяси диалогқа, аймақтық қауіпсіздікке қатысты ұстанымдарды үйлестіруге және жаңа трансшекаралық қауіп-қатерлерге қарсы іс-қимылдың ортақ тетігін қалыптастыруға көшу жүзеге асты. Зерттеу нәтижесінде авторлар 1996–2001-жылдардағы «шанхай үдерісінің» қалыптасуын үш өзара байланысты кезеңге бөліп қарастыратын авторлық кезеңдеуді ұсынады: 1996–1997 жж. — әскери-шекаралық сенім мен қарулы күштерді шектеудің шарттық-құқықтық негіздерінің қалыптасуы; 1998–2000 жж. — көпжақты күн тәртібінің, саяси үйлестірудің және аймақтық қауіпсіздік саласындағы ынтымақтастықтың кеңеюі; 2001 ж. — қатысушылар құрамының кеңеюі және ресми аймақтық ұйымға көшу. Мақала авторлары зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы 1996–2001 жж. ШЫҰ құрылуының қарапайым алғышарты немесе тек дайындық кезеңі ретінде емес, аймақтық ынтымақтастықтың институционалдануының дербес кезеңі ретінде түсіндіруде деген қорытынды жасайды.

Кілт сөздер: ШЫҰ тарихы, Шанхай бестігі, ШЫҰ, Орталық Азия, аймақтық ынтымақтастық тарихы, регионализм, аймақтық қауіпсіздік кешені теориясы, шекаралық қауіпсіздік, халықаралық қатынастар тарихы.

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От «Шанхайской пятёрки» к ШОС: история регионального сотрудничества в рамках регионализма и теории регионального комплекса безопасности (1996–2001 гг.)

В статье рассматривается история трансформации «Шанхайской пятёрки» в Шанхайскую организацию сотрудничества в 1996–2001 гг. Основное внимание уделяется переходу от военно-пограничного механизма укрепления доверия и ограничения вооружённых сил к устойчивому многостороннему формату регионального сотрудничества с постепенно расширяющейся повесткой в сфере безопасности. Цель исследования заключается в выявлении исторической логики становления ШОС и определении факторов, обусловивших институционализацию регионального взаимодействия в рамках подходов регионализма и теории регионального комплекса безопасности. Источниковую основу исследования составляют межгосударственные соглашения, совместные заявления и декларации, принятые в рамках «Шанхайской пятёрки» и на этапе создания ШОС. Авторы анализируют указанные документы с целью проследить изменение содержания сотрудничества от мер военного доверия и урегулирования приграничных вопросов к политической координации, формированию общего понимания региональных угроз и институциональному оформлению многостороннего взаимодействия. Дополнительно учитываются последующие нормативные документы организации, позволяющие определить дальнейшее развитие её организационно-правовой структуры. Методологическую основу исследования составляют подходы регионализма, включая новый регионализм, а также теория регионального комплекса безопасности Б. Бузана и О. Вэвера.

Авторами применяются историко-генетический, проблемно-хронологический, историко-сравнительный и институциональный методы. Результаты исследования показывают, что российско-китайское стратегическое сближение являлось важным и необходимым, но недостаточным условием формирования ШОС. Авторы анализируют роль Казахстана, Кыргызстана и Таджикистана как самостоятельных участников процесса создания региональных механизмов безопасности, руководствовавшихся собственными интересами в стабилизации границ, снижении военно-политической неопределённости и формировании предсказуемого взаимодействия с Китаем. Последующее включение Узбекистана свидетельствовало о выходе сотрудничества за пределы первоначальной военно-пограничной логики и приобретении «шанхайским процессом» более широкого центральноазиатского характера. Установлено, что в 1996–2001 гг. происходило последовательное расширение функций взаимодействия: от пограничной стабилизации и мер доверия к политическому диалогу, координации подходов к региональной безопасности и формированию общего механизма противодействия новым трансграничным угрозам. В результате исследования предложен авторский вариант периодизации становления «шанхайского процесса» в 1996–2001 гг., включающий три взаимосвязанных этапа: формирование договорно-правовых основ военно-пограничного доверия и ограничения вооружённых сил в 1996–1997 гг.; расширение многосторонней повестки, политической координации и сотрудничества в сфере региональной безопасности в 1998–2000 гг.; расширение состава участников и переход к формальной региональной организации в 2001 г. Авторы делают вывод о том, что научная новизна исследования заключается в интерпретации 1996–2001 гг. не как простой предистории или исключительно подготовительного периода создания ШОС, а как самостоятельного этапа институционализации регионального сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: история ШОС, Шанхайская пятерка, ШОС, Центральная Азия, история регионального сотрудничества, регионализм, теория регионального комплекса безопасности, приграничная безопасность, история международных отношений.

Introduction

The relevance of this study is determined by the need for a more consistent understanding of the historical transition from the «Shanghai Five» to the SCO as a distinct stage in the formation of regional cooperation. In the scholarly literature, this period is often considered either as a brief prehistory of the organisation's establishment or predominantly through the prism of Russian-Chinese rapprochement. However, such an approach does not fully reflect the complexity of the multilateral processes that unfolded in Central Asia in the second half of the 1990s. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were not merely participants in negotiations between Russia and China, but also independent states interested in stabilising their borders, reducing military-political tensions, developing mechanisms of mutual confidence, and creating a sustainable regional security environment. Uzbekistan's accession to the emerging mechanism in 2001 further demonstrated the expansion of its functional and geographical logic.

The research significance of the issue is also determined by the fact that the formation of the SCO took place amid the transformation of the international and regional security system following the collapse of the USSR. The Central Asian states simultaneously faced the tasks of strengthening their sovereignty, defining new forms of foreign-policy interaction, and responding to transnational threats. Under these conditions, cooperation within the framework of the «Shanghai Five» gradually evolved from the regulation of military-border issues towards a broader agenda that included political coordination, the maintenance of regional stability, and countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Thus, this mechanism became one of the first sustainable multilateral formats in which the interests of Russia, China, and the Central Asian states received institutional expression.

The research problem lies in determining how the initial mechanism of border-related confidence-building was transformed during 1996–2001 into the foundation of a new regional organisation and which political, institutional, and military-security factors facilitated this transition. Of particular importance is the question of the relationship between the Russian-Chinese factor and the independent role of the Central Asian states in the formation of the new cooperation format.

The aim of the article is to examine the historical dynamics of the transition from the «Shanghai Five» to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 1996–2001 through the lenses of regionalism theory and Regional Security Complex Theory. To achieve this aim, the study seeks to trace the principal stages in the development of multilateral interaction; identify changes in the content and scope of the regional agenda; determine the roles of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the institutionalisation of cooperation; establish the significance of the multilateral agreements and declarations of 1996–2001 for the formation of the organisational principles of the SCO; and demonstrate the explanatory

potential of regionalism and Regional Security Complex Theory in relation to the historical period under consideration.

The scholarly novelty of the study lies in considering the years 1996–2001 not as an auxiliary or preparatory stage in the history of the SCO, but as a distinct period of regional institutionalisation. Within this approach, Russian-Chinese rapprochement is regarded as an important, but not the sole, condition for the formation of the new regional mechanism. Particular attention is paid to the independent role of the Central Asian states, the expansion of the multilateral agenda, and the gradual transition from military-border cooperation to a comprehensive understanding of regional security. This approach makes it possible to interpret the establishment of the SCO in 2001 as the result of accumulated experience of interaction and the institutional development of the «Shanghai Five», while the subsequent legal formalisation of the organisation continued during the next stage of its development.

Materials and Methods

The source base of the study consists of official interstate documents adopted during the formation of the «Shanghai Five» and the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 1996–2001. Their sequential analysis makes it possible to trace changes in the content of regional interaction: from the regulation of military-border issues and the strengthening of mutual confidence to the expansion of the security agenda and the formation of a permanent multilateral mechanism of cooperation. Among the principal sources is the 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, signed in Shanghai on 26 April 1996 [1]. The document is regarded as the initial institutional foundation of the «Shanghai Five», since it established the principles of mutual confidence, transparency, and limitations on military activities in the border area. The Agreement on the Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in the Border Area, signed in Moscow on 24 April 1997 [2], is also of particular importance, as it further developed the mechanism of military-political confidence and gave cooperation a more sustainable character.

To identify the subsequent expansion of the multilateral agenda, the study draws on documents adopted at meetings of the leaders of the five states in the late 1990s, primarily the Almaty Joint Statement of 1998 [3], the Bishkek Declaration of 1999 [4], and the Dushanbe Declaration of 2000 [5]. Their comparison makes it possible to trace the gradual movement of cooperation beyond the initial border and military agenda, as well as the growing emphasis on regional stability, political interaction, and new transnational threats. Particular attention is given to the Dushanbe meeting of 2000, in which Uzbekistan participated as an observer, marking one of the indications of the territorial and functional expansion of the emerging regional mechanism.

A key group of sources consists of documents adopted in 2001 that were directly related to the establishment of the SCO. First and foremost, the study analyses the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, signed on 15 June 2001 by the leaders of Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan [6]. This document is used to determine the nature of the transition from the «Shanghai Five» to an international regional organisation, the objectives of the new association, and the principal areas of multilateral interaction. At the same time, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism of 15 June 2001 [7] is examined as a document reflecting a qualitative change in the security agenda and the consolidation of countering transnational threats as one of the priority areas of cooperation. In order to define the chronological boundaries of the process under study, the SCO Charter [8], signed in 2002, is also taken into account. However, it is used not as a principal source for the period under consideration, but to confirm that the institutional and legal formalisation of the organisation established in 2001 continued at the next stage of its development.

The theoretical and methodological framework of the study combines approaches associated with regionalism, including the principles of new regionalism, with Regional Security Complex Theory. Regionalism is employed to explain the gradual institutionalisation of interstate interaction, the expansion of the substantive agenda, and the transition from a relatively narrow mechanism of border cooperation to a formal regional organisation. Within this approach, the formation of the SCO is understood not as a single political decision taken in 2001, but as the outcome of the consistent development of multilateral relations during 1996–2001.

The Regional Security Complex Theory developed by B. Buzan and O. Wæver is used to explain the structural preconditions for the development of cooperation. Of central analytical importance is the

proposition concerning the territorial interdependence of security problems, according to which threats and responses to them cannot be considered exclusively at the level of individual states. At the same time, Central Asia is not treated in this study as a fully autonomous regional security complex. Its embeddedness within a broader post-Soviet security system is taken into account, alongside the simultaneously intensifying interaction of the Central Asian states with China. This approach makes it possible to view the formation of the «Shanghai Five» and the subsequent establishment of the SCO as a process that unfolded at the intersection of post-Soviet and Central Asian-Chinese security dynamics.

The study is based on the principles of historicism, systemic analysis, and comprehensive analysis. The principle of historicism makes it possible to examine the events of 1996–2001 in their sequential development and causal interrelationship. The systemic approach is applied to analyse the interaction of the participating states as elements of an emerging regional mechanism of cooperation, while the comprehensive approach enables the comparison of military-political, institutional, and regional factors.

The study employs historical-genetic, problem-chronological, historical-comparative, and institutional methods. The historical-genetic method is used to identify the preconditions for the emergence of the «Shanghai Five» and the sequence of its transformation into the SCO. The problem-chronological method makes it possible to distinguish the principal stages in the development of cooperation: the formation of the military-border mechanism in 1996–1997, the expansion of the multilateral agenda in 1998–2000, and the transition to a formal regional organisation in 2001. The historical-comparative method is used to compare the content of interstate documents adopted in different years and to identify changes in the objectives, areas, and instruments of cooperation. The documents were compared according to several principal parameters: the composition of participants, the stated objectives of interaction, the nature of the threats under consideration, the principal areas of cooperation, and the degree of institutional consolidation of the agreements reached. This approach makes it possible to trace the transition from predominantly military-border issues and mutual confidence-building measures to a broader agenda of regional security, political coordination, and countering transnational threats, as well as to identify changes in the composition of participants and forms of multilateral interaction. Institutional analysis is aimed at identifying the mechanisms through which norms, practices, and forms of multilateral interaction were gradually consolidated.

The combination of these sources and methods makes it possible to interpret the transition from the «Shanghai Five» to the SCO not merely as a sequence of diplomatic meetings and agreements, but as a historical process of institutionalising regional cooperation, driven by changes in the regional security environment and the growing interdependence of states in responding to common challenges.

Results

Transformation of the Regional Security Environment and the Preconditions for the Formation of the «Shanghai Five».

The formation of the «Shanghai Five» in the mid-1990s took place amid a substantial transformation of the political and strategic landscape of Eurasia following the collapse of the USSR. The emergence of newly independent states in Central Asia altered the configuration of borders, security mechanisms, and interstate interaction. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan acquired independent international legal status, while at the same time inheriting a range of unresolved issues related to the former Soviet-Chinese border, military infrastructure, the regime of border territories, and the need to develop new forms of political confidence between the states of the region and China. Under these conditions, the security problem had a distinctly regional character. Threats and risks arising in border areas could not be effectively addressed exclusively through bilateral mechanisms. For Russia and the Central Asian states, maintaining stability in the eastern direction remained important, while China was interested in creating a predictable and secure environment along its western borders. It was precisely the interdependence of security problems that created the preconditions for the formation of a multilateral mechanism.

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory, this stage can be regarded as a manifestation of the territorial interconnectedness of national security interests. However, with regard to Central Asia, an important methodological limitation must be taken into account. In the concept developed by B. Buzan and O. Wæver, Central Asia is not identified as a fully independent regional security complex, but is considered in relation to the broader post-Soviet space, in which Russia continued to play a system-forming role. At the same time, the Chinese factor gradually increased the significance of the eastern dimension of regional security. Therefore, the emergence of the «Shanghai Five» should be understood not

as the result of the formation of a fully autonomous Central Asian security system, but as a product of the intersection between post-Soviet and Chinese-Central Asian security dynamics.

The first institutional expression of this tendency was the Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area, signed in Shanghai on 26 April 1996 by Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan [1]. Official SCO materials subsequently linked the emergence of the «Shanghai Five» directly to this agreement and to the subsequent Moscow Agreement of 1997. The significance of the 1996 document lay not only in regulating specific military issues. It marked the transition of the states from a logic of mutual suspicion to coordinated measures of transparency and restrictions on military activity in the border area. From an institutional perspective, the agreement created a sustainable format for multilateral meetings within which the five states began to develop common norms and practices of interaction. It is precisely here that the first connection with regionalism theory becomes apparent. At the initial stage, the «Shanghai Five» did not yet constitute an international organisation in the full sense of the term. There were no permanent bodies, secretariat, or developed normative structure. Nevertheless, as early as 1996, a mechanism of regular coordination of interests emerged, based on a shared regional problem. This makes it possible to interpret this period as the initial, weakly institutionalised phase of regional cooperation.

The next step was taken on 24 April 1997, when the Agreement on the Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in the Border Area was signed in Moscow [2]. The official history of the SCO regards the agreements of 1996 and 1997 as interrelated documents that established a mechanism of mutual confidence in the military sphere and contributed to the development of partnership relations among the five states. Whereas the 1996 agreement was primarily aimed at establishing confidence and preventing unintended escalation, the 1997 agreement brought cooperation to a higher level by providing for measures to reduce military capabilities in the border area. Thus, interaction acquired a more structured character. The five states did not merely declare their readiness for peaceful coexistence, but began to establish a mechanism of reciprocal obligations.

Historically, it was the combination of the 1996–1997 agreements that created the core of the future «Shanghai Process». However, its content at this stage remained relatively narrow. The principal objective was to stabilise the border area and establish military-political confidence. It would therefore be premature to speak of fully developed regionalism in relation to this period. A more accurate characterisation is that this stage marked the emergence of a sustainable multilateral practice that subsequently created the institutional preconditions for the expansion of cooperation.

From Border Settlement to the Expansion of Regional Cooperation.

A qualitative transformation of the «Shanghai Five» began to emerge after the initial military-border tasks had been addressed. The regularity of meetings between the heads of state gradually transformed the agreements of 1996–1997 from isolated diplomatic acts into the foundation of a continuously reproduced format of interaction.

The Almaty meeting of the heads of the five states on 3 July 1998 was of particular significance in this process. The joint statement adopted following the meeting [3] became a link between the initial agenda of military-border confidence-building and broader areas of multilateral cooperation. Subsequently, the Bishkek Declaration of 1999 [4] explicitly referred to the agreements embodied in the Joint Statement of the participants in the 1998 Almaty meeting, thereby confirming the continuity in the development of the format. The significance of the Almaty meeting lies primarily in the fact that cooperation among the five states began to move beyond the initial logic of border demilitarisation. The regularity of the meetings itself became an independent political resource. Sustainable practices of consultation, exchange of positions, and coordination of approaches to regional issues began to take shape.

This change was directly reflected in the text of the Almaty Joint Statement. Already in its preamble, the states proceeded from the objective of «expanding and strengthening multilateral cooperation», linking further interaction not only with the implementation of the 1996–1997 agreements, but also with ensuring stability and security in a broader regional context [3]. The document's reference to the role of economic cooperation in strengthening regional peace and stability is also significant. Thus, the Almaty Statement demonstrated the beginning of the functional expansion of the «Shanghai Process»: the military-border mechanism retained its original significance, but gradually became a foundation for the development of broader multilateral interaction. The wording concerning the «expansion and strengthening of multilateral cooperation» is indeed contained in the Almaty Statement; the same document also links economic cooperation with regional peace and stability.

From the perspective of regionalism, it is precisely at this stage that one can speak of the gradual functional expansion of cooperation. Regional institutions are often formed not instantaneously, but through the expansion of an initially narrow range of tasks. In the case of the «Shanghai Five», border issues constituted this original core. As mutual confidence strengthened, the mechanism began to acquire broader political content.

This tendency was further developed in Bishkek on 25 August 1999. The Bishkek Declaration emphasised the need to expand and deepen multilateral cooperation and recorded the parties' interest not only in security, but also in the further development of interaction in other areas [4]. The text of the declaration of the five states noted the results achieved since 1996 and the prospects for further cooperation in the field of security and other areas. The Bishkek Declaration is of particular interest for the analysis of institutionalisation because it demonstrates a change in the very understanding of the «Shanghai Process».

Whereas in 1996–1997 its legitimacy was directly linked to the need to address border-related issues, by 1999 interaction was increasingly perceived by the parties as an independent multilateral platform. At the same time, the regional security environment was undergoing significant change. Threats that could not be reduced to traditional interstate conflicts gradually came to the forefront. Political instability in certain parts of Central Asia, the growing activity of radical groups, transnational crime, and extremist threats contributed to a broader understanding of security. It is precisely here that Regional Security Complex Theory helps explain why the functional expansion of the «Shanghai Five» proceeded relatively rapidly. The security of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, and China depended not only on the condition of their immediate borders, but also on developments within neighbouring states and transnational spaces. The emerging threats were interdependent in nature, which objectively stimulated multilateral coordination.

At the same time, the development of the «Shanghai Five» cannot be explained exclusively through the security dimension. Regionalism makes it possible to identify another aspect of the process: the states gradually became accustomed to regular summits, joint declarations, the coordination of positions, and the collective formulation of regional interests. Thus, security acted as a structural incentive, while institutionalisation served as the mechanism through which interaction was politically consolidated.

Expansion of the Security Agenda and the Transformation of the «Shanghai Five» in 1999–2000.

By the end of the 1990s, the distinction between the original military-border format and the new content of cooperation had become particularly evident. The five states increasingly discussed issues that were not directly related to the reduction of armed forces in the border area. Security acquired a comprehensive character, encompassing domestic stability, transnational threats, and political coordination. This tendency was further reflected at the meeting of the heads of state in Dushanbe in 2000. The changing nature of interaction was most clearly articulated in the Dushanbe Declaration of 5 July 2000. In the document, the parties declared their intention to make efforts to transform the «Shanghai Five» into a «regional structure of multilateral cooperation in various fields» [5]. This formulation is of fundamental importance for understanding the institutional evolution of the mechanism: for the first time, the prospects for its development were linked not only to the implementation of military-border agreements, but also to the formation of a broader regional structure. At the same time, the participants expressed their intention to deepen interaction in the political, diplomatic, trade and economic, military, military-technical, and other spheres in order to ensure regional security and stability [5]. Thus, the Dushanbe Declaration marked the transition from a functionally limited mechanism to a model of multisectoral regional cooperation that directly preceded the establishment of the SCO. In this sense, the Dushanbe Declaration became an important stage in the evolution of the format. Uzbekistan participated in the meeting as an observer, which in itself indicated that the mechanism was moving beyond the original configuration of states directly connected by agreements concerning the former Soviet-Chinese border. Subsequent materials on the history of the organisation likewise identify the meetings of the «Shanghai Five» in Almaty in 1998 [3], Bishkek in 1999 [4], and Dushanbe in 2000 [5] as successive stages in its development.

The Uzbekistan factor was of fundamental importance. The state did not share a border with China and, consequently, had not been a participant in the original mechanism of military-border settlement. Its inclusion in the emerging format meant that the attractiveness of the «Shanghai Five» was no longer determined by its initial border-related function, but by a broader regional security agenda. This development can be regarded as one of the most convincing indications of institutional transformation. If participation in a format ceases to be determined exclusively by the original problem for which it was created, then the institutional logic itself acquires a degree of relative autonomy. The Dushanbe stage also demonstrated the strengthening of the political dimension of cooperation. The states began to formulate common approaches

to issues of sovereignty, domestic stability, and non-interference. As a result, the «Shanghai Five» gradually evolved into a platform in which security was understood not only in military, but also in political terms.

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory, Uzbekistan's inclusion also appears logical. Uzbekistan occupied an important geographical and political position in Central Asia, while many of the threats discussed within the framework of the «Shanghai Five» were transnational in nature. The formation of a broader system of regional interaction without Uzbekistan therefore had obvious limitations. At the same time, it is necessary to avoid a retrospective interpretation suggesting that the establishment of the SCO had already been predetermined in 1996. In 1996–1997, the primary focus was on a specific mechanism of confidence-building in the border area. It was only the subsequent evolution of regional threats, the accumulation of experience in multilateral meetings, and the expansion of the political agenda that led to the emergence of a new institutional quality.

Thus, the period 1999–2000 should be regarded as a transitional stage. On the one hand, the «Shanghai Five» retained the characteristics of an informal political mechanism. On the other hand, it was already ceasing to correspond to its original narrow function. A contradiction emerged between the expanding agenda of cooperation and the relatively weak degree of its institutional formalisation. The need to resolve this contradiction became one of the preconditions for the establishment of a new organisation.

Uzbekistan and the Establishment of the SCO: From a Border Mechanism to a Regional Organisation.

The decisive transformation took place in June 2001. The inclusion of Uzbekistan and the subsequent establishment of the SCO signified a change not only in the number of participants, but also in the very principle underlying the organisation of regional cooperation. The official Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation of 15 June 2001 [6] explicitly indicated the continuity of the new organisation with the «Shanghai Five». The document emphasised the importance of the previously achieved level of good-neighbourliness, mutual confidence, and cooperation, as well as the need to raise interaction to a higher level.

An important development was that the membership of the new organisation included Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This finally overcame the original linkage of the mechanism to states directly connected by a common set of border-related issues with China. This makes it possible to regard 2001 as a dividing line between two historical forms of interaction. The «Shanghai Five» emerged as an instrument for addressing a limited set of military-border issues. The SCO, by contrast, was established as a regional organisation with broader objectives. Here, the institutional logic of regionalism becomes evident: the accumulation of interaction, the expansion of functions, and the increase in the number of participants created the need for the formal consolidation of a new level of cooperation.

The continuity of the format, together with its qualitative transformation, was explicitly enshrined in the Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO. The document linked the need to transform the previous mechanism with raising the «Shanghai Five» «to a higher level of cooperation» [6]. Particularly indicative is the provision that the organisation was formed on the basis of the agreements of 1996 and 1997, while by 2001 cooperation had already extended to the political, trade and economic, cultural, scientific and technological, and other spheres [6]. Thus, the SCO's founding document itself recorded both institutional continuity with the military-border mechanism of the 1990s and the substantial expansion of its functional content that had taken place over five years. This is directly confirmed by the Declaration: it refers to raising the mechanism to a higher level and separately emphasises that cooperation had already extended into the political, trade and economic, cultural, scientific and technological, and other spheres.

Together with the Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO, the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism was signed on 15 June 2001 [7]. Official SCO documents date it specifically to 15 June 2001 and classify it among the organisation's fundamental international agreements. The significance of the Convention extends far beyond the legal formalisation of cooperation in a single sphere. Historically, it marked a fundamental transformation of the security agenda. In 1996, the principal focus was on the military activities of states in the area of their common borders; by 2001, terrorism, separatism, and extremism had become central to normative interaction. This shift reflected a transformation in the very understanding of threats. The states were moving from a predominantly traditional model of security, based on controlling armed forces and preventing interstate conflict, towards a model in which transnational and intra-regional risks played a substantial role.

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory, this signifies a change in the character of the securitisation of the regional space. Threats were no longer localised exclusively at state borders. They could move across the territories of several states, assume a networked character, and simultaneously affect

the domestic stability of different political systems. It was precisely for this reason that cooperation had to acquire a more permanent and institutionalised form.

At the same time, the establishment of the SCO should not be reduced to a Russian-Chinese project or explained solely by the convergence of the strategic interests of Moscow and Beijing. Russia and China indeed played a key role; however, institutionalisation became possible because the Central Asian states were also interested in a mechanism that combined external security, domestic stability, and international coordination. Uzbekistan's accession is particularly indicative in this regard. If the «Shanghai Process» had retained an exclusively border-related function, Uzbekistan's participation would have lacked an obvious institutional logic. Its accession demonstrates that by 2001 the format had already evolved into a mechanism of broader regional regulation.

The Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO and the Shanghai Convention should therefore be considered together. The former established the institutional form, while the latter defined the substantive core of the new security agenda. Taken together, these two documents demonstrate the transition from an informal multilateral process to a formal regional organisation.

From the «Shanghai Five» to the SCO: The Interaction of Two Logics of Historical Development.

The history of the formation of the SCO in 1996–2001 demonstrates that the process cannot be adequately explained by any single theoretical model. Regional Security Complex Theory and regionalism reveal different but interconnected dimensions of the same historical process. Regional Security Complex Theory helps explain why cooperation emerged precisely in this part of Eurasia and why security issues constituted its initial substantive focus. Geographical proximity, the legacy of the former Soviet-Chinese border, the interdependence of the interests of Russia, China, and the Central Asian states, as well as the spread of transnational threats, created structural pressures favouring multilateral interaction.

Regionalism, in turn, helps explain how the initial interaction evolved into a more sustainable institution. The 1996 Agreement established the first multilateral confidence-building mechanism. The 1997 Agreement deepened this mechanism through specific measures for the reduction of armed forces. The Almaty Joint Statement of 1998 signalled the expansion of political interaction. The Bishkek Declaration of 1999 consolidated the tendency towards deeper multilateral cooperation. The Dushanbe Declaration of 2000 demonstrated the expansion of the regional agenda and the emergence of Uzbekistan as a participant in the developing mechanism. Finally, the documents adopted in June 2001 transformed the accumulated practices into a formal international organisation.

Consequently, the historical logic of the process was not linear but cumulative. No single document, taken in isolation, created the SCO. A new institutional quality emerged as a result of the successive accumulation of agreements, practices, political confidence, and a shared perception of threats. For this reason, the term «institutionalisation» should be applied to the period 1996–2001 in a differentiated manner. By 2001, a transition had occurred from a weakly institutionalised format to a formal international organisation. However, this did not yet signify the final completion of its institutional and legal formalisation. This is confirmed by the fact that the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was signed only on 7 June 2002. The official document established the organisation's objectives, principles, structure, and principal areas of activity [8]. Consequently, 2001 should be understood as marking the completion of the process of establishing the SCO, but not the completion of the organisation's entire institutionalisation.

This distinction is of fundamental importance for historical periodisation. If the years 1996–2001 are regarded exclusively as the prehistory of the SCO, the independent significance of the «Shanghai Process» is lost. Conversely, if 2001 is treated as the moment at which institutionalisation was fully completed, the role of the Charter and the subsequent establishment of permanent bodies is overlooked. It is more accurate to define 1996–2001 as a distinct stage in the transition from a multilateral military-border mechanism to a formally established regional organisation.

As a result, the analysis of the documents demonstrates a consistent transformation of three principal parameters of cooperation. First, its substantive scope expanded: from military confidence-building and force reductions to political stability and countering transnational threats. Second, the composition of participants changed: Uzbekistan's accession represented a departure from the original border-related logic. Third, the degree of institutionalisation increased: from separate agreements and annual meetings to the establishment of an international organisation. It is precisely the combination of these processes that makes it possible to speak of the transformation of the «Shanghai Five», rather than merely its renaming. The SCO emerged as a new institutional quality formed on the basis of accumulated experience in multilateral cooperation.

Thus, the transition from the «Shanghai Five» to the SCO in 1996–2001 represented a historical process involving the interaction of two logics. The first — the logic of regional security — determined the necessity of cooperation and the expansion of the range of common threats. The second — the logic of regionalism — provided the institutional consolidation of this interaction. Regional Security Complex Theory explains the structural causes of rapprochement among the states, while regionalism reveals the mechanism of the gradual transition from functionally limited border cooperation to a formal regional organisation. It is precisely the combination of these two approaches that makes it possible to interpret the formation of the SCO as the result of the historically evolving interdependence between security and the institutionalisation of regional cooperation.

Discussion

The findings make it possible to interpret the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 1996–2001 not merely as a sequence of interstate agreements or as a consequence of the convergence of the foreign-policy interests of Russia and China, but as a more complex process of regional institution-building under conditions of a transforming security environment. Such an approach requires the findings of the present study to be compared with several strands that have developed in the scholarly literature: studies of regionalism, research on the specific features of regional interaction in Central Asia, geopolitical interpretations of the SCO, and studies of the organisation as a mechanism for responding to non-traditional threats.

The concept of new regionalism is theoretically important for understanding the process of the SCO's formation. Within this approach, a region is understood not as a predetermined geographical unit, but as a space that is formed and consolidated through interaction among states and other actors. B. Hettne and F. Söderbaum associated the development of regionness with a gradual increase in the intensity of interaction and the formation of sustainable regional structures [9]. This approach makes it possible to assess the history of the «Shanghai Five» from a different perspective. In 1996, it was not yet a fully fledged international organisation; however, the regularisation of meetings, the emergence of legally formalised commitments, and the subsequent expansion of the substantive agenda gradually increased the level of institutionalisation of interaction. The transition from military confidence-building agreements to the establishment of an organisation in 2001 can therefore be regarded as a process of the formation of regionness, rather than merely as the diplomatic history of several agreements. Understanding regionalism as a process, rather than exclusively in terms of the existence of a formal organisation, corresponds to the principal propositions of Hettne and Söderbaum's approach.

At the same time, the application of general theories of regionalism to Central Asia requires caution. In A. Bohr's studies, regionalism in the region is characterised by significant internal constraints arising from interstate contradictions, border and resource issues, and the desire of states to preserve political autonomy [10]. R. Allison likewise draws attention to the weakness of many forms of regional cooperation in Central Asia and uses the concept of «virtual regionalism» to describe the gap between declarations of cooperation and the actual depth of integration [11]. These observations are of fundamental importance for interpreting the early history of the SCO. They demonstrate that the transition from the «Shanghai Five» to the SCO cannot automatically be equated with regional integration in the European understanding of the process. Central Asia was characterised by considerably more cautious forms of interstate interaction, which preserved a high degree of state sovereignty and an intergovernmental mode of decision-making. Yet this very fact makes it possible to refine the findings of the present study. The SCO was not the result of the internal integration of the five Central Asian states. Moreover, Russia and China participated in its formation from the outset, while Turkmenistan did not join the organisation. Consequently, the early SCO represented a different type of regionalism: regional cooperation formed at the intersection of the interests of the Central Asian states and two major neighbouring powers. In this respect, the history of the «Shanghai Five» supports the conclusion that regionalism may develop not only through the internal self-organisation of small and medium-sized states, but also as an institutional mechanism for structuring relations between regional states and centres of power external to Central Asia proper.

This circumstance is closely related to the Regional Security Complex Theory developed by B. Buzan and O. Wæver. The authors proceed from the assumption that the security of geographically proximate states is highly interdependent, as a result of which the principal processes of securitisation and desecuritisation are clustered at the regional level [12]. At the same time, when applying this theory to the SCO, it is necessary to take into account the configuration of the post-Soviet space proposed by Buzan and Wæver themselves. In

their framework, Central Asia is not represented as a fully autonomous regional security complex independent of Russia; rather, its dynamics are examined within a broader post-Soviet complex organised around Russia as a central power [12].

It is precisely at this point that the findings of the present study make it possible to further develop the application of Regional Security Complex Theory. The emergence of the «Shanghai Five» demonstrates that, in the 1990s, Central Asian regional security was being shaped not only within the post-Soviet system. China was gradually becoming a direct participant in the regional security mechanism. The agreements of 1996 and 1997 linked Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan with China within a single system of confidence-building measures and military limitations. The early «Shanghai Process» can therefore be interpreted as a mechanism of interaction between the post-Soviet security structure and an emerging Central Asian-Chinese security dimension. This conclusion does not require a revision of Buzan and Wæver's concept, but makes it possible to demonstrate the more complex interregional dynamics that were gradually taking shape along the eastern boundaries of the post-Soviet space.

Another influential strand of scholarship explains the development of the SCO primarily through China's interests. Chien-peng Chung regards the organisation as an important instrument for strengthening Chinese influence in Central Asia and demonstrates Beijing's interest in its institutional consolidation [13]. In his subsequent work, he specifically analyses China's role in the institutionalisation of the SCO and emphasises the Chinese leadership's interest in developing the organisation as a mechanism for advancing its regional objectives [14]. These studies convincingly demonstrate the significance of the Chinese factor and help explain why Beijing was interested in transforming the initial border mechanism into a more sustainable structure of regional cooperation.

However, reducing the formation of the SCO primarily to Chinese strategy appears insufficient to explain the entire process of 1996–2001. An analysis of the sequence of documents demonstrates that institutionalisation developed through the mutual adjustment of the interests of all participants. Russia was interested in preserving its role in the security system of the post-Soviet space; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan sought border stabilisation and the reduction of military-political risks; and China aimed to ensure the security of its western borderlands and develop stable relations with the newly independent Central Asian states. Uzbekistan's later participation further broadened the regional basis of cooperation. Chinese activity was therefore an important, but not the sole, explanatory factor.

A similar conclusion is presented in the collective study by A.J.K. Bailes, P. Dunay, Pan Guang, and M. Troitskiy prepared for SIPRI. The authors regard the SCO specifically as a regional security institution that combines the interests of its member states, the task of managing potential Russian-Chinese competition, and responses to transnational threats [15]. This approach is particularly close to the findings of the present study because it avoids two extremes: viewing the SCO exclusively as an instrument of Russia and China and, conversely, interpreting the organisation as a fully autonomous supranational actor. The SCO emerged as an intergovernmental institution in which diverse national interests interacted, united by the need for a stable regional mechanism.

A particularly important issue in the historiography concerns the relationship between the SCO and non-traditional security. S. Aris argues that one of the organisation's central functions became countering the so-called «three evils» — terrorism, separatism, and extremism — and suggests that the SCO should be viewed primarily as a regional mechanism for responding to non-traditional threats rather than as an anti-Western military-political bloc [16]. This conclusion is consistent with our analysis of the evolution of the relevant documents. Between the 1996 Agreement and the Shanghai Convention of 2001, a fundamental shift in the object of security is clearly observable: from regulating the conduct of armed forces in the border area to jointly responding to threats that were not confined to interstate military confrontation.

The present study, however, places a somewhat different emphasis on this issue. Countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism is interpreted not as the original cause of the emergence of the «Shanghai Five», but as the result of the expansion of its initial agenda. This distinction is important for historical periodisation. If the SCO is analysed primarily through the functions it performed after 2001, there is a risk of retrospectively projecting the organisation's subsequent counterterrorism specialisation back onto 1996. In fact, the original basis of cooperation concerned military confidence-building, reductions in armed forces, and the stabilisation of border areas. Non-traditional threats became a central element of the emerging system only as the regional security environment itself underwent transformation.

In another study, S. Aris directly associates the SCO with the formation of a distinctive model of Asian regionalism and draws attention to the specific features of its institutionalisation in comparison with other

regional organisations [17]. In his monograph *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, he likewise examines the development of the SCO as a distinct example of Eurasian regional cooperation and as a mechanism for ensuring regional security [18]. These arguments make it possible to place the early history of the SCO within the broader debate on the plurality of regionalism models. The European model of integration should not be treated as the sole benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of regional institutions. The SCO developed as a sovereignty-centred intergovernmental organisation whose institutional stability coexisted with a limited transfer of authority to supranational structures.

An important critical strand in the literature concerns the domestic political function of the SCO. T. Ambrosio draws attention to the consolidation within the organisation of norms related to sovereignty, non-interference, and the maintenance of the political stability of existing regimes [19]. R. Allison likewise emphasises the significance of regime security for regional structures in Central Asia [11]. These interpretations broaden the understanding of security within the SCO and demonstrate that the concept of regional stability may encompass not only the protection of states from external threats, but also the interest of political elites in preserving domestic order.

For the period 1996–2001, however, this approach should be applied with some caution. The normative dimension associated with sovereignty, non-interference, and domestic stability did indeed become more pronounced as the «Shanghai Process» expanded. Yet explaining the initial emergence of the «Shanghai Five» primarily in terms of authoritarian consolidation would be anachronistic. The source analysis demonstrates that the original core of cooperation was military-border in nature. The regime-political dimension is therefore better understood as one component of the subsequent functional transformation of the format rather than as the original cause of its emergence.

A comparison of the existing scholarly approaches makes it possible to identify the principal distinction of the interpretation proposed here. Studies of the SCO often examine individual aspects of its formation separately: as an element of Chinese policy in Central Asia [13], [14], as a product of Russian-Chinese interaction [15], as a mechanism for combating non-traditional threats [16], as a form of Eurasian regionalism [17], [18], or as a structure contributing to the consolidation of particular political norms [19]. Each of these approaches captures an important dimension of the process, but none fully explains the historical sequence of the transition from the agreements of 1996–1997 to the establishment of the SCO in 2001.

In Kazakhstani scholarly literature, the formation and development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation are examined primarily in the context of regional integration, security, the interaction of the Central Asian states with Russia and China, and Kazakhstan's place in the emerging system of Eurasian regionalism. One of the conceptual foundations of this strand of research is provided by the work of S.K. Kushkumbayev on regionalisation and integration processes in Central Asia. In examining geopolitical, ethno-political, and security-related factors of regional interaction, the author draws attention to the combination of the internal interests of the Central Asian states and the influence of external centres of power [20]. The significance of this position for the study of the history of the «Shanghai Five» and the SCO lies in the fact that the formation of regional mechanisms of cooperation can be understood not only as the outcome of major-power policies, but also as a process directly connected with the interests of the Central Asian states themselves.

The stages in the establishment and development of the SCO are analysed more directly by E.B. Akhmetov. The researcher examines the formation of the organisation in connection with the task of ensuring regional military-political security and traces the principal stages of its development and functioning [21]. In his interpretation, the period preceding the establishment of the SCO appears primarily as a stage in the formation of the preconditions for its subsequent organisational development. This approach is relevant to the present study, yet it also raises the question of whether a different periodisation is possible: the materials from 1996–2001 demonstrate that this period involved not only preparation for the future organisation, but also the successive institutionalisation of multilateral interaction.

An important strand of Kazakhstani scholarship concerns the study of the China factor and Kazakhstan's place within the SCO. A. Serikkaliyeva, A. Amirbek, and E. Batmaz analyse China's institutional diplomacy towards Kazakhstan through interaction within the SCO and the New Silk Road initiative [22]. The authors view the SCO primarily as a security mechanism, while simultaneously linking the organisation's development to the changing regional role of China. Kazakhstan, however, appears in their study not merely as a space for the implementation of Chinese policy, but also as a significant participant in multilateral interaction. This framing makes it possible to broaden the analysis of the agency of the Central

Asian states, although the authors focus mainly on a later stage in the organisation's development. Further development of this issue can be found in the study by M. Gubaidullina, A. Yelibayeva, and Q. Liu, devoted to the place of the SCO in the geopolitical configuration of Eurasia [23]. The authors examine the organisation as a multilateral format of interaction developing under conditions of regional interdependence among states and the simultaneous existence of differing national interests. Particular attention is paid to the energy dimension of cooperation, which demonstrates both the potential for cooperation and the persistence of contradictions among the participants. Of particular relevance to the present study is their treatment of the SCO as a space for coordinating the interests of several states rather than exclusively as an instrument of bilateral Russian-Chinese interaction.

In recent years, the broader theoretical context of the analysis of regional processes has also expanded considerably. L.F. Delovarova and A.B. Yermekov examine the prospects for creating a collective security system in Asia and the possibilities for Kazakhstani diplomacy in developing multilateral security mechanisms [24]. Although this work is not directly devoted to the history of the SCO's establishment, it is important for understanding a broader trend in Kazakhstani scholarship, in which Kazakhstan is regarded as a participant in the formation of regional security institutions rather than merely as an object of the policies of larger powers. This perspective is methodologically consistent with the need to take into account the roles of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan when analysing the formation of the «Shanghai Process».

The issue of Kazakhstan's agency in contemporary integration processes is addressed most explicitly in the work of K. Usserova, F. Kydyrbek, and F. Kukeyeva, which examines Kazakhstan's place in Eurasian regionalism [25]. The authors propose moving beyond an understanding of Eurasian regionalism exclusively as a post-Soviet integration space and instead regard Kazakhstan as an independent participant in broader continental processes, including interaction within the SCO [25]. Such an approach is of fundamental importance for the historical analysis of 1996–2001, since it makes it possible to view Kazakhstan's participation in the «Shanghai Five» not as a derivative of Russian-Chinese rapprochement, but as an independent dimension of its foreign-policy and regional strategy.

Thus, Kazakhstani studies demonstrate a gradual expansion of approaches to the study of the SCO: from issues of regional integration and military-political security to analyses of the China factor, multilateral interdependence, and Kazakhstan's agency within Eurasian regionalism. At the same time, in the works examined above, the historical dynamics of the specific period 1996–2001 do not constitute an independent subject of comprehensive analysis through a combination of regionalism theory and Regional Security Complex Theory. This makes it possible to clarify the research position of the present article: the transition from the «Shanghai Five» to the SCO is interpreted not merely as a result of Russian-Chinese rapprochement or as a preparatory stage in the establishment of the organisation, but as an independent process of regional institutionalisation in which the interests and actions of the Central Asian states were themselves among the factors shaping the multilateral mechanism of cooperation.

The findings of the present study make it possible to integrate these interpretations through two analytical logics. Regional Security Complex Theory explains the structural necessity of cooperation arising from geographical proximity, the interdependence of threats, the post-Soviet security legacy, and China's incorporation into regional dynamics. Regionalism, by contrast, explains the form through which this cooperation developed: the gradual consolidation of norms, the regularisation of meetings, the expansion of functions, the increase in the number of participants, and the subsequent transition to an international organisation.

It is precisely the interaction of these two processes that explains why the «Shanghai Five» did not disappear after the initial tasks of border confidence-building had been addressed. Had the mechanism been connected exclusively with the technical settlement of border issues, progress in this sphere might have led to a decline in its significance. The opposite occurred: the format expanded both its functions and its membership. This indicates the emergence of an institutional dynamic in which an already established mechanism began to be used to address new common problems.

This interpretation also makes it possible to refine the concept of institutionalisation. The establishment of the SCO on 15 June 2001 represented a qualitative turning point, but did not signify the completion of the organisation's entire institutional and legal framework. The SCO Charter was signed in 2002, while permanent institutions were established later. The period 1996–2001 should therefore be defined as a distinct historical stage in the transition from a weakly institutionalised mechanism of military-border cooperation to a formally established regional organisation, rather than as a process of fully completed institutionalisation.

Accordingly, comparison with the existing scholarly literature confirms the need for a multidimensional explanation of the SCO's formation. The geopolitical interests of Russia and China were an important factor, but by themselves they do not explain the expansion of the institutional basis of cooperation. Non-traditional threats exerted a decisive influence on the formation of the new agenda, but the organisation initially grew out of a military-border mechanism. The characteristics of the political regimes of the member states influenced the normative principles of interaction, but they were not the sole source of the emergence of the «Shanghai Process». In this sense, the history of 1996–2001 demonstrates the gradual convergence of structural security interdependence and the institutionalisation of regional cooperation, which constitutes the principal analytical distinction of the approach proposed in this study.

Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates that the transformation of the «Shanghai Five» into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation constituted a gradual process involving changes in the substantive content, membership, and institutional form of multilateral interaction. Three interconnected stages can be distinguished in the development of this process. In 1996–1997, the treaty-based and legal foundations of military-border confidence-building and the limitation of armed forces in border areas were established. In 1998–2000, the scope of cooperation expanded to include issues of political stability and responses to transnational threats, gradually altering the functional purpose of the original mechanism. In 2001, the enlargement of membership and the establishment of the SCO consolidated the transition to a formal regional organisation.

The analysis of interstate documents makes it possible to conclude that this transition was not the result of a single factor or the implementation of a predetermined model of regional order. Its substance was shaped through the coordination of state interests, the accumulation of experience in regular interaction, and changes in the nature of regional security challenges. In this regard, the participation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan was significant not only for the practical implementation of the agreements reached, but also for the formation of the multilateral mechanism itself. Uzbekistan's inclusion at the final stage of the period under study confirmed the transformation of the original configuration of cooperation and the expansion of its regional basis.

The combination of Regional Security Complex Theory and regionalism makes it possible to distinguish between two interconnected aspects of this historical process. The former explains the conditions under which the security of neighbouring states became increasingly interdependent and required coordination at the regional level; the latter makes it possible to trace how this need acquired institutional expression through regular meetings, agreements, common principles of interaction, and, ultimately, the establishment of the organisation. On this basis, the period 1996–2001 should be regarded as a distinct stage in the formation of the SCO, during which the original mechanism of cooperation underwent a qualitative transformation. The establishment of the organisation in 2001 marked the completion of this stage, whereas the adoption of the SCO Charter in 2002 and the subsequent formation of its permanent bodies belonged to the next stage of institutional development.

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