

## ARTICLE

# Shanghai Cooperation Organization: The End of Mongolia's Observership

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**Abstract:** *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has evolved as a regionally important and internationally attractive regional organization. Albeit its inherent challenges of dealing with competitive interests of great powers, regional powers, and Central Asia states, the SCO has become well institutionalized as an organization, endured during the global pandemics and geopolitical tensions, and kept its focus on Central Asia. Mongolia had been welcomed by its two powerful members, China and Russia, to become a full member of the organization, but this invitation was not uniformly endorsed by Mongolian political leaders, pundits, and even the public. This resulted in an observer status. However, last September, the SCO merged both observer and partner statuses - ending Mongolia's unique status of the observer. This article argues a key reason for Mongolia's hesitance in joining the SCO is its explicit regional identification with East Asia, not Central Asia. We will discuss Mongolia's involvement during different phases of the organizational evolution, analyze the internal debate about the country's membership, and present our explanation of contemporary Mongolia's identification with the East Asian region.*

**Keywords:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Geopolitics, Foreign Policy, Central and East Asia, Regional Organization

## Introduction

On 1 September 2025, leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member countries issued “the Tianjin Declaration of the Council of Heads of State

of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” - that highlighted milestones of the organization and approved the “SCO Development Strategy for the Next 10 Years

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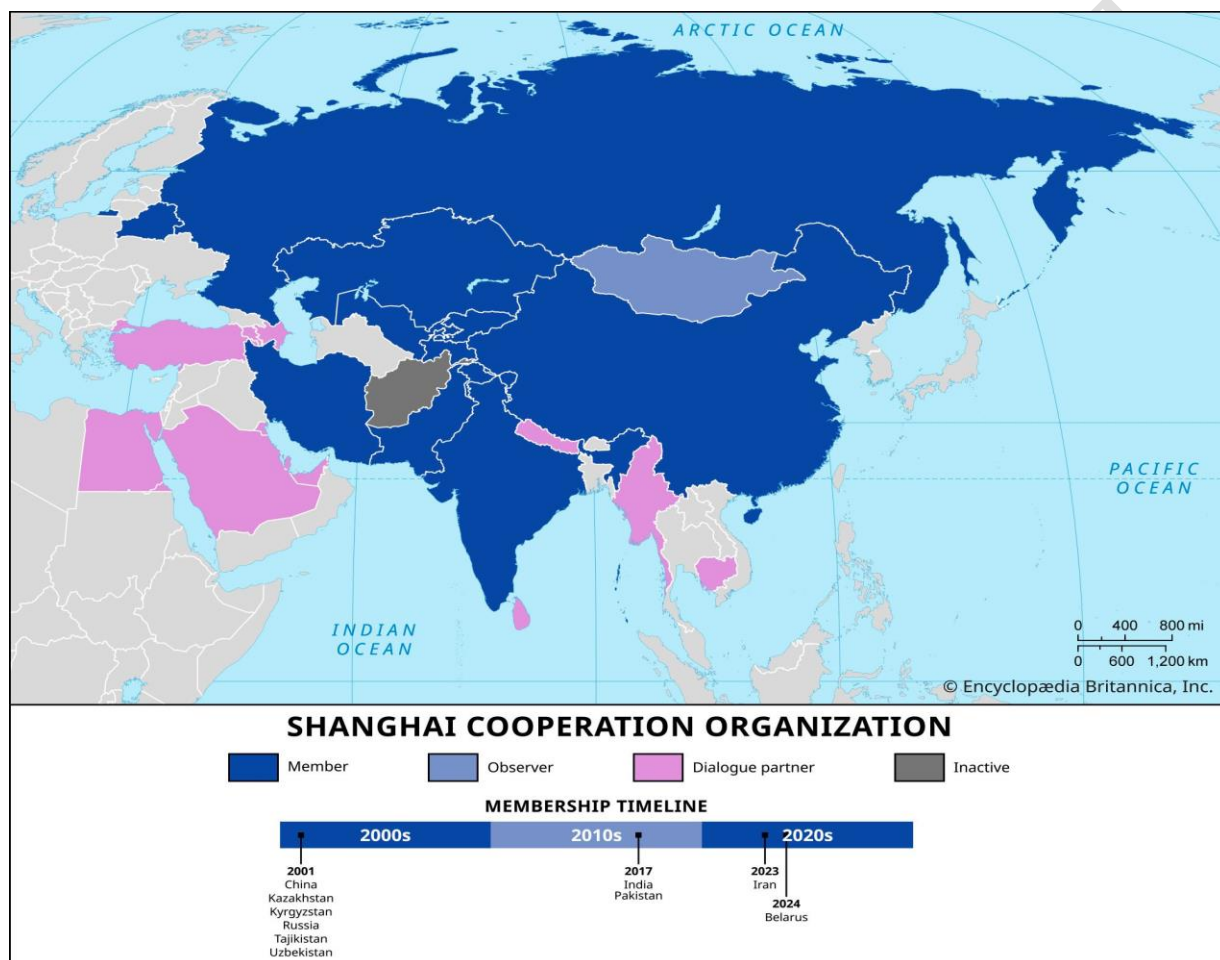


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(2026-2035).”(SCO, 2025) The Tianjin declaration also ended the observer status - which was considered as a transitional status between the dialogue partner and the full member.

In 2004, Mongolia was given the first observer status, but it had been under constant

pressure from China and Russia to become the organization's full member. In fact, Mongolia's membership would have filled the gap in the organization's political map.



Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shanghai-Cooperation-Organization>

Then, in 2005, the SCO welcomed India, Iran, and Pakistan as the next group of observers while rejecting the US application for the observer. Afghanistan was accepted as an observer in 2012 and Belarus in 2015. Out of six observers, India and Pakistan became full members in 2017 at the Summit in Astana, Iran in 2023 at the Summit in New Delhi, and Belarus in 2024 at the Astana

Summit. Nevertheless, the Tianjin decision had implications for the remaining two observers: Afghanistan and Mongolia. Although Afghanistan is one of the key security concerns for Central Asia, this decision relieved members of the SCO from debating the recognition of the Taliban regime and removing Afghanistan from the potential membership list. Since 2021, the

SCO suspended the participation of Afghanistan from the SCO summits and activities.

For Mongolia, the observer status used to be a safe haven based on the country's foreign policy stance of neutrality and lack of practical engagements with Central and Eurasian states. However, following the SCO summit, President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin convened with President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa for the Seventh Trilateral Summit (Council of Heads of State of the SCO, 2025). This summit was initiated by Mongolian side, but China and Russia occasionally agree to conduct it as a side-meeting during the SCO summit.

The intriguing question is why, after a three-year hiatus, Chinese and Russian

leaders agreed to reconvene this summit. It is difficult to surmise whether they decided to praise Mongolia's continued stance of neutrality or to coax and even corner Mongolia to support their geopolitical interests, especially joining in the SCO. The answer remains difficult, but we assume the internal debate concerning the SCO membership will continue in the coming years. Therefore, this paper examines Mongolia's involvement during different phases of the SCO evolution, analyses the membership debate in Mongolia, and presents our explanation of Mongolia's regional identification with East Asia rather than Central Asia.

### **The SCO Evolution and Mongolia's Involvement**

#### *Earlier evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Mongolia's stance*

In April 1996, the presidents of China, Russia and three newly independent former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—met in Shanghai (later known as the Shanghai Five) to sign the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions (Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions, 1996). This was a critical issue for all five States because the Soviet Union then Russia had maintained large military installations and infrastructure in these Central Asian States against China as well as in support of its war in Afghanistan. In the following year, in Moscow, these five States signed the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions as a significant step in confidence-building and the reduction of security concerns, especially

for Beijing. These treaties have required a series of measures for demilitarizing and verifying the military force reduction process.

At that time, Mongolia was not invited to the Shanghai Five meeting for three reasons: First, the Soviet military withdrawal from Mongolia was agreed in 1986 and completed by 1992. Second, Mongolia had downsized its military following the Sino–Mongolian normalization in 1989 and had declared in its new Constitution and policy documents to maintain a small, capable, professionally oriented self-defense force. Third, Mongolia and China had concluded a border treaty and demarcated the common border in the early 1960s. In contrast, China's border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan had not been fully settled.

When the Shanghai Five meeting reached its initial objectives by 2000, the five States began to formalize the meeting as a mechanism to promote regional cooperation and to deal with immediate challenges such as transnational issues (crime and religious extremism). The presidents of these five States, plus Uzbekistan, declared the establishment of the SCO in 2001 and signed the SCO Charter, which explains the purpose, structure and operating framework for the organization (SCO Secretariat, Shanghai Declaration on the establishment of the SCO, 2001). The timing of this establishment coincided with the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, China's increased concern over the so-called three evils (terrorism, separatism and extremism), a series of suicide attacks in Russia and the activities of armed groups along the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

As a result, the SCO quickly shifted its attention to counterterrorism and agreed to establish the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, a permanent body for coordination and information sharing, in Uzbekistan. In this period, neither the SCO members nor Mongolia were interested in each other. Although Mongolia borders the Chinese Xinjiang Uyghur region, the area is well controlled, and Mongolia does not face any terrorist threats. As well, Mongolian policy and academic practitioners have not been in favor of the SCO because it would be dominated by China and Russia. The majority of these practitioners have preferred to reach out to other regional organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO), rather than join the SCO.

In 2004, the SCO emerged as an ambitious regional organization. The permanent secretariat, which is located in Beijing and serves as a coordinating and implementing body, has established partnerships with the United Nations (as an observer), the Commonwealth of Independent States of the former Soviet republics and even regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union and the African Union (Dorjjugder & Nyamjav, 2021). Since then, the SCO has become more active and organized through annual summits: the Council of Heads of State (presidents) in the spring and the Council of Heads of Government (premiers and prime ministers) in the fall. During this period, the SCO began taking steps as if it was becoming a political and military alliance against the United States and its allies in Europe. The Defense Ministers' Meeting and military exercises have now become regular events. In 2005, the SCO issued a demand to the United States and NATO forces to withdraw from Central Asia (SCO, 2005). In the same year, the SCO signed an agreement with the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which is a Russia-led military alliance that includes former Soviet republics.

The militarization and security cooperation were primarily pushed by Russia rather than China, which has seen the SCO as a venue to promote political and economic ties. In that period, more countries expressed interest in either joining or collaborating with the SCO. In Mongolia, the SCO membership discourse resurged. Some people in Ulaanbaatar began to see the benefit of

joining the SCO, such as (1) a one-stop diplomatic venue to meet multiple leaders, (2) participation in regionalization efforts, especially economic, and (3) participation in regional law-enforcement activities.

But many people were still hesitant to join the SCO due to China and Russia explicitly using the venue for their foreign policy agendas. As a result, Mongolia became the first observer of the SCO in 2004. Since then, the observers have expanded: India, Iran and Pakistan became observers in 2005,

Afghanistan in 2012 and Belarus in 2015. It also set up a mechanism, the Dialogue Partner, which now includes Sri Lanka, Turkey, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, Armenia, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Maldives, Myanmar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Laos. Unarguably, the SCO has become an important regional organization that includes two great powers and Central Asian States, excluding Turkmenistan, which is a declared neutral State.

### *Sudden calls for permanent neutrality and full membership*

In 2014, Mongolian President Elbegdorj Tsakhia hoped to welcome the Chinese and Russian presidents together for a trilateral summit in Ulaanbaatar. Instead, both presidents made separate visits to Mongolia and then engaged in the first trilateral summit on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2014). In the following year, at the SCO summit in June, the three leaders agreed to merge three different concepts—Mongolia's Steppe Road, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road Initiative—through the creation of the China–Mongolia–Russia (CMR) Economic Corridor. Interestingly, on 8 September 2015, President Elbegdorj suddenly summoned the National Security Council, the country's highest-ranking consultative body and which consists of the president (chair), the speaker of the Parliament and the prime minister, to issue a recommendation to declare permanent neutrality status internationally (National Security Council of Mongolia, 2015). Immediately, the Presidential Office submitted a draft bill on the Permanent

Neutrality of Mongolia to the Parliament. However, the Parliament members were reluctant to consider the bill because the presidential initiative already divided diplomats and academics, many of whom were opposed to legalizing the country's neutrality stance permanently. It is not clear whether President Elbegdorj wanted to leave the foreign policy legacy in his second term or if he was under pressure from Beijing or Moscow. At that time, China had been encouraging Mongolia to upgrade its observer status to full membership in the SCO, while Russia was welcoming Mongolia to join the Eurasian Economic Union. Their agreement to conduct the trilateral summit on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Ulaanbaatar could be perceived as joint efforts to include Mongolia in the SCO. In 2016, at the third trilateral summit in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the three presidents signed a document for constructing the CMR Economic Corridor (China–Mongolia–Russia Trilateral Summit, 2016). In June 2017, the Chinese and Russian presidents did not organize a trilateral summit with Mongolia during the SCO summit in

Astana, Kazakhstan because the Mongolian presidential election was scheduled for two weeks after the summit.

A month before attending his first SCO summit, in Qingdao city of China's Shandong Province in 2018, newly elected Mongolian President Battulga Khaltmaa highlighted the need to collaborate closely with the two neighbours economically. According to him, this would require Mongolia to enter into a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union and to become a full member of the SCO. The president's statement regarding the SCO quickly backfired in the media and even led to intense, controversial debates.

On 10 June 2018 at the SCO summit and the Mongolia–China–Russia summit in Qingdao, President Battulga stated that “Mongolia is studying the possibility to upgrade the level of its participation in the SCO,” (President of Mongolia, 2018) followed by his first foreign policy press conference with the Mongolian media to explain the economic rationale for joining the SCO as a full member.

There are two possible explanations for President Battulga's move. One is purely economic, which is to attract infrastructure investment for the CMR Economic Corridor and to reduce trade barriers, especially customs tariffs, with the two neighbours. The other is to conduct foreign policy distinct from his predecessor by joining the Chinese

and Russian regionalization initiatives instead of declaring permanent neutrality. His sudden move to become a full member of the SCO, however, was not supported by the Parliament and instead resulted in a non-ending debate between supporters and opposers.

In 2019, at the SCO summit in Bishkek, President Battulga reaffirmed that Mongolia remained studying the possibility of full membership and explained that the Mongolian public was extremely divided on this matter (President of Mongolia, 2019). Political leaders along with foreign policy experts agreed to dispatch a study group to SCO member countries (Bolor, 2019). The study group of foreign policy experts visited China and India in 2019, but its planned trips to other member States were interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic.

Interestingly, both of these sudden initiatives ended in 2020. On 6 May 2020, the government annulled its earlier decision to declare permanent neutrality internationally. On 10 November 2020, at the virtual SCO summit, President Battulga did not talk about upgrading the country's status to full membership but stressed “the importance of the active involvement of the SCO observer States in economic, humanitarian and other practical activities” as well as “the road map for the development of cooperation between observers” (President of Mongolia, 2020). This, then, signaled the end of the full membership initiative.

#### *Dynamics from 2021 to 2025 (or the end of the observership)*

In this period, Mongolia's interaction with the SCO has evolved in a similar pattern. Mongolian political leaders attend the summits at the capacity of the observer: the

President attends the Summits of Heads of State and Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Ministers attend the Summits of Heads of Government. Russia and China pressure the

Mongolian side at the trilateral and bilateral level meetings. This triggers a brief debate among pundits whether Mongolia needs to become a full member of the organization. But these debates were not intense as they were in 2015 or 2018. In response, Mongolian Foreign Ministers had to make an official statement of Mongolia's commitment to the observer status. This period presented some unique challenges for the SCO members. *First*, the COVID-19 pandemic ruined Russia's master plan for hosting the SCO Heads of State Summit along with the BRICS forum in St. Petersburg in 2020. Similarly, Heads of the State Summit in Tajikistan in 2021, and Heads of Government Summit in New Delhi in November, 2020, Astana in 2021, and Beijing in 2022 were all impacted by the pandemic and conducted virtually. *Second*, China and India had military stand-offs in 2020-2022, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan had border clashes in 2021-2022, and Kazakhstan experienced the largest unrest in 2022 since its independence. The Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) deployed the military contingent briefly in support of the Kazakh authority to restore order (CSTO, 2025). *Third*, the US and NATO forces withdrew their forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the Taliban took control. The instability in Afghanistan clearly raises concern for many SCO members. *Finally*, Russia's war with Ukraine also complicates the internal dynamics of the organization. For instance, after a successful in-person summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan in 2023, India decided to host a virtual summit because of the arrest warrant of the International Criminal Court for Russian President

Vladimir Putin. This decision was followed by the 15th BRICS Summit in South Africa in 2023 - when the Russian president participated virtually due to the ICC warrant. In retrospect, the SCO overcame the global pandemic challenges, brought together its members with conflictual relations, avoided interfering in the Kazakhstan domestic situation, recognizing the Taliban regime, and taking sides in the Russia-Ukraine war. However, the last two summits demonstrate that the SCO will continue to be an important international organization with a core interest in Central Asia and parties outlined the development strategy for until 2035 (SCO, 2025). In 2025, it ends the vague status of the observer.

In the same period, Mongolia also experienced similar challenges, especially crafting the country's foreign policy stances. *First*, the country was totally blocked from the world as its two neighbours closed all its borders and airports due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mongolia needed to reach out its two neighbours and so-called 'third neighbours' for vaccines, bring back its stranded citizens and obtain essential supplies and funds. But, Mongolian leaders actively engaged in all virtual summits organized within the SCO framework. *Second*, Mongolia conducted its regular parliamentary elections in 2020 and presidential election in 2021 respectively. By the nature of the democratic politics, the elections caused political turbulence as politicians, political parties, and other actors engaged in quite intensive contests. However, winners in these elections refrained from campaigning on any foreign policy related issues, including the country's stance on the SCO. The newly-

elected President, Prime Minister, and cabinet members agreed to continue as an observer. *Third*, the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan ended Mongolia's military deployments to Afghanistan in support of the US and German contingents (Consilium Libratum, 2021). This ends the worry of political-military leaders and the public because of the eroding security situation for the non-UN military operations. *Fourth*, Russia's war in Ukraine forced Mongolia to pursue a very similar neutrality policy like China, India and all other Central Asian states because of its bilateral relations of both Russia and Ukraine and avoidance of being caught in the larger geopolitical competition between Russia and the Western countries. At the same, Mongolia became the only ICC member state that welcomed President Vladimir Putin for the state visit in 2024 to

celebrate the 85th anniversary of the Battle of Khalkhyn Gol, where Mongolian and Russian troops defeated the Japanese aggression. But neither side refrained from making explicit statements regarding the ongoing conflict (Autin, 2024). Apparently, Mongolia continued to actively participate in the SCO summits, as an observer, to increase the country's foreign policy visibility and multilateral diplomacy objectives, to conduct bilateral and trilateral meetings with leaders of the SCO member countries, and to deepen its ties with Central Asian states as the country's new foreign policy objective.

Nevertheless, the ending of the observer status meant neither Mongolia could end its engagements with the SCO and its members nor end the membership debates in the country's domestic politics.

### **Mongolia's Membership Debate**

#### *Reasons for supporting or opposing Shanghai Cooperation Organization membership*

Despite the lost momentum for full membership, intense debate will likely surge following any major change in the country's external and/or internal settings.

At the moment, three major reasons are usually put forward in support of SCO membership. The first relates to the recent membership of India and Pakistan. Both countries were accepted as observers in 2005 and then succeeded in becoming full members in 2017. Their membership eases Mongolia's key reservations: the perception by "third neighbors" that Mongolia is joining an authoritarian club. India and Pakistan are considered parliamentary democracies, like Mongolia. Thus, if they have joined, the SCO

cannot be labelled as a club of authoritarian States. Moreover, as a strategic partner of Mongolia, India could support Mongolia in withstanding any pressure from its powerful neighbors (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2020).

Another reason is the economic benefit from integration with Central Asia and Eurasian economies as a result of China pushing more economic integration (banking and finance) and infrastructure investment through the SCO. China established the SCO Development Bank, the SCO Development Fund and the Silk Road Fund and even pledged, in 2020, more funds to develop the SCO economic demonstration zone in

Qingdao, a major city in eastern China, as well as the SCO agricultural hi-tech demonstration zone in northwest Shaanxi Province (State Council of Information Office the Peoples of China, 2023). These zones would increase economic cooperation with SCO member States.

The final reason is to support Chinese and Russian initiatives and to maintain amicable and neighborly relations instead of refraining from participation in their

regionalization efforts. Mongolia's economy is largely dependent on these neighbors, and both neighbors have strong leverage to pressure Mongolia. In the past, China used railway and market access and Russia instrumentalized the fuel supply to influence Mongolia's policies. The realization of the CMR Economic Corridor or the reduction of customs taxes, tariffs and fees would require Mongolia's participation in their joint regionalization efforts, such as the SCO.

Table 1 Reasons for membership

India and Pakistan joined	The SCO is no longer an authoritarian club.
Economic benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The SCO would provide access to Chinese funding.</li> <li>• It would also provide economic integration in Central Asia and Eurasia.</li> </ul>
Friendly neighbour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership would require endorsement of the regional integration efforts of China and Russia.</li> <li>• Membership would secure preferential market access and the realization of the CMR Economic Corridor.</li> </ul>

In contrast, there are three prevailing counterarguments. Foremost, the SCO is becoming a political and security organization, which would be used by China and Russia against the United States and its allies. In support of this argument is the following evidence: In 2005, China and Russia convinced all the Central Asian SCO members to demand the immediate withdrawal of the United States military from the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan. Also, the SCO regularized the Defence Ministers' Meeting beginning in 2003 and has now conducted multiple exercises, ranging from small-scale exchanges to large ones, such as the Peace Mission, on a regular basis. Despite formal statements denouncing the military alliance, these types of political and defence cooperation raise reservations in Mongolia: (1) There is fear of losing its independent

foreign policy to develop ties with the United States and its allies and (2) fear of being pressured to stop defence cooperation with NATO members and US allies in Asia.

Another argument is the denial of the economic benefits of the SCO. The SCO's future is uncertain because all members have different expectations and objectives for the organization. China wants to deal with Central Asian States through the regional organization to secure their commitments towards China's security need to maintain stability in its volatile Xinjiang Uyghur region, which is culturally and historically connected to the Central Asian States. Russia wants to maintain its special geopolitical privileges in Central Asia and thus prioritizes security cooperation and protects its interests in the energy sector. Russia also pushes to integrate its new strategies for Eurasian

Economic Union. As a new member, India pursues the geopolitical role of being involved in Central Asia while checking Pakistan's involvement in the region. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two-larger Central Asian States, use the SCO for regime security, in light of the United States and European Union raising human rights issues. Therefore, the SCO's economic benefits from integration are simply rhetoric. Mongolia already has established good bilateral mechanisms for economic cooperation with its two neighbours. Most economists doubt the potential for Mongolia's economic cooperation with Central Asia and other South Asian states.

The other argument is that Mongolia would fall under joint control by China and Russia. This argument is quite natural for a small state operating next to two nuclear, populous, and economically as well as militarily powerful neighbours. The power imbalance along with traditional

geopolitically expansionist strategies and behaviors of Great Powers strengthen the basis for this argument. Pundits who argue along these lines stress the past, but recent experiences of Mongolia losing its independent foreign policies. In 1915, Mongolia lost its independence under the Treaty of Kyakhta. Although Mongolia was an equal party to this tri-party treaty process, it recognized the suzerainty of China over Mongolia and prohibited Mongolia's conduct of the independent foreign policy. Then, in 1936-1939, Mongolia was caught up between the Soviet-Japanese geopolitical competition and its reluctance to ally with the Soviet Union resulted in execution of political leaders, including President, Prime Minister, and military leaders. The most recent example would be Mongolia's alliance with the Soviet Union during the Sino-Soviet tensions resulting in Mongolia ceasing all types of bilateral relations with China.

Table 2 Reasons against membership

Chinese and Russian alliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Independence and sovereignty would be jeopardized.</li><li>• Bilateral ties with third neighbours (such as the United States) would be impacted.</li></ul>
Uncertain future of the SCO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All major powers have different agendas.</li><li>• It is better to deal with China and Russia bilaterally than through the SCO.</li></ul>
Losing its independent foreign policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• End of the independent foreign policy.</li><li>• Pressured to take sides with both or either powerful neighbours.</li></ul>

### **Mongolia's East Asia Identification**

In addition to above mentioned reasons, we argue a key reason for Mongolia's hesitance in joining the SCO is its explicit regional identification with East Asia, not Central Asia while the organization's core area of interest is Central Asia, not Eurasia or

East Asia. The latter point is also apparently clear stances and actions of the founding members, especially of China and Central Asian states.

Mongolia has clearly identified itself as an East Asian state and strives to develop a

close tie with all East Asian states, including economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. Mongolia's largest trading partners are in Northeast Asia: China, Japan and South Korea. Mongolia has strong economic and cultural connections with South Korea: 40,000–50,000 Mongolian migrant workers, regular daily flights between Ulaanbaatar and Seoul and a growing Korean cultural and business presence. Mongolia and Japan have established a free trade agreement (Economic Partnership Agreement) and developed a strong cultural tie, for example, through Japanese sumo wrestling, in which Mongolian wrestlers have been in the lead since 2003. Unlike Mongolia–Russia trade, which is basically oil and energy imports, Mongolia's reliance on China's trade and infrastructure has grown significantly. Mongolia also maintains amicable ties with North Korea and pursues non-isolation policy regarding North Korea. The essence of the annual Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security is to provide a neutral platform for parties in conflict to engage for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. From this reality, those against SCO membership stress the importance of joining organizations and initiatives (the China - Japan - South Korea trilateral summit, Six Party Talks, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and so forth) in East Asia and Asia - Pacific Region.

In contrast, Mongolia's connection with Central Asian states are extremely limited even though with the new foreign policy shift to Central Asia. The new foreign

policy shift indicated Mongolia's desire to be connected with Central Asia. Over the last two years, President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa visited and hosted Presidents from all five Central Asian states. As a result, Mongolia declared the strategic partnership with Kazakhstan, comprehensive partnership with Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. But, it is unlikely to expect close relationships with Central Asian states because of lack of infrastructural connectivity, distinctive cultural barriers, and limited interests. For Central Asia states, Mongolia does not fit comfortably to regional identity and integration. In the similar line of thinking, Mongolia considers the SCO as a format to develop bilateral ties with Central Asian states. Therefore, for Mongolia, the SCO is a diplomatic venue like the Group of 77 (G77), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to strengthen its international and regional visibility and to maintain bilateral ties through the multilateral platform.

In a nutshell, Mongolia's stance toward the SCO membership remains a complicated foreign policy issue, not only for China and Russia, but also for the domestic politics. Because of the country's regional identification with East Asia and growing economic and cultural integration with East Asia, Mongolians would remain reluctant to see benefits of joining in the SCO – mostly of its Central Asia and Eurasian foci.

## Conclusion

As Presidents of China and Russia welcomed Mongolian President for the

trilateral meetings during the SCO Summits of Heads of State in Samarkand in 2022 and

Tianjin in 2025, Mongolia would be welcomed to upcoming summits and activities of the SCO in the coming future. We could expect three types of scenarios for the SCO. The most likely one is the SCO would become a large regional organization equivalent to the OSCE by welcoming states from Eurasia, South and Southeast Asia, Middle East and Mediterranean and Gulf States. The merger of the observer and dialogue partner statuses would serve for this purpose. It removes a seemingly transitional status and makes the organization a quite attractive international venue.

Another scenario would be the continuation of the current situation. This

could be a likely scenario if all key members, especially China and Russia could not compromise their competing interests and visions for the organization. The other scenario is the SCO would become a weak, ineffective regional gathering. In all three scenarios, Mongolian politicians, pundits, and the public would remain debating and unlikely support the country's membership – unless the organization begins to focus on East Asia and the Asia Pacific region. Otherwise, the SCO would be regarded as a Central Asian and Eurasian regional gathering

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### **Authors' Contributions**

**Soyolgerel Nyamjav:** writing – original draft, collecting data and materials, development and conceptualization of research argument and formal analysis. **Mendee Jargalsaikhan:** Theoretical and practical advice in development of theory and conceptualization.

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