



The Role of SCO and BRICS in Asian Stability from the Chinese Perspective

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Cover Page Photo: A gold-painted replica Terracotta Warrior among many unpainted examples near Xi'an in Shaanxi province, China.
George Clerk/Getty Images.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the world enters a new period of turbulence and transformation, China's comprehensive approach to coordinating development and security has attracted widespread attention. Within China's security concept, development and security are two sides of the same coin. As China's two primary multilateral mechanisms, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS play vital roles in regional security and economic growth, serving as key platforms for this strategic thinking. Specifically, the SCO functions as a regional stabiliser by institutionalising cooperation, maintaining geopolitical stability, and exploring security models outside traditional military alliances. Conversely, as a structural stabiliser, BRICS anchors the economic realm, stabilising the global economy, balancing global governance, and supporting multilateralism. Despite long-term internal differences rooted in their structural attributes as 'heterogeneous coalitions', both organisations are poised for greater global influence. Looking ahead, the SCO will transition from a security platform to a comprehensive governance framework with a stronger economic focus and mature internal balancing mechanisms. Meanwhile, BRICS will upgrade into a core of coordination for the Global South, deepening financial, monetary, and non-traditional security cooperation among its member states.

¹ The author would like to thank PhD candidate Wu Chenmiao for her contribution to this research.

INTRODUCTION

Escalating global security tensions have fractured efforts to maintain world peace and justice. Faced with intensifying global instability, China seeks to provide more international stability and certainty through consistent domestic and foreign policies, and advancing the Global Security Initiative (GSI) to build of a community with a shared future for mankind. This raises critical questions about the essence of China's vision for security and the international order, and how these concepts are operationalised through China's primary multilateral platforms, the SCO and BRICS.

To explore these issues, this paper first outlines the historical evolution of China's security concept since 1949, identifying its characteristics as both a dynamic framework responsive to changing environments and a stable approach ensuring both development and security. Building on this background, the paper further analyses the SCO and BRICS as primary platforms of China's comprehensive strategic thinking in coordinating development and security. Specifically, it focuses on the respective functional positionings, internal challenges, and future development of these two organisations, thereby illustrating how China's security and developmental visions are operationalised in practice and how their evolution affects cooperation across the Global South.

EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S SECURITY CONCEPT AND THOUGHT

The idea of security involves an individual or group's systematic views on the type of security they need and the specific strategies to achieve it. Traditional security perspectives focus on the state as the central subject of security, however security approaches vary among countries, shaped by their specific value systems, strategic cultures, and political philosophies.² Since its founding, the People's Republic of China has gradually developed a set of security concepts and approaches with distinct Chinese characteristics, by actively participating in international security affairs and global security governance. By introducing core security concepts such as the 'comprehensive national security', 'new security', 'Asian security', and 'global security initiative', China has challenged traditional security thinking which is typically represented by zero-sum thinking.³ Moreover, China's security thinking is not simply a rejection of traditional security concepts or a set of fragmented explanations of its innovative concepts. It is instead a continuation and advancement of key developmental

2 Liu Le, "Understanding Contemporary China's Security Philosophy," *International Security Studies*, no. 4, 2024, pp. 53-77.

3 For Core Policy Documents see: China's Position Paper on the New Security Concept, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 31, 2002, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zcwj_674915/200208/t20020806_9868841.shtml; China's Policy on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 11, 2017, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zcwj_674915/201701/t20170111_9869230.shtml; Concept Paper on the Global Security Initiative, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 21, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/202302/t20230221_11028322.shtml

features of “stability at the core, adaptability in response to changing circumstances.”

China’s security concept has been a dynamic, progressive one that has evolved in response to changing circumstances. During the Anti-Japanese War and the early years of ‘war and revolution’, following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the state espoused a traditional national security perspective, aimed at stability and the consolidation of political power as the primary objectives of security. Security was attained through strong, confrontational measures such as external warfare. After the Chinese economic reform, however, peace and development became the key objectives for China, and needing a new security concept with universal significance.⁴ In this era, China’s security concept progressed through two stages: in the first stage, the new security concept prioritised mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation; and in the second stage, it expanded into a global security concept centered on shared, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security.⁵ This progression led to the Global Security Initiative (GSI) built on “six commitments” to address both China’s domestic security needs and the international questions about how the world can achieve common security. It can be argued that the Global Security Initiative is a natural extension of China’s new security concept in the international security realm, reflecting the country’s unwavering commitment to the international security based on the idea of a shared human destiny.⁶

Despite its dynamic nature, the spiritual core of China’s security concept remains consistent. It rests on a security philosophy that integrates traditional Chinese elements, Chinese characteristics, and Chinese temperament. Chinese scholars elaborate on those philosophical underpinnings to define China’s contemporary security concept. While traditional security philosophy is essentially a state-centric, closed, and exclusive philosophy, Chinese scholars have argued that the “new” aspect of China’s contemporary security concept lies in its

4 After the economic reform, China’s new security concept emphasised universal security as its characteristic. Universal security has also become one of the five fundamental aspects of the Chinese concept of a shared future for mankind.

5 The academic descriptive review of the evolution of China’s security concept has already been quite comprehensive. For details, see: Xu Tao, “China’s New Security Concept and the SCO’s Twenty Years of Security Practice,” *Peace and Development*, no.3, 2021, pp. 1-13; Zhao Kejin, Zhang Jiahao, “The Theory of Central Harmony and Common Security: The Global Security Philosophy of the ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative,” *Russian Studies*, no.6, 2024, pp. 3-29; Liu Le, “Understanding Contemporary China’s Security Philosophy,” *Journal of International Security Studies*, no.4, 2024, pp. 53-77; Wang Mingsheng, “From Traditional Security Concepts to the Overall National Security Concept: The Evolution, Achievements, and Global Agenda of China’s Security Concept,” *Asia-Pacific Security and Ocean Studies*, no.3, 2024, pp. 36-54.

6 Bi Haidong, “Global Security Concept: Formation Process, Rich Connotations, and Practical Value,” *National Security Studies*, no.1, 2024, pp. 38-58; Liu Yusong, Jin Xin, “The Security Dimension of the Community of Shared Future for Mankind-An Analysis Based on the Global Security Initiative,” *Journal of the Party School of the Corps*, no.6, 2023, pp. 87-94; Wang Le, Liu Jun, “Core Principles, Theoretical Innovations, and Global Significance of the Global Security Initiative,” *China International Studies*, no.3, 2022, pp. 16-28; Han Aiyong, “Global Security Initiative and the Construction of a New Regional Security Architecture,” *China International Studies*, no.4, 2022, pp. 79-99; Wang Mingsheng, “From Traditional Security Concepts to the Overall National Security Concept: The Evolution, Achievements, and Global Agenda of China’s Security Concept,” *Asia-Pacific Security and Ocean Studies*, no.3, 2024, pp. 36-54. Concept Paper on the Global Security Initiative, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 21, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/202302/t20230221_11028322.shtml

innovative understanding of security, emphasising two unique dimensions: “common” and “development”. On the one hand, common security is an accurate reflection of the concept of a shared human destiny, with three rich connotations.⁷ First, it entails that achieving security is an organic component of a nation’s right, and all countries, regardless of their size, wealth, or power, have an equal right to security.⁸ Second, it implies that one country’s security should not come at the expense of the security of others. In fact, it suggests that a country’s security should contribute to the security of others.⁹ Third, common security reflects the twofold idea that security is indivisible and that humanity constitutes an inseparable security community.¹⁰ It involves non-violent and cooperative approaches. Some scholars argue that this characteristic represents the core manifestation of China’s new security concept. They suggest that it surpasses the traditional Lockean framework of “survival and permission to survive,” by embodying a distinct community-oriented focus.¹¹ Another feature of China’s new security concept challenges the binary thinking that development and security are distinct. Instead, it balances security and development, in fact achieving, assisting, and promoting security through development. Contrary to the traditional dichotomy of “high politics” versus “low politics”, China’s innovative thinking of ‘development security’ incorporates the “middle politics”, which posits that some “low politics” security issues, such as production safety and quality safety, while closely related to security, insecurity stems from insufficient economic development.¹²

Finally, China’s new security concept, and the political security philosophy it encompasses, not only provide ideological guidance for China’s participation in contemporary global security governance, but also profoundly influence multi-level security cooperation through organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS.¹³ The norms represented by China’s new security concept, focusing on common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, offer a timely alternative to address these complex challenges. Specifically, by transcending the zero-sum logic of the resurgent Cold War-geopolitics, these norms provide a holistic framework to untangle the knot where traditional

7 Liu Yusong, Jin Xin, “The Security Dimension of the Community of Shared Future for Mankind-An Analysis Based on the Global Security Initiative,” *Journal of the Party School of the Corps*, no.6, 2023, pp. 87-94.

8 “Ambassador Shen Jian’s Statement at the 2024 Disarmament Conference on the Topic of ‘The Relationship Between Disarmament and Development’ at the General Debate Session,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, May 15, 2024, https://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/dbtyw/cjjk/202405/t20240524_11311132.htm

9 Liu Le, “Understanding Contemporary China’s Security Philosophy,” *Journal of International Security Studies*, no.4, 2024, pp. 53-77.

10 Wang Le, Liu Jun, “Core Principles, Theoretical Innovations, and Global Significance of the Global Security Initiative,” *China International Studies*, no.3, 2022, pp. 16-28.

11 Han Aiyong, “Global Security Initiative and the Construction of a New Regional Security Architecture,” *China International Studies*, no.4, 2022, pp. 79-99

12 Liu Le, “Understanding Contemporary China’s Security Philosophy,” *Journal of International Security Studies*, no.4, 2024, pp. 53-77.

13 The 11 current member states of the BRICS are China, Russia, India, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Ethiopia, and Indonesia.

military rivalries and non-traditional vulnerabilities, such as economic coercion and cyber threats reinforce each other.

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND CHINA'S ROLE

The contestation between unilateralism and multilateralism is increasingly emerging as the principal contradiction within the contemporary world system.¹⁴ Since the reelection of the Trump administration in January 2025, the United States has advanced an “America First” foreign policy centered on populism, protectionism, and transactional diplomacy. This policy orientation has profoundly shaken and challenged existing international institutions, norms, and governance structures. This “transitional period”¹⁵ and “post-liberal moment”¹⁶ have prompted intense scholarly debates about the future trajectory of international order. Drawing on his “three-dimensional chessboard” framework, Joseph S. Nye argues that the future system will exhibit a stratified structure, characterised by the coexistence of unipolar military power, multipolar economic power, and the complex capabilities of non-state actors.¹⁷ Through his concept of a “multiplex world”, Amitav Acharya envisions an order that is no longer dominated by the United States but retains elements of liberalism while displaying pluralistic and complex features.¹⁸ G. John Ikenberry anticipates the emergence of a more flattened “Liberal International Order 3.0”, in which governance mechanisms shift from a hegemon-driven “private” orientation toward a more universal and “public” form of global governance.

Building upon these international discussions, Chinese scholars contend that the evolving world order will exhibit clearer characteristics of a United Nations- centered and Global South-driven non-hegemonic core, giving rise to a multilateral institutional order marked by consultative practices and pluralistic values. From the perspective of governance outcomes, a multipolar governance structure led by multiple major powers and mediated through

14 Yang, Jiemian, Meng Xiangqing, and Wu Zhicheng, “Analysis of the Basic Contradictions in the Current International Community,” *International Review*, no. 3, 2025, pp.22-36.

15 Wang Fan, “The Regular Characteristics of the ‘Transitional Period’ and China’s Response,” *International Studies*, no.2, 2025, pp.39-64.

16 Amitav Acharya and Fu Qiang, “The End of the American World Order and the Advent of a ‘Multiplex World,’” *World Economics and Politics*, no.6, 2017, p.25.

17 Joseph S. Nye, “The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, No.6, 2010, pp.2-12.

18 Amitav Acharya and Fu Qiang, “The End of the American World Order and the Advent of a ‘Multiplex World,’” *World Economics and Politics*, no.6, 2017, p.25.

international institutions is considered more conducive to achieving balanced and stable global governance than are hegemonic models.¹⁹

Compared to John J. Mearsheimer's realist warning of a future driven by the "Hobbesian conflict,"²⁰ mainstream Chinese scholarship remains cautiously optimistic about the resilience of multilateral institutional order and emphasises the constructive role of the Global South, particularly that of China, in the reconstruction of international order.²¹ There's a long-standing debate in the academic discourse over China's role in the transformation of the international order. Perspectives, grounded in power transition theory and hegemonic stability theory, characterise China as a "revisionist" or even "subversive" power within the liberal international order. These perspectives also frame the US-China competition as a structural zero-sum conflict between a status quo power and a rising challenger. Within this framework, China's behaviour is often portrayed as offering an alternative institutional model for non-Western states seeking to bypass systemic constraints, directly threatening the sustainability of the liberal international order.²² However, a growing body of scholarship suggests that China's role in global governance transformation is far more complex than the label of "disruptor" implies.²³

The binary framework that presumes the United States as the "guardian" of order and China as its "challenger" is increasingly inadequate for explaining contemporary international realities. Instead, a notable role reversal is unfolding: the United States is contributing to internal erosion and potential disengagement from the liberal order due to its interest-

19 Qin Yaqing, "On World Order," *World Economics and Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 6, 2017, pp. 4-13; Liu Feng, "American Hegemony and Global Governance: The Role of the United States in Global Governance and Its Dilemmas," *Journal of Nankai University (Philosophy, Literature and Social)*, No. 3, 2012, pp.15-16; Shu Jianzhong, "Institutional International Public Goods: From the Hegemonic Model to Global Governance," *International Forum*, No. 3, 2025, pp.3-19.

20 John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No.1, 1990, pp.5-56; John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton, 2001.

21 Representative research achievements include Zheng Yongnian, "China-U.S. Relations and the Future of International Order," *China International Studies*, Vol.35, No.1, 2014, pp.36-48; Qin Yaqing, "Discussion on the World Order," *World Economics and Politics*, No.6, 2017, pp. 4-13; Tang Shiping, "The Transformation of the International Order and China's Choices," *Social Sciences in China*, No.3, 2019, pp.187-203; Wu Xinbo, "The China Challenge: Competitor or Order Transformer?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No.3, 2020, pp.99-114; Niu Haibin, "The Global South is an important driving force for the changes of the international order," *Contemporary World*, No.11, 2023, pp.22-27; Ye Shulan and Yin Hao, "The Pursuit of Role Status by the Global South and the Transformation of the Contemporary International Order," *International Forum*, No.27, No.6, pp.21-38; Da Wei, "China is bound to bear greater historical responsibility for promoting changes in the international order," *World Affairs*, No.16, 2025, pp.17-18.

22 Lim Darren and Ikenberry John, "China and the Logic of Illiberal Hegemony," *Security Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2023, pp. 1-31.

23 Representative research achievements include Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2019, pp.9-60; Andreas Kruck and Bernhard Zangl, "The Adjustment of International Institutions to Global Power Shifts: A Framework for Analysis," *Global Policy*, Vol. 11, No. S3, 2020, pp.5-16; Zheng Yongnian, "China-U.S. Relations and the Future of International Order," *China International Studies*, Vol.35, No.1, 2014, pp.36-48; Zhang Jiadong, "China and the United States: Who Are the Challengers to the Contemporary International Order?" *Fudan American Review*, 2007, pp.172-220; Yuan Huawei, "Is China a Revisionist State?" *Global Review*, Vol. 21, No.6, 2012, pp.51-63.

centered unilateralism;²⁴ and emerging powers represented by China are not only defending multilateralism but also actively promoting incremental reforms to global governance rules. Some scholars argue that China's guiding principles of respect for national differences, pursuit of mutual benefit, and partnership-based cooperation, continue to bear liberal institutional imprints.²⁵ More importantly, the current power transition is occurring within a highly institutionalised international environment, without the large-scale conflicts predicted by classical realism. This context allows China to pursue its objectives through strategic adaptation within the existing system, rather than constructing an entirely new world order.²⁶ As academic consensus around China as an “in-system reformer” deepens, the focus of research is also shifting from concerns over whether China is a disruptor/challenger/revisionist power, to the normative and feasibility assessments of China's proposed global governance reforms.



Group photo of “SCO Plus” heads of state and government and their spouses at a reception and concert program at the Tianjin Meijiang International Convention and Exhibition Center hosted by the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, and First Lady Peng Liyuan, on 31 August 2025. Wikimedia Commons.

24 Zhu Xu, “China’s Concept on Global Governance: Conceptual Basis, Constituting Elements and Practice Principles,” *China International Studies*, No.2, 2023, pp.1-25.

25 Lim, D. J., & Ikenberry, G. J., “China and the Logic of Illiberal Hegemony,” *Security Studies*, Vol.32, No.1, 2023, pp. 1–31.

26 Matthew D. Stephen, “China and the Limits of Hypothetical Hegemony,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2024, pp. 152-159.

Overall, China seeks to position itself as a “stabilising anchor” and “safe harbor” in global political and economic affairs, as well as a “guiding compass” amid transformations in international order.²⁷ China also seeks to continuously inject momentum for growth into an increasingly volatile world by assuring high-quality development. In September 2025, President Xi Jinping proposed the ‘Global Governance Initiative’ at the SCO + meeting, as a normative approach. This initiative is premised on sovereign equality, grounded in the rule of international law, guided by multilateralism, oriented toward people-centered values, and driven by action-based principles. Together with the ‘Global Development Initiative’, the Global Security Initiative, and the ‘Global Civilization Initiative’, it constitutes a coherent and mutually reinforcing framework with clearly defined objectives and functional differentiation, systematically reflecting China’s evolving vision of international order in the new era.²⁸ Building on this foundation, China has further advanced concepts such as “pluralistic coexistence” and “an equal and orderly multipolar world”.²⁹ Although the relatively recent articulation of these ideas has led to cautious observation from the international community,³⁰ China has demonstrated its commitment to reform through tangible resource investment and pragmatic action. At the institutional level, China has firmly upheld the authority and centrality of the United Nations while actively promoting quota reforms within the Bretton Woods institutions. Simultaneously, it has engaged in proactive institutional innovation by establishing new financing mechanisms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank, advancing the historic expansion of BRICS, and jointly initiating platforms like the International Mediation Organization with over 30 countries. These efforts aim to construct a complementary “overlay order” within the existing system. In specific governance domains, China has not only assumed major power responsibilities in both traditional and non-traditional security fields, such as advancing the “dual carbon” goals in climate governance, but has also contributed to normative frameworks in emerging domains like artificial intelligence. Initiatives such as the Global AI Governance Initiative and the establishment of a World AI Cooperation Organization underscore China’s growing leadership in shaping governance agendas in new frontiers.³¹

27 “Upholding Win-Win Cooperation and Embracing the World with an Open Mind-Insights from President Xi Jinping’s 2026 New Year Address (II),” *People’s Daily*, January 2, 2026.

28 Yu Tiejun, “The Global Governance Initiative and China’s Vision of International Order in the New Era,” *China Security Studies*, No. 5, 2025, pp.78-82; Fan Jishe, “Global Governance Initiative: China’s Proposal for Reforming and Improving the Global Governance System,” *People’s Daily Online (Theory)*, October 1, 2025.

29 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China’s Foreign Policy and External Relations,” March 8, 2026, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202603/t20260308_11870706.shtml; Wang Fan, “Forging the Brightness of China’s Diplomacy in a World of Turbulence and Change,” *Guangming Daily*, March 11, 2026, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/content/202603/11/content_8170.html

30 Economy Elizabeth, “How China Wins the Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 101, No. 1, 2022, <https://archive.is/20260116142539/https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-china-wins-future-elizabeth-economy>

31 Ding Zhuang, “Against the Tide of Hegemony, a New Global Landscape, and China’s Role,” *World Affairs*, No. 3, 2026, pp.60-61; Fan Jishe, “Global Governance Initiative: China’s Proposal for Reforming and Improving the Global Governance System,” *People’s Daily Online (Theory)*, October 1, 2025; “The Question of International Order Behind the ‘Big Year’ of China-U.S. Relations,” Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and China’s Foreign Policy in the New Era, March 11, 2026, https://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2026-03/10/content_118373708.shtml?

THE PRACTICE OF CHINA'S SECURITY CONCEPT IN THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND BRICS

For the Chinese government, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a 'regional stabiliser' centered around security, while the BRICS countries serve as a 'structural stabiliser' focused on development.

A. Shanghai Cooperation Organization

While the development of the SCO, its primary focus has remained on security issues and the pursuit of regional security.³² The stabilising influence of the SCO in security is primarily reflected in three aspects: first, as one of the vehicles for the institutionalisation of security cooperation; second, in its geopolitical stability function; and third, as in offering a new avenue for security cooperation outside of military alliances. The objective of institutional development of regional security cooperation, is guided by the "Shanghai Spirit", which emphasises mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilisations, and the pursuit of common development. China officially positions the SCO as a "partnership, not an alliance; as a dialogue, and not as confrontation,"³³ and as a "comprehensive", "non-hegemonic", and "institutionalized" "new type of regional cooperation organization".³⁴ This means that, on the one hand, the SCO is positioned as a security cooperation platform that "does not form alliances, does not engage in confrontation, and does not target third parties." It does not follow the old path of military alliances or aim to establish military blocs. Instead, it emphasises preventing regional security vacuums and external interference in sovereign affairs. Specifically, the main goals of the SCO are to combat the three forces (terrorism, separatism, and extremism), maintain stability in Central Asia and the surrounding areas of Afghanistan, and promote border security and law enforcement cooperation among member states.³⁵ The corresponding core supporting systems include the counter-terrorism cooperation mechanism, intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and the mechanized operation of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). On the other hand, in terms of decision-making mechanisms concerning security affairs, the SCO emphasises a "consensus-based" decision-making, without voting and based on mutual agreement among member states.³⁶ This ensures the principle of "equality of states

32 Porshneva Olga and Razinkov Sergey, "Institutional Formation and Development of SCO Activities: Experience of Retrospective Analysis," *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2024, pp. 264-279.

33 Xi Jinping, "Remember the Original Mission, Uphold Unity and Cooperation, and Achieve Greater Development-Speech at the 23rd Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of State Council," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 4, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202307/t20230704_11107586.shtml

34 Sun Xia, "New Regionalism in Central Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Russian Studies*, No.6, 2009, pp. 57-70.

35 Xi Jinping, "Remember the Original Mission, Create a Bright Future - Speech at the 25th Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of State Council," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 1, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202509/t20250901_11699331.shtml

36 "Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 15, 2002, <https://chn.sectsc.org/20020615/43899.html>

regardless of size” at the institutional level, encouraging member states to participate equally in regional security governance.³⁷ Some scholars even argue that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s security cooperation constitutes a pioneering practice in establishing an equal partnership among states that differ significantly in size, influence, economic and political capacity, as well as cultural and civilizational characteristics. In essence, it demonstrates, through soft-power diplomacy, the Organisation’s capacity to contribute to international norms and values, and therefore carries important symbolic significance for China.³⁸

China views the SCO as a “tool” for achieving geopolitical stability. In both official and academic contexts in China, the primary task of the SCO is to prevent Central Asia from becoming the frontline for major power confrontations. Some scholars argue that the SCO, by pursuing the path of “partnership, not alliance,” has enabled the Eurasian continent to break free from the traditional constraints of alliances and confrontation, ushering in a “new era” of regional geopolitics.³⁹ Especially, in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and the fragile situation in Afghanistan, Beijing emphasises that the SCO is an important multilateral platform for maintaining stability in the Eurasian continent, serving as a crucial institutional buffer to prevent regional polarisation and spillover conflicts. Some Chinese scholars generally define the SCO as a “low-militarized security and stability zone,” rather than a traditional military alliance, and they argue that the turmoil in the region has actually led member states having more positive expectations from the SCO, offering a key opportunity for the organization’s transformation and upgrading.⁴⁰ The SCO has indeed played a notable role in mediating the India-Pakistan conflict and the security challenges stemming from Afghanistan. Foreign scholars, especially regional stakeholders, tend to view India-Pakistan interactions within the SCO as a dynamic interplay of crisis and cooperation. Despite periodic escalations in bilateral conflict, both sides have sought to leverage the SCO to advance their own strategic agendas and security interests. As such, the SCO has the potential to serve as an indispensable multilateral institutional platform for mitigating tensions and facilitating rapprochement between the two countries.⁴¹ The Chinese academic community generally holds that while the SCO cannot resolve the India-Pakistan conflict, the mere inclusion of both countries in the SCO means they undertake the obligation to resolve

37 Deng Hao, “The Process, Dynamics, and Prospects of Security Cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Contemporary World*, No.9, 2021, pp. 20-25.

38 Alimov Rashid, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2018, pp. 114-124; Saher Liaqat and Abu Hurairah Abbasi, “Regional Cooperation and SCO: Analyzing China’s Role in Regional Integration,” *Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2025, pp. 61-69.

39 Feng Yujun, “Strategic Positioning and Development Direction of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Contemporary International Relations*, No.11, 2006, pp. 12-17.

40 Deng Hao, “New Changes in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Response Against the Background of the Ukraine Crisis,” *Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies*, No.3, 2023, pp.1-19.

41 Rauf Shagufta and Tariq Maira, “The Bilateral Engagement of India and Pakistan at Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects and Challenges,” *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability*, 2023; Khan, Hameed Ullah and Manzoor Khan Afridi, “Trans-Regionalism, Regionalism, and Realism are what Explain India-Pakistan Relations Under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Central Asia*, 2025.

disputes without the use of force.⁴² The SCO can also provide opportunities and a platform for institutionalised and regularised engagement between the parties involved, strengthening mutual trust through dialogue and reducing the risk of conflict escalation.⁴³ Even during periods of India-Pakistan tension, the SCO summits and ministerial meetings have operated effectively, providing space for dialogue in a confrontational environment. Furthermore, the SCO serves as an important ‘safety valve’ to prevent the Afghanistan conflict from spilling over. To this end, the SCO, through the Afghanistan Contact Group, counter-terrorism cooperation, and economic reconstruction initiatives, seeks to build a “regional consensus on stability” regarding the Afghanistan issue, with a primary focus on countering transnational organised crime, illicit drug trafficking and preventing terrorism.

Finally, China generally views the SCO as part of a new security mechanism outside of Western security frameworks. China does not seek to establish a military alliance through the SCO but is willing to use its platform to unite countries outside of the Western alliances, contributing alternative governance ideas, security and public goods to maintain regional stability and international peace. The goal is both to escape Western-centric security frameworks and to avoid forming new opposing camps. Chinese scholars generally agree that the SCO represents a distinctly different model. In terms of structural positioning, without a single dominant power center or rigid internal hierarchy, the SCO works on the principles of consensus, equal national sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, cooperative development replacing conflict and confrontation.⁴⁴

The SCO’s organisational philosophy is anchored in the principle of indivisible security. The organization seeks to safeguard the security of SCO member states in tandem with the security of others, or at least without threatening security of other actors. Moreover, it actively pursues its stability by promoting the security of others, reflecting the essential characteristics of a security community.⁴⁵ The SCO’s operational approach is unlike traditional Western military alliances; it neither participates in regional conflicts nor provides military assistance to belligerents. It has focused, instead, on regional peacekeeping and, in this process, has explored a “de-securitized” development pathway. This approach comprehensively responds to member states’ security needs and expectations, fostering a sense of recognition and inclusion, and thereby advancing the construction of an SCO security community.⁴⁶

42 “SCO and India-Pakistan Relations: New Opportunities for Cooperation and Mediation,” *China-India Dialogue*, August 31, 2025, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/hOpy2ltuEF5CqCnStY9wuw>

43 Ibid.

44 Zeng Xianghong, Luo Jin, “An Analysis of the Connotations and Value of the ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization Development Model,’” *South Asian Studies*, No.2, 2024, pp.1-26; Li Xiaotian, “New Developments of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Pioneering the ‘SCO Model’ of Regionalism,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, No.4, 2023, pp. 94-130.

45 Yang Jun, “Security Cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Academic Journal of Russian Studies*, no.3, 2017, pp.77-85.

46 Zeng Xianghong, Du Jiaming, “De-Securitization’: A Unique Pathway for Building the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Security Community,” *Northeast Asia Forum*, No.4, 2025, pp.76-91; Wang Qingping, “Research on the Construction of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Pathways, Challenges, and Building a Community of Shared Destiny,” *Journal of International Relations*, No.6, 2025, pp. 3-29.

B. BRICS

The BRICS have been widely recognised for achievements in the fields of economic and development cooperation, but they have also undertaken significant efforts toward security cooperation. These efforts are primarily reflected in the coordination of positions on specific security issues, as well as in policy alignment and, to a lesser extent, on institutional development initiatives. Although some progress has been made in policy coordination, advancements in institutionalisation within the security domain remain limited.⁴⁷ Therefore, the prevailing view is that the role of BRICS in international security affairs remains relatively constrained. Some scholars argue that the organisation's core characteristic, operating within a relatively low-binding institutional framework, effectively sets an upper limit on both the scope and depth of security cooperation among its members. Similarly, skepticism persists regarding BRICS's capacity to translate its economic weight into substantive influence over international political discourse and security governance.⁴⁸ In fact, unlike the SCO, BRICS is not a security-oriented organisation, and security functions do not constitute its core mandate. Economic cooperation has always been the foundation of BRICS cooperation. The idea of BRICS originated from economic investment, and was built through economic cooperation, with a focus on economic governance. Currently, BRICS represents a mechanism for the Global South and serves as a platform for economic cooperation and financial governance reforms.

The Chinese government emphasises three key functions for BRICS: global economic stability, global governance balance, and support for multilateralism. First, economic cooperation is the ballast and driving force of BRICS collaboration. In the context of global high inflation, supply chain disruptions, and escalating geopolitical conflicts, common development remains the internal driving force for BRICS countries, with development still being the top priority for emerging market economies and developing countries, represented by BRICS. The Chinese government believes that BRICS countries can strengthen trade and investment connectivity among themselves, promote local currency settlement and cross-border payment cooperation, thereby reducing reliance on a single currency system. This is essentially a hedging strategy aimed at enhancing the resilience of developing countries to external systemic shocks and maintaining global economic stability. To this end, China

47 Specifically, BRICS countries' cooperation in the field of international security has mainly focused on coordinating their positions on specific security issues. By comparison, while there have been some efforts to align policies among BRICS members, progress in institutional development within the security domain has been rather limited. For related discussions, see Abdenur Adriana, "Can the BRICS Cooperate in International Security?" *International Organisations Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2017, pp. 73-95.

48 The political functions of BRICS have been widely discussed, particularly in foreign scholarship. Critical perspectives argue that the group's representative achievements in the field of international security remain insufficient. For related discussions, see Carl Meacham and Marcos Degaut, "Do the BRICS Still Matter?," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/do-brics-still-matter>; Abdenur Adriana, "Can the BRICS Cooperate in International Security?" *International Organisations Research Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2017, pp. 73-95; Moraes Rodrigo, "Whither Security Cooperation in the BRICS? Between the Protection of Norms and Domestic Politics Dynamics," *Global Policy*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2020, pp. 439-447; Opeoluwa Adisa Oluyemi, Adisa and Abdelsalam Elhudairi, "Reimagining Global Security Architectures: The Rise of BRICS in a Multipolar World Order," *Adalya Journal*, Vol. 14, Issue 7, 2025, pp.244-265.

attaches great importance to promoting the construction of a BRICS financial security network. Among these, the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) are two important institutional tools within the BRICS framework, and they hold certain stabilising significance.⁴⁹ The NDB is widely regarded as an innovative institutional mechanism and business model for financing infrastructure and sustainable development, thereby alleviating the funding gap for development to some extent. This mechanism, while not imposing political conditions, innovatively provides local currency financing, helping to reduce exchange rate risks for borrowing countries and ensuring the sustained stability of their project funding sources.⁵⁰ The CRA provides short-term liquidity support to the relevant countries. The Chinese government defines it as a “complement, not a substitute” for the existing Bretton Woods system, while many scholars view it as a diversified expansion of the global financial safety net.⁵¹

Second, the Chinese government emphasises the role of BRICS in balancing the order and structure of the global system. With the growing global influence of the BRICS countries, the group is increasingly regarded as an important force in reshaping the emerging architecture of global governance. Some scholars even argue that the rise of BRICS signifies a gradual shift away from a Western-dominated international order toward a “post-hegemonic world”, in which no single actor, whether a state or a group of states, holds absolute dominance.⁵² With the expansion of its membership, BRICS now includes more countries from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, which objectively enhances the representation of Global South countries. Specifically, China seeks to fundamentally reform global governance structures through multiple pathways. These include improving organisational and administrative arrangements to enhance the voice and representation of developing countries in global agenda-setting; continuously increasing the quota shares and voting power of developing countries in international organisations, particularly international financial institutions; and reforming institutional mechanisms as well as corresponding decision-making procedures. Through these efforts, China aims to address historically entrenched power imbalances, strengthen the voice and influence of the Global South, and promote a more balanced and inclusive process of global rule-making.⁵³

49 Wan Zhe, “BRICS Cooperation as a Stabilizer in a Turbulent World,” Beijing Normal University News, June 23, 2022, <https://news.bnu.edu.cn/zx/xzdt/128441.htm>

50 “BRICS Cooperation Promotes the Joint Progress of the Global South,” Xinhua News Agency Research Institute, July 17, 2025, <https://www.news.cn/world/20250717/472c006b3068409caaf947ddb4c0ce20/c.html>

51 Zhang Zhengxin, “BRICS Emergency Reserve Arrangement: A Supplement, Not a Substitute for the Global Financial Safety Net,” *IMI Research Bulletin 2014 Compilation*, 2014, pp.1040-1046; Zhu Jiejin, “BRICS Emergency Reserve Arrangement: A Financial Safety Net for Developing Countries,” *World Knowledge*, no.15, 2023, pp.18-20; Chen Fengxian, “BRICS Emergency Foreign Exchange Reserve Arrangement: Cost-Benefit Analysis, Governance Deficiencies, and China’s Choices,” no.2, *South China Finance*, 2015, pp. 4-13.

52 Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, Routledge, 2009; Marek Rewizorski and Andrew Cooper, *Global Governance and The Political South: Continuity and Change In and Beyond the BRICS*, Routledge, 2025; Brosig Malte and Verma Raj, “The war in Ukraine, the Global South and the evolving global order,” *Global Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2024, pp. 740-745; Chen Xiaobing and Zhang Songwanjing, “BRICS and Global Governance: An Analysis from the Perspective of International Political Economy,” *Journal of Fintech and Business Analysis*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2025, pp. 44-49.

53 Zou Zhibo, “The Far-reaching Impact of the Historic Expansion of BRICS,” *The People’s Forum*, January 2, 2024, <https://www.rmlt.com.cn/2024/0102/691826.shtml>

BRICS is also seen as an intermediary to alleviate the systemic pressures caused by a unipolar structure. China opposes “group politics” and “zero-sum games” and advocates for an “open and inclusive” approach. The core logic is that when power distribution in the international system becomes more diverse and development is more balanced, the pressure of unipolarity diminishes, which in turn reduces the probability of conflict. Additionally, on global governance issues such as climate change, food security and digital governance, BRICS member countries already have policy coordination, which is conducive to the stability and balance of global policies.⁵⁴

Finally, China views BRICS as having a multilateral supporting function to counterbalance unilateralism. The Chinese government emphasises that BRICS supports an international system centered around the United Nations, international law, and multilateral consultations. The logic is that the more solid the multilateral consultation mechanism, the smaller the space for unilateral actions, and the more stable the system becomes. Therefore, at the political level, BRICS is regarded as an important pillar of multilateralism. In contrast to Western-dominated mechanisms like the G7, BRICS offers a platform that does not impose ideological conditions, emphasising development rights and sovereignty equality. At the same time, BRICS is framed as a “constructive platform” rather than a confrontational group.

Therefore, BRICS cooperation in the field of international security is not primarily concerned with building alliances to enhance confrontational capabilities, but rather with how security issues are understood and incorporated into the international agenda.⁵⁵ With the expansion of BRICS, the concept of “Global South cooperation” has increasingly been used in Chinese diplomatic discourse.⁵⁶ On the one hand, the term “Global South” as a weaker geopolitical concept enables BRICS to aim for the creation of a more just and equitable “post-Western” order through non-Western institutional attempts, rather than an “anti-Western” order. In other words, recognising that the existing liberal international order has significantly deviated from its original liberal ideals, an increasing number of voices place their hopes in BRICS as a vehicle for promoting a more open and pluralistic, rather than more closed

54 The topics of economic and trade security, financial security, food security, counter-terrorism cooperation, and cybersecurity in the BRICS cooperation process have sparked lively discussions within China's academic community. Representative works include: Gao Wanglai, “BRICS Cybersecurity Cooperation: Progress and Paths for Deepening,” *China International Issues*, no.5, 2017, pp.63-74; Sun Yi, Li Wei, “BRICS Pathways in International Financial Security Governance,” *Journal of International Security Studies*, no.6, 2015, pp.55-80; Jia Zhongzheng, “BRICS Economic and Trade Security Cooperation: Challenges and Countermeasures,” *Journal of International Security Studies*, No.4, 2017, pp.125-153; Zhang Jiaolong, “An Analysis of BRICS Food Security Cooperation,” *Journal of International Security Studies*, No.6, 2018, pp.107-129; Zhang Guangyao, Feng Li, “The Necessity and Feasibility of BRICS Counter-Terrorism Cooperation,” *Journal of Jiangsu University (Social Science Edition)*, No.5, 2017, pp. 34-39; Chen Zheng, “BRICS and the ‘Responsibility to Protect,’” *Foreign Affairs Review*, No.1, 2015, pp.1-26.

55 Danielle Jacon Ayres Pinto, Larlecianne Piccolli, Riva Sobrado de Freitas, “Russia, BRICS and Cyber Power: Evoking Synergies under Conjectures of Deviation,” *JCIR: BRICS Special Edition* (2020), p.94.

56 Zhao Long et al., “Understanding ‘Big BRICS Cooperation’: A Non-Western Path to Building a Development Community,” Shanghai Institute for International Studies, March 2025, <https://www.siiis.org.cn/syybg1/16671.jhtml>

global order through diverse and multifaceted approaches.⁵⁷ On the other hand, emphasising the collective identity of the Global South helps enhance the collective bargaining power of developing countries, reduce the fragmentation of international rules, secure space for negotiation on key issues, and ultimately strengthen its bargaining capacity.

It should be noted that, for China, economic development and security are two sides of the same coin. Without development, there is no security, and the purpose of security is to enable development. In fact, in recent years, the cooperation agendas of the SCO and BRICS have increasingly overlapped. This is a natural result of functional spillover. Emphasising that BRICS cooperation on economic governance does not deny its role in security governance; rather, it reflects China's dialectical approach to development and security. Especially when facing complex international security issues and the construction of the global order, China has not pushed BRICS to transform into a security or military organisation. Instead, China seeks to eliminate the root causes of security threats by addressing global economic development and governance issues.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND INTERNAL DIVERGENCES WITHIN THE SCO AND BRICS

1. China's Perspective on Internal Divergences within the SCO and BRICS

China views internal divergences between member states as a “normal condition” in the evolution of multilateral organisations. Internal divergences within the BRICS and the SCO are inevitable because of several shared characteristics.

First are the structural attributes. The SCO and BRICS are “heterogeneous coalitions” that are composed of countries with diverse civilizations, political systems, and stages of development. This accounts for both the absence and presence of divergences. The SCO includes Central Asian states (e.g., Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), South Asian countries (India and Pakistan), as well as major Eurasian powers (Russia and China). These states differ fundamentally in their geopolitical interests, security priorities, and external strategic orientations. Compared with the SCO, heterogeneity within BRICS is even more pronounced. As a trans-regional, cross-institutional, and cross-civilizational platform for cooperation among major developing countries, BRICS members vary significantly in their development stages and strategic priorities. Its members – China, India, Brazil, Russia, South Africa (as well as newly admitted members) – also exhibit diverse economic structures: China represents a manufacturing-oriented economy; Russia is a resource-dependent economy; and India is transitioning from a service-led to a more manufacturing-oriented economy. These

⁵⁷ Hopewell Kristen, “The ties that bind: reassessing the political significance of the BRICS amid Russia's War on Ukraine,” *Globalizations*, 2026, pp. 1-19; Marek Rewizorski and Andrew Cooper, *Global Governance and The Political South: Continuity and Change In and Beyond the BRICS*, Routledge, 2025; Matthew Louis Bishop and Pegs Murray-Evans, “Five Little B(R)ICS: Huffing and Puffing, but not Blowing Your House in,” *New Political Economy*, Vol. 25, No. 5, 2020, pp. 691-702.

structural differences translate into distinct growth models, with some economies driven by exports and others by domestic demand. Consequently, member states hold divergent preferences on trade rules, industrial policies, and global governance reforms. For instance, export-oriented and domestic-demand-driven economies often adopt markedly different, even opposing, positions on regional economic integration, while resource exporters and importers diverge sharply in their conceptions of energy security.

Second, organisational expansion inevitably introduces greater diversity and complexity, thereby generating new divergences. Enlargement of the SCO has incorporated bilateral disputes into the multilateral framework, intensifying internal tensions. The joining of India and Pakistan, in particular, has significantly increased the organization's political complexity. In South Asia, longstanding India–Pakistan disputes have already paralysed several regional multilateral platforms or led India to pursue alternative arrangements to the exclusion of Pakistan. Within the SCO, these tensions carry the potential to complicate cooperation on certain geopolitical issues. Similarly, expansion of the BRICS (for instance, the inclusion of Saudi Arabia and Iran) has enhanced representativeness but also raised coordination costs, widened issue divergence, and amplified geopolitical considerations. As a trans-regional organisation, BRICS faces an increasing number of coordination rounds and an expanding agenda – covering energy, food security, security governance, finance, and development financing. As a result, differences have evolved from “limited divergences” to “structural divergences,” necessitating a gradualist approach based on the ‘minimum common denominator.’



BRICS 2025 plenary session “Strengthening Multilateralism, Economic-Financial Affairs, and Artificial Intelligence” at the Museum of Modern Art (MAM). Rio de Janeiro, RJ, July 6, 2025. Wikimedia Commons.

Third, as a multilateral framework with a strong economic orientation, BRICS reflects the varying degrees of dependence that its members have on the Western economic system. Some members (such as India and Brazil) maintain closer economic ties with the West, while others (such as Russia) face strained relations. China occupies an intermediate position: it remains deeply integrated into the Western economic system while simultaneously confronting trade frictions and export controls. These differences produce divergent positions on issues such as sanctions, de-dollarisation, and international institutional reform. For example, some members advocate more assertive reforms to reduce reliance on the US dollar – Russia has shown strong interest in promoting a common BRICS settlement currency – while others, notably India, adopt a more cautious stance due to concerns over financial stability and relations with the United States.

2. China's Approaches to Managing Internal Divergences in the SCO and BRICS

China has developed a set of pragmatic approaches to manage internal divergences within both frameworks. China adheres to the principles of “non-alignment” and “non-confrontation,” vis-à-vis SCO, opposing the politicisation or bloc formation stemming from intra-member differences. The SCO is defined as an organisation that does not target third parties nor engages in bloc-based confrontation. China also promotes a ‘common security’ concept, emphasising the indivisibility of security and rejecting the pursuit of one state’s security at the expense of others. Within this framework, divergences should be addressed through consultation rather than confrontation. Moreover, China prioritises development over political contestation, seeking to “dilute” political differences through economic cooperation. It places particular emphasis on infrastructure connectivity, energy cooperation, and regional trade development, viewing the SCO as a stable foundation for economic growth. The underlying logic is that expanding shared interests reduces the disruptive potential of divergences. With respect to India–Pakistan tensions, China supports bilateral dialogue and encourages the use of existing bilateral or international mechanisms, aiming to ‘isolate’ such conflicts from derailing the SCO framework. At the same time, China promotes agenda setting based on ‘minimum consensus’ and builds basic mutual trust through functional cooperation.

Regarding BRICS, China conceptualises the grouping primarily as an economic platform and seeks to anchor cooperation in economic common ground. It actively promotes trade and investment facilitation, infrastructure development through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the New Development Bank, and energy and resource cooperation to address shared concerns over energy security. China also seeks to avoid ideological confrontation within BRICS, emphasising openness, inclusiveness, and non-confrontation, thereby reducing internal tensions stemming from members’ differing external alignments. Furthermore, China highlights the shared identity of the “Global South,” aiming to strengthen collective cohesion by downplaying internal differences and enhancing BRICS’ collective voice in global governance, particularly in development discourse. In managing specific divergences, such as those in China–India relations, China adopts a strategy of avoiding sensitive issues, advancing cooperation incrementally, and following a “low-hanging

fruit first” approach. Regarding disruptions caused by India–Pakistan tensions, China continues to prioritise development as a means of building trust and addressing disputes.

China employs several strategies at the institutional level. First, it promotes a practice of ‘issue differentiation’ and guides both organisations toward a functionalist development path, which means that starting cooperation from high-consensus areas, continuously enhancing mutual trust, achieving functional spillover, and finally reaching a higher level of cooperation. In the SCO, China prioritises areas with high consensus (counterterrorism and economic cooperation, for instance) while downplaying more contentious issues. In BRICS, it similarly emphasises high-consensus areas such as trade, finance, and development financing, while adopting a cautious stance on geopolitical and security issues. Second, China advances institutionalisation to reduce disruptions caused by political cycles. Within the SCO, it supports mechanisms such as the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government, and various ministerial meetings. Within BRICS, it backs institutions such as the New Development Bank, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, and the Partnership on the New Industrial Revolution. Third, China stresses balanced and manageable expansion, supporting enlargement while maintaining operational efficiency and preventing factionalisation. It advocates keeping bilateral disputes outside multilateral frameworks to avoid “political capture” of the organisations.

CHINA’S EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCO AND BRICS

Expectation 1: The SCO will transition from a “security cooperation platform” to a “comprehensive governance framework”.

First, most Chinese experts judge that, in the context of the Ukraine crisis, mutual trust and cooperation in the security domain will remain the SCO’s primary development direction, as traditional security threats resurface.⁵⁸ By the year 2035, the institutionalisation of the SCO’s security functions will continue to deepen. In the face of increasingly prominent complex security challenges, three strengthening trends are expected. Counter-terrorism cooperation will become routine and technical, with issues such as digital counter-terrorism and cross-border law enforcement cooperation becoming more prominent. “New security issues”, such as cybersecurity, data security, and security cooperation for critical infrastructure, will be incorporated into the framework. Stability in Central Asia and the surrounding areas of Afghanistan will be maintained, and long-term management mechanisms for instability factors in Afghanistan and Central Asia will be developed.

58 “Leaders of Multiple Countries Believe the SCO Makes Positive Contributions to Security, Development, and Stability,” *Xinhua News*, July 5, 2024, <https://www.news.cn/20240705/1962937d2011401192d7655f46bfd8/c.html>

Second, the emphasis on economic and development issues will increase. Experts generally believe that relying solely on security cooperation will not sustain the long-term cohesion of the mechanism. Instead, it will be necessary to strengthen “functional cohesion” through connectivity and energy cooperation, thereby solidifying the foundation for security cooperation. Therefore, by the year 2035, the SCO may develop into a ‘regional cooperation model’, transitioning from security cooperation to cooperation in other areas, representing a “reverse spillover” model, with a structure of “security at the core, development at the wings”.⁵⁹

Third, the internal balancing mechanisms of the SCO will gradually mature. Scholars believe that India and Pakistan represent a “balancing expansion”. With India and Pakistan coexisting for the long term, the internal conflict management capability of the mechanism will become crucial. Its development path will continue to feature “low institutionalization, weak constraints, and high political consultation” and, based on this, will steadily promote internal reforms in areas such as organizational systems, expansion mechanisms, and decision-making principles.⁶⁰

Expectation 2: As the vanguard and leading force of the Global South, BRICS will evolve from an economic cooperation platform to the ‘coordination core’ of the Global South.⁶¹

First, the expansion of BRICS will become a regular process, but its pace will be more cautious. Chinese experts generally believe that BRICS will maintain an open expansion trend in the future and become one of the most representative mechanisms of the Global South. The ‘BRICS+’ cooperation model will serve as an open platform for broader cooperation among Global South countries. As a result, BRICS will gradually form a layered interaction structure, consolidating cooperation among its internal members while continuously absorbing more partners from the Global South for orderly participation and diverse collaboration.⁶²

59 Zeng Xianghong, Ma Rong, “The Role and Development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from the Perspective of a Community of Shared Destiny in the Neighborhood,” *Contemporary International Relations*, no.7, 2025, pp.27-48; Zeng Xianghong, Luo Jin, “An Analysis of the Connotations and Value of the ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization Development Model,’” *South Asian Studies*, no.2, 2024, pp.1-26; Feng Zheng, Xue Litai, “Reverse ‘Spillover’: Security Cooperation and Diffusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Journal of Xi’an Jiaotong University (Social Science Edition)*, No.2, 2019, pp.142-147; Zeng Xianghong, “SCO Practice: A Major Innovation in International Relations Theory,” *China Today*, June 11, 2018, http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/zw2018/rdzt/2018shzz/pinglun/201806/t20180611_800132515.html

60 Zeng Xianghong, Gao Weitong, “The ‘Organizational Unity’ Mechanism in the Expansion Process of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Academic Journal of Russian Studies*, no.6, 2024, pp.24-46; Wei Bing, “Mechanisms and Dynamics of Regional Security Institution Expansion,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, no.4, 2021, pp.67-96; Peng Xin, “A Study on the Expansion of Weakly Binding Institutions,” PhD Dissertation, China Foreign Affairs University, 2021, pp. 43-52.

61 Xi Jinping, “Unity and Cooperation, Moving Forward Bravely-Speech at the BRICS Leaders’ Virtual Summit,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, September 8, 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/202509/t20250908_11704575.shtml

62 Xi Jinping, “Together, Paving the Way for the Second ‘Golden Decade’ of BRICS Cooperation-Speech at the BRICS Business Forum Opening Ceremony,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, September 3, 2017, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/201709/t20170903_9870097.shtml

Second, financial and monetary cooperation will gradually deepen. Despite the many challenges posed by a unified currency and common payment systems, by the year 2035, the proportion of local currency settlement in BRICS will significantly increase, and the cross-border payment system will become increasingly diversified. At the same time, member countries will contribute more to the New Development Bank, and the bank's capital scale will expand significantly. In other words, BRICS countries will steadily advance in the direction of “de-risking” rather than “de-dollarisation”, continuously promoting the diversification of the global financial system.

Third, security cooperation among member states, especially in non-traditional security areas, will deepen. Philosophically, BRICS countries will continue to advocate for a new type of security concept based on common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable principles. Practically, BRICS countries will follow a new security path of “dialogue, not confrontation; partnership, not alliance; and win-win, not zero-sum”. As demonstrated by their past joint calls for a ceasefire in the Israel-Palestine conflict, the member states' willingness and ability to participate in international security governance and to coordinate geopolitical crises as a collective entity representing the Global South and BRICS will become stronger.⁶³

Fourth, BRICS countries' ability to coordinate on global issues will significantly enhance, especially in areas such as sustainable development and climate financing, green investment and technological cooperation, global digital governance, food and energy security, poverty alleviation, and livelihood construction. However, the role and positioning of BRICS will resemble more of a “topic coordination group” rather than a political security organisation.

Of course, neither the Shanghai Cooperation Organization nor BRICS is a cooperation mechanism solely led by China. The principle of consultation and shared governance is a key reason why both have received broad support and participation from the Global South countries in the current international context. At the same time, the future development of the SCO and BRICS depends on both internal coordination and external interaction. China, Russia, and India are the major powers in both mechanisms, and they bear greater responsibility and mission toward internal coordination. The strategic expectations and mutual trust among these three countries will be particularly important. From the perspective of external interaction, speeches such as that of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, and an article by Alexander Stubb, the President of Finland, in *Foreign Affairs*, seem to signal that the Western world, excluding the United States, is beginning to seriously consider “strategic autonomy” and a new international order. French President Macron even expressed France's willingness to attend the BRICS summit. The US stance, however, remains highly uncertain. In 2025, President

63 Yang Na, “The Concept and Practice of China Advancing BRICS Cooperation in the New Era,” *China International Studies*, no.6, 2025, pp.1-21; Wan Zhe, “BRICS Cooperation as a Stabilizer in a Turbulent World,” Beijing Normal University News, June 23, 2022, <https://news.bnu.edu.cn/zx/xzdt/128441.htm>

Trump repeatedly threatened to impose tariff sanctions on BRICS countries. The continued development and expansion of BRICS and the SCO are likely to raise concerns within US strategic circles, who may view it as an attempt to target US interests and weaken US influence in key regions of the world. Therefore, how BRICS and the SCO engage in strategic communication with the United States may be a key issue to consider over the next decade.

Expectation 3: China emphasises several strategic directions for the long-term development of these organisations.

First, it underscores the importance of clearly defining their identity and normative foundations. Member states, especially major powers, should work toward a set of shared values. Historically, Western countries have dominated the interpretation of universal values, but the growing diversity within BRICS and the SCO necessitates the development of more inclusive normative frameworks. These should be compatible with international law while accommodating diverse interests, and may include principles such as respect for sovereignty, strategic autonomy, equality, multipolarity, international law-centered order, consensus-building, and mutual listening. Additionally, the organizations should develop functional mechanisms for managing internal geopolitical tensions, potentially including a principle of resolving disputes without the use of force. Finally, both frameworks should leverage their institutional capacities to build a “commodities partnership network”, encompassing critical minerals, high-tech industrial goods, and key agricultural products, thereby enhancing resilience against external sanctions and strengthening strategic autonomy.

Second, China advocates the expansion of “minilateral” cooperation within both frameworks. This involves strengthening existing sub-groupings and creating new ones. Within BRICS, cooperation among core members should be consolidated, including continued policy coordination among Brazil, South Africa, India, and China in global climate negotiations. Existing mechanisms such as the India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum can also be further developed. Within the SCO, existing mechanisms such as China-Central Asia (C+C5) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization can generate complementary effects. New minilateral initiatives may include energy cooperation platforms involving both producers and consumers (e.g., Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Russia, India, and China), as well as “BRICS+” arrangements in critical minerals involving countries such as Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Chile. Additionally, targeted coordination on regional issues, such as Afghanistan, could begin in smaller groupings and later be integrated into the broader institutional framework.

Third, China calls for gradual institutional refinement. This includes clarifying enlargement criteria to balance representativeness with functional coherence, ensuring that new members maintain constructive linkages with founding members. While expansion is widely supported, it should proceed cautiously, taking into account the long-term strategic impact rather than pursuing scale for its own sake. Finally, China highlights the need to establish formal exit mechanisms. At present, both organizations possess accession procedures but lack withdrawal frameworks. Given intensifying geopolitical competition and domestic political shifts within member states, the possibility of withdrawal cannot be excluded. Establishing orderly entry and exit mechanisms would represent an important step toward institutional maturity, and China is well-positioned to take a leading role in this process.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the SCO and BRICS represent the primary institutional expressions of the Chinese characteristic approach to international security and global order. As practical pillars of China's comprehensive security paradigm, both organisations increasingly require a synchronized approach to their security and developmental mandates. For the SCO, long-term internal cohesion cannot rely exclusively on traditional security ties; its foundation must be continuously reinforced through practical economic connectivity and energy cooperation. Similarly, while BRICS is not inherently a security organization, it is progressively emerging as a pivotal platform for the Global South to coordinate responses to both traditional and non-traditional security challenges.

Beyond functional cooperation, the evolution of the SCO and BRICS underscores China's broader commitment to fostering a more just and equitable international order. Critically, neither mechanism functions as a unilateral vehicle for Chinese dominance. Instead, they are structured around the principle of equal and orderly engagement among all member states, advancing a global governance model rooted in achieving shared growth through consultation and collaboration. By combining this equal internal engagement with the maintenance of stable relations with other major powers, the SCO and BRICS are positioned to serve as crucial platforms in advancing an equal and orderly multipolar world.

The background of the entire page is a photograph of several Terracotta Army statues from ancient China. The statues are made of a light-colored, weathered material, possibly terracotta or stone, and are dressed in traditional armor. They have distinct facial features, including mustaches and beards. The focus is on a central statue in the foreground, with others visible in the background, slightly out of focus.

About APLN

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, and diplomatic leaders and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks.

The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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