Chapter 19

Sino–Russian Strategic Partnership: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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ABSTRACT

The colossal economic transformations and political intrusions had been affecting brutally China and the Soviet Union in the final decades of the twentieth century. Currently, Russia is a gigantic power struggling to rebuild its economic base in an era of globalization. On the other hand, the economic rise of China has attracted a great deal of attention and labeled as a success story by the Western world. China and Russia have made a number of efforts to strengthen bilateral ties and improve cooperation on a number of economic/political/diplomatic fronts. Since the mid-1990s, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been an important feature of Eurasian politics and a vehicle to forge a new sort of cooperation between China and Russia. A number of issues related to geopolitics, security, the economy, and regional politics have been handled by the SCO member states.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, several scholars have suggested that the regions of the world have gained increased importance in the current international system and they act as an emerging potent force in the process of globalization (Holm & Sørensen, 1995; Mittelman, 2000). The Westphalian state is referred as a system of political authority based on territory and autonomy and it has been the dominant form in the international system up to the 1990s (Caporaso, 2000). In the past decade, however, the underpinnings of this system have been challenged by the creation of new regional unions or the restructuring of already existing ones. Consequently, the international system has witnessed a cohabitation of multiple forms of governance at multi level. Regions are the building blocks of this new international system and inherently, changes that take place within them affect the international system overall. To certain extend the regions and their development provides a context for the explanation of newly emerged systemic trends.

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This chapter will argue that the 21st century saw the strengthening of the existing regional systems or the naissance of many loose and new regional systems. The chapter will discuss regional integration theories while providing examples from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

In distinction from European Union, the SCO as a regional system is characterized by the absence of democracy and the continuation of authoritarian leadership (Ambrosio, 2008). The nature of the regime in place limits the possibility of interest and preference formation from bottom-up. Consequently, regional integration theories utilized to explain European integration becomes blurry when applied to the SCO. Finally, the chapter will evaluate the development of the SCO over the past decade by taking in consideration Chinese and Russian approaches. Yet, the contention of this chapter is that since most of the developed conceptual framework as well as the case studies vis-à-vis the regional systems are Eurocentric, the application of these lenses to the growing number of regional systems in other parts of the globe remains at best problematic, and at worst elusive.

BACKGROUND

Definitions of Region, Regionalism, Regionalization

There are multiple definitions of the region and each reflects the peculiarities of a specific historical period of the international system and adjusts itself to the changing environment. In the first half of the 20th century, certain definitions referred to geostrategic regions (Mackinder, 1919), to physiographic characteristics (Vance, 1951), or to homogeneity of economic and social structures within a national context (Odum, 1936; Odum & Moore, 1938). In the Cold War era, Bruce Russett illustrated the complex process of identifying a “region”. He emphasized a number of criteria such as cultural similarity, common political orientation, institutional membership, transaction flows, and proximity. A region is determined as such if it attained a certain minimum score when measured quantitatively against these criteria (Russett, 1967). Several scholars developed an approach of region as subsystems based mostly on geographic region such as either side of the North Atlantic (Hoffmann, 1963), Southeast Asia (Brecher, 1963; Modelski, 1963) or Africa (Zartman, 1973).

In the post-Cold War era, International Relations (IR) scholars started to redefine these concepts along with the concept of globalization. Holm and Sorensen provide four different definitions of the concept of region: geographical units with natural barriers (e.g., the Caucasus and Africa); social or cultural entities (e.g., Polynesia and Iberian peninsula); organized political units (e.g., the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area); regions of identity (e.g., Central Asia and Latin America). Andrew Hurrell (Fawcett & Hurrell, 1995), with regard to regionalism identifies four categories. First, regionalization refers to the growth of societal integration within a region that takes in consideration an increasing flow of people and the intensification of market interaction. Second, regional identity is associated with an increase in its awareness, which in turn facilitates the regionalism. Third, regional interstate cooperation refers to the formation and intensification of intergovernmental and institutional relations. Finally, regional cohesion represents the ultimate manifestation of regionalism and incorporates the full development of the above mentioned categories. Hurrell’s definition also implies that regionalism is understood as an integral part of globalization. It is assumed that regionalism is a unifying process rather than fragmenting on international level. Bjorn Hettne after identifying three models of region—trading blocs, geopolitical division, and process of regionalization—claims that the “new regionalism” is the outcome of the process of regionalization and represents a version of “extended nationalism”. Subsequently, he devel-
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