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## The Soft Dimension of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Fight Against the "Three Evil Forces". Insights on Counterterrorism Preventive Measures and Youth Education

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### Abstract

This article examines the comprehensive and participatory component of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) approach to the fight against the "Three Evil Forces" within the theoretical framework of smart counterterrorism. After analyzing the problematic definitions of the concepts of terrorism and extremism, the authors choose to focus on the non-coercive preventive pillar of the SCO's counterterrorism strategy through the prism of youth education. The emphasis is placed on the strikingly similar practices of SCO Member States in this field, whereby state and non-state actors foster partnerships to conduct cultural activities promoting the same values of patriotism, civic identity, interethnic and interfaith dialogue as a counter-ideology to the dissemination of radical ideas among the youth. The experience of SCO Member States in implementing inclusive counterterrorism programs serves as a basis for the evolution of SCO's soft diplomacy, which has very recently entered a new phase in its development, following the first SCO Youth Assembly and Uzbekistan's decision to support the SCO Youth Council. In this paper, the youth is analyzed as the primary target and actor of the SCO's preventive counterterrorism efforts.

**Keywords:** extremism, terrorism, separatism, the "Three Evil Forces", the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, smart counterterrorism, soft counterterrorism, counternarratives, community resilience, education, patriotism, multiethnic harmony, the SCO Youth Council, the SCO Youth Assembly.

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## 1. Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a permanent intergovernmental organization founded on 15 June 2001 by the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the of Republic of Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan. Stephen Aris, senior researcher at the Center for Security Studies (CSS), points out that the SCO is a regional organization focused on non-traditional security ([Non-traditional security..., 2014](#)) and is not hostile to the West ([Aris, 2009](#)). In the early stages of its creation, the SCO elaborated the doctrine of the “Three Evil Forces” based on the crimes of extremism, terrorism and separatism. The threat of committing or the act of committing anyone of these three crimes falls under the anti-terrorist legislation of SCO Member States and triggers extradition. Hence, separatism and extremism are assigned equal weight and seem to be interpreted as interconnected crimes by the SCO. In 2005, the SCO Member States adopted a Cooperation Agreement establishing the principle of “mutual recognition” of terrorist, separatist or extremist acts *“regardless of whether the legislation of SCO Member States includes a corresponding act in the same category of crimes or whether the act is described using the very same terms”* ([Concept of Cooperation, 2005](#)). This clause provides for the harmonization of the anti-terrorist legislations and practices of SCO Member States. It can be noticed the SCO pursues the common objective of eradicating internal threats to the security of its Member States through the implementation of non-military instruments. Although the SCO officially acts as a security blanket in the region, it has so far not given any external assistance to its Member States in the fight against the “Three Evil Forces”. This is not surprising since the SCO does not provide for a collective defense clause in the event of a national crisis, nor for a rapid response force in emergency situations ([Laruelle, Peyrouse, 2013: 251](#)). Within this framework, the SCO’s role is mostly limited to expressing concerns or giving moral support without intervening directly. The SCO’s non-interventionist position meets in full the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs which serves as a building block of the Organization’s development path. Besides, SCO Member States seemingly prefer, through bilateral agreements or autonomously, to define their own modalities of counterterrorism interventions ([Tolipov, 2006](#)). Russia and China, for example, manage independently and without the aegis of the SCO the threat posed by Chechen and Uyghur separatist movements within their own borders ([Tolipov, 2006](#)). However, the SCO's refusal to establish itself as a platform for dialogue on water management and migration issues in Central Asia has greatly frustrated the expectations of its Central Asian Member States. As noted by Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse: *“The gap between the organisation’s official discourse on the fight against “non-traditional dangers” and the – quasi-non-existent – mechanisms in place to enable collective or at least concerted action constitute the main component for the disillusionment of Central Asian experts”* ([Laruelle, Peyrouse, 2013: 245](#)). Yet it is worthy the note once more that the SCO’s approach to combating terrorism is not interventionist and global, but rather consensus-based and regional. Hence, the “Three Evil Forces” doctrine mainly satisfies the purpose of defending its Member States’ stability and territorial integrity and of defining a common regional approach to counterterrorism.

## 2. Data and methodology

The authors analyze the SCO’s fight against the “Three Evil Forces” through the lens of smart counterterrorism, a concept introduced by Joseph Nye and Richard L. Armitage in 2008. Although the SCO does not employ this term in its conventions, the authors believe the notion of smart counterterrorism is a relevant analytical tool to examine the SCO’s response to non-traditional threats. The holistic approach built on four pillars which flows from the Action Plan of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) serves as a basis for the study of SCO preventive antiterrorism programs. The sources used in this paper are the SCO’s official conventions on combating terrorism, extremism and separatism, analysed in the context of international law standards. Furthermore, the authors examine the counterterrorism programs of SCO founding Member States in a comparative perspective. Primary sources used to discuss the contours of the Organisation’s youth diplomacy are interviews with SCO representatives carried out in Russia and Tajikistan in 2018.

### 3. Discussion

In the Convention Against Terrorism of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2009), the SCO draws a straight line between the concepts of “terrorism” and an “ideology of violence” by laying out the following definition: “*Terrorism – an ideology of violence and a practice of influencing decision-making by the authorities or international organizations through the commission of or the threat of committing violent and (or) other criminal acts connected with intimidating a population and aimed at causing damage to the person, to society, and to the state*” (Konventsiya Shankhaiskoi organizatsii..., 2009). In the same fashion and in accordance with the Convention on Combating Extremism (2017), the term “extremism” now no longer refers to an act, but to an “ideology” and a “practice”. Indeed, extremism is defined as: “*An ideology and practice aimed at resolving political, social, racial, national and religious conflicts through violent and other anti-constitutional actions*” (Konventsiya Shankhaiskoi organizatsii...). In comparison with previous SCO documents, this Convention enshrines a comprehensive system of measures to counter extremism. Prior to the adoption of this new Convention, the SCO cooperation in the field of the fight against extremism was regulated by two documents: the SCO Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (2001) and the Concept of Cooperation Between SCO Member States in Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism (2005) (SCO Secretary-General, 2017).

The choice of the “ideology of violence” criterion to describe the notions of terrorism and extremism raises a number of problems. For instance, Human Rights in China's (HRIC) emphasizes that terrorism must not be defined on the basis of ideology, as political or ideological goals cannot alone constitute the essence of terrorism. In international law, at least two other conditions must be met to confer a terrorist nature to an act: the first condition is a material result (for example the death of a victim), the second is an objective, which in most cases, refers to spreading a state of terror among the population (Human Rights in China (HRIC), 2011). It goes without saying that the concept of an “ideology of violence” is vague, muddled and highly subjective in its interpretation. An ideology refers to beliefs and values that cannot be evaluated objectively and that, moreover, could be associated with the freedom of speech and religion (Human Rights in China (HRIC), 2011). The blurry line between the concepts of terrorism and extremism together with the lack of common views regarding the adoption of a universal definition of these concepts within the United Nations (UN) make these phenomena open to various ambiguous interpretations, both in the theory and in the practice of counterterrorism.

The thorny issue of defining and interpreting the concept of “extremism” has drawn the attention of many researchers. The term “extremism” etymologically originates from the Latin word *extremus*, meaning “situated at the edge” or the “ultimate in degree” (Fasmer, 1986). Oftentimes extremism can lead to violent methods in the pursuit of achieving a specific goal (Oleinikova, 2016) and thus evolve into terrorism. The academic literature devoted to the study of the concept of extremism does not display a common and unequivocal understanding of the issue (Yuritsin, 2017). In this paper, we shall use the terms “terrorism” and “violent extremism” as synonyms. The concept of “extremism” will be intended as an important step in the staircase of radicalization. This is because extremism is likely to evolve into terrorism once the extremist acceptance of violence shifts to the widespread terrorist use violence (The European Institute of Peace, 2018). This said, the notions of “terrorism”, “violent extremism” and “extremism” can appear hand-in-hand or isolated in contemporary counterterrorism strategies.

In today's globalized world, terrorism has become a hydra-headed menace which takes the form of a sophisticated and ramified transnational network, difficult to define, to characterize and to control. As the Council of Europe puts it, this modern form of terrorism is characterized by an “a-territorial” and “a-cultural” dimension, although terrorist claims to a given culture are common (Conseil de l'Europe, 2004). Nowadays, most States across the globe implement comprehensive antiterrorism strategies resulting from a complex blend of hard and soft measures, which in their interaction, reflect the principles of smart counterterrorism (Howell, 2014). Joseph Nye and Richard L. Armitage defined this concept in “Implementing Smart Power: Setting an Agenda for National Security Reform” in 2008: “*Smart counter-terrorism can be defined as a process of prudent integration of a large number of governmental and non-governmental players from various levels, with the aim of reducing terrorist motivation and capacity, and winning the hearts and minds of the population in the public arena. This approach should integrate*

*preventive, defensive and offensive measures conducted by a large number of players into an efficient short-term and long-term approach*" (Prezelj, 2013).

According to the Canadian counterterrorism expert Margaret Purdy, any counterterrorism strategy should be built upon four interlinked strategic pillars. The first three pillars are criminal justice, public safety and the military response to acts of terrorism. The fourth pillar is the most innovative but is rather tricky to put in place: its aim is long-term prevention through the eradication of the root causes of terrorism. For the fourth pillar to be firmly grounded, it is necessary that the diplomatic, development, private and public sectors foster partnerships to annihilate the very purpose of terrorism (Purdy, 2004/2005: 4-5). Although most modern counterterrorism strategies have long disregarded the importance of the fourth pillar, it is now becoming a central part of national programs designed to form a cordon sanitaire against "homegrown terrorism" (Purdy, 2004/2005: 7). Besides, the Plan of Action of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by consensus in the form of a resolution on 8 September 2006, is based on the holistic four pillar approach and thereby emphasises the need to prevent and address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism (UN Global Counter-Terrorism..., 2006).

Preventive counterterrorism strategies are, as mentioned by Margaret Purdy, closely linked to the study of the "root causes" of radicalization. The academic and political debates surrounding this topic are multiple and stormy. However, experts mostly underline the following main "root causes" of terrorism: poverty, precariousness, the marginalization of entire sectors of society, the sudden decline in living conditions in Muslim countries, globalization and the inequalities that flow from it, extremist religious ideologies, unstable, weak and failing States, authoritarian regimes, frozen conflicts (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), US foreign policy, feelings of alienation, rage, hopelessness and humiliation (Purdy, 2004/2005: 9-10). Addressing the root causes of terrorism is a long-term process involving informal and community-based measures aimed at the promotion of social cohesion to prevent and counter radical ideologies (Aly, 2013: 4). As noted by counterterrorism expert Anne Aly: "*Soft counterterrorism constitutes an important and necessary element of a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy both internationally and on the home-front. An alternative framework for developing soft counter terrorism starts from acknowledging that terrorists have an objective of influencing multiple audiences and that these audiences, individually and collectively, have agency in constructing counter-narratives to terrorism*" (Aly, 2013: 16). In order to develop "community resilience" to terrorism, States and international organizations broaden the potential of collective action both formally and informally to build counter-narratives aimed at reducing the appeal of terrorism (Aly, 2013: 11). Given the complex nature of this task, both state and non-state actors have a role to play in the soft dimension of counterterrorism: governments, civil society organizations, businesses, universities and religious institutions (Aly, 2013: 14). The Plan of Action of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy established the comprehensive and participatory component of international counterterrorism, further reinforced through the adoption of Resolution 2250 on 9 December 2015. This unprecedented resolution encourages UN Member States to put in place inclusive mechanisms at the national level to ensure youth participation, especially in the fight against violent extremism (Resolution 2250, 2015). Countering the ideology of violent extremism through culture and education is an important aspect of soft counterterrorism as it can ensure that learning institutions do not become a "breeding ground for violent extremism". However, as stressed by UNESCO: "*The role of education is not to intercept violent extremists or identify individuals who may potentially become violent extremists, but to create the conditions that build the defenses, within learners, against violent extremism and strengthen their commitment to non-violence and peace*" (UNESCO, 2017)." Counterterrorism through education and culture is destined to the youth, perceived as the primary target of these policies, but also as its chief implementor. It is therefore little surprising that in most countries today, the youth is both the object and the subject of cultural and educational programs on combating the ideology of violent extremism.

According to the Russian Academy of Sciences, the SCO is ultimately an attempt to create a smart diplomatic platform, making use of soft and hard instruments in international relations (Perspektivy razvitiya ShO..., 2016). In this regard, there is no doubt that the SCO's fight against the "Three Evil Forces" carries within itself the seeds of smart counterterrorism, although this term does not appear in the Organization's official documents. Indeed, the SCO makes use of a skillful mix of soft and hard measures in its conventions to prevent, monitor and suppress its non-

traditional threats. For example, the Concept Between SCO Member States in Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism (2005) sets objectives ranging from the prevention of the spread of radical narratives to the monitoring, surveillance and suppression of the “Three Evil Forces”, the elimination of the consequences of terrorist acts and the fight against the financing of terrorism ([Kontsepsiya sotrudnichestva gosudarstv..., 2005](#)). With the aim of building community resilience to all forms of extremism, the SCO encourages the collaboration between state entities, civil society and media actors to elaborate counterterrorism narratives ([Kontsepsiya sotrudnichestva gosudarstv..., 2005](#)). In parallel, hard counterterrorism cooperation between SCO Member States covers joint military exercises, intelligence and information sharing, extradition procedures ([Kontsepsiya sotrudnichestva gosudarstv..., 2005](#)) and law enforcement cooperation on border control ([Mingwen, 2018](#)). Along the same lines, the four pillars of counterterrorism clearly appear in the SCO Convention on Combating extremism (2017) as it intends simultaneously to prevent, detect and curb the tide of extremism while eliminating its consequences, identifying and eliminating the causes and conditions conducive to radicalization ([Konventsiya Shankhaïskoi organizatsii...](#)).

The prevention of terrorism and extremism among the youth has recently grown to become a key area of cooperation in the frame of the SCO. The Ufa Declaration by the Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2015) states that the SCO has built and strengthens a global security system in the information and communications field. It aims to actively fight the spread of terrorist, separatist and extremist narratives in order to prevent religious extremism, racial and ethnic intolerance, in particular among the youth with the support of schools, media agencies, religious organizations, non-governmental organizations and businesses ([Ufinskaya deklaratsiya..., 2015](#)). Already in 2009, the Declaration of the Special Conference on Afghanistan Convened under the Auspices of the SCO together with the Plan of Action for combating terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and organized crime signed with the Republic of Afghanistan, stressed the need to promote international, interethnic and interfaith dialogue in the fight against ideologies advocated by terrorists ([Deklaratsiya...](#)).

The SCO's increased attention to the youth in its counterterrorism policies is significant. The study titled “Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media” commissioned by UNESCO provides a global mapping of the assumed roles played by social media in radicalization processes across all the regions of the world. In this study, the youth is considered to be the most affected category of the population to extremism ([S raphin Alava, 2017](#)). This, of course, clarifies why the youth also takes center stage in SCO Member States counterterrorism programs. Taking the example of Russia, scholars distinguish different types of extremism which are gaining momentum on the international stage: ethnic extremism, religious extremism, political extremism and nationalist extremism. According to available statistics, the youth is responsible for 80 % of extremist activities in Russia ([Agapov i dr, 2015](#)). As argued by Shlegel', most perpetrators of crimes of extremism in Russia are 14 to 30 years old ([Shlegel', 2008](#)). Some researchers also include the age range from 30 to 35 years old. Aminov and Oganyan further note that young men are more inclined to commit acts of extremism between the age of 16 and 18, whereas extremist crimes among women are more likely between the age of 18 and 25 ([Aminov, Oganyan, 2005](#)). In Russia, a surge in extremism can be observed for the 14-24 age group (65 %). This group is particularly susceptible to embrace extremist ideologies because of increased vulnerability, identity struggles, behavioral problems, delinquency, the quest for significance and self-affirmation. Furthermore, youngsters between the age of 14 and 24 are in average fearless and more confident. They show more readiness to commit crimes than other age groups and justify their behavior by shifting the responsibility of their acts on others ([Sergeeva, 2016](#)). However, it should be noted that being part of an extremist youth movement may not initially determine the radical tendencies of its members ([Makarov, 2016](#)). As stressed by Rodina, youngsters become extremists gradually, within the process of participating in extremist activities and accepting radical ideologies ([Rodina, 2016](#)).

SCO Member States have a great deal of expertise in adopting soft measures designed to counter the spread of terrorist narratives. To repel terrorist and extremist threats effectively and to strengthen the immunity of the youth to radical ideas, SCO Member States promote inclusive youth initiatives built on the values of patriotism and interethnic harmony. In accordance with SCO conventions and national counterterrorism programs of SCO Member States, such traditional values serve as a counter-ideological response to neutralize and defeat terrorism.

The Federal target program “Russian Culture (2012-2018)” highlights multiethnic harmony and patriotism as useful soft power instruments in the prevention of extremism. Indeed, according to this Federal target program, Russia can mobilize its historical memory, its democratic state, its humanism, the unity of its multiethnic state, its traditional family and patriotic values to curb radical ideologies ([Pravitel'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii..., 2012](#)). Further, the Strategy of the Russian Federation against extremism up to 2025 emphasizes that the actors of the fight against extremism are federal and regional agencies, civil society organizations and Russian citizens ([Strategiya protivodeistviya ekstremizmu..., 2014](#)). The strategy also stresses the need to base youth education on the spiritual, moral and patriotic values of the Russian Federation ([Strategiya protivodeistviya ekstremizmu..., 2014](#)). In addition, it sets the goal of harnessing the potential of youth and veterans' associations to educate Russian citizens in the spirit of patriotism and unity ([Strategiya protivodeistviya ekstremizmu..., 2014](#)). In the same vein, the draft law on the participation of citizens of the Russian Federation, civil organizations and civil-governmental associations in the rule of law ([Federal'nyi zakon ot 22.08.1996](#)) encourages collaboration in the detection of criminal offenses between non-state actors and the police ([Rossiiskaya Federatsiya...](#)). The Conception on civil security in the Russian Federation (2013) also takes up the notion of soft counterterrorism as it seeks to coordinate the joint action of federal, regional and civil society organizations to develop preventive, educational and propaganda tools capable of tackling the origins and consequences of extremist acts ([Prezident Rossiiskoi Federatsii..., 2013](#)). In this context, it is worth mentioning the widespread practice of students' *družiny* ([Anne Le Huérou..., 1998](#)) which lend a helping hand to law enforcement actors by monitoring and preventing ethnic-based conflicts in schools and student residences ([Agapov i dr, 2015](#)). Cyber *družiny* is another interesting phenomenon in Russia: young volunteers monitor the Internet and search for illegal and extremist content on social media. Although this form of volunteerism already exists in Russia, the party United Russia has recently proposed a draft law to foster and regulate its activities ([BBC News, 2018](#)).

The education of the youth in the spirit of patriotism and traditional values as a means to counter extremism is also relevant for SCO Central Asian Member States. All four Republics are implementing counterterrorism strategies intended to eradicate popular support for radical ideologies. The Republic of Kirghizstan seems to have a great deal of experience in this field. Its Program on combating extremism and terrorism for 2017-2022 pursues the objective of improving the activities of state and non-state bodies in the field of the prevention of extremism and terrorism. Among the main achievements reached, the program states the implementation of various socio-economic programs aimed at improving the well-being of vulnerable groups of the population; the creation of the conditions for interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue and the introduction of the subject “History of religious culture” into school curricula. The program also identifies areas for improvement ([Programma Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi...](#)). For example, the Republic of Kirghizstan intends to expand the outreach of its program to include the most vulnerable groups to radicalization, strengthen the level of education in religious educational institutions which remains low, adapt the secondary and higher education systems to the challenges of extremism and terrorism, develop a system of preventive measures to counter the ideology of extremism and terrorism in prisons and foster good practices in the rehabilitation and reintegration processes of persons convicted of crimes of extremism ([Programma Pravitel'stva Kyrgyzskoi...](#)).

In 2013, the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted law 63-V, which extends preventive counterterrorism cooperation to civil society actors, the media and educational institutions in order to form and nourish an “anti-terrorist conscience” within society ([Zakon Respubliki Kazakhstan...](#)). In addition, on 2 October 2013, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev adopted a national program to combat religious extremism and terrorism primarily targeting the youth. The chief goal of this program is to enact preventive antiterrorism measures capable of developing a renewed religious consciousness reflecting the traditions and cultural values of the Republic of Kazakhstan ([Zhanabilov, 2016](#)). Quite similarly, the Republic of Tajikistan's national strategy on combatting of extremism and terrorism for 2016-2020 includes inclusive and preventive counterterrorism measures aimed at preserving national unity as a sustainable barrier against the spread of radical ideas ([O Natsional'noi strategii...](#)). The strategy points out that the ideological vacuum in post-Soviet Tajikistan largely contributed to the outbreak of civil war in the 1990s and led to the erosion of the foundations of national unity. Improving the level of legal culture within society and

promoting social development are among the key guidelines of the strategy ([O Natsional'noi strategii...](#)). With the support of the OSCE Program Office in Dushanbe, Tajikistan has created community councils in various regions to ensure cooperation between the law enforcement and civil spheres at the local level ([OBSE](#)). As regards the Republic of Uzbekistan, it has adopted a new law on combating extremism in June 2018 which sets forth the overall objective of building a culture of resilience against extremism by promoting cultural traditions together with the spiritual, moral and patriotic education of the youth ([Zakon Respubliki Uzbekistan...](#)). To achieve this goal, the law encourages state and non-state actors to implement a series of soft counterterrorism instruments designed to promote legal education, scientific literature and informative workshops ([Zakon Respubliki Uzbekistan...](#)).

China has only very recently laid out its counterterrorism strategy in a legislative framework. The first law of the People's Republic of China on the fight against terrorism was adopted on 27 December 2015. This law views counterterrorism as a "people's war" ([Singh, 2016](#)) which should rely on "civil participation". The goal is twofold: citizens and civil organizations are required to collaborate with state entities as informers and are encouraged to form groups of volunteers in the event of terrorist attacks ([Singh, 2016](#)). Since Xi Jinping took office in November 2012, he has attached great importance to "social stability and long-term security" in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, where the greatest terrorist threat to China is believed to come from. China bases its counterterrorism strategy in Xinyang on the promotion of patriotic values and interethnic understanding. The ultimate goal of these efforts is for all Chinese ethnic groups to be "tightly bound together like the seeds of a pomegranate" ([China Daily, 2014](#)). To maintain stability and security in Xinyang, the Chinese government has mobilized the de-radicalization efforts of 1.28 million cadres, 0.4 million teachers, and 28000 religious actors ([Zhou, 2017](#)). This year, China's so-called re-education camps in Xinjiang to "carry out anti-extremist ideological education" have received wide media coverage. Human rights organizations claim the Chinese government has detained an estimated up to one million predominantly Muslim people in Xinjiang ([Amnesty International..., 2018a](#)). With the aim of enforcing patriotism and loyalty to Beijing in the region, the Chinese government is allegedly implementing policies of "mass internment, intrusive surveillance, political indoctrination and forced cultural assimilation against the region's Uighurs" ([Amnesty International..., 2018](#)). It follows that China appears to be making a coercive use of soft counterterrorism instruments. This hard reinterpretation of combating extremism through culture and education leads to human rights violations, virulent indoctrination and might also prove ineffective in the long run. China's rather unyielding approach to counterterrorism even in its "soft dimension" seems to distinguish it from its neighbors which, for the time being, have not yet adopted such a hard line. Nonetheless, the Secretary-General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Rashid Alimov, supported the policy of the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang. According to him, Beijing's measures to counter terrorism are not aimed at a specific ethnic group, origin or religion ([Nazvana pol'za..., 2018](#)). Beyond soft and hard counterterrorism through education and reeducation, in SCO countries the preventive public health approach to radicalization is poorly developed even at national level. Soft forms of counterterrorism which should be considered and explored in the medical sphere are psychological treatment programs for youngsters at risk of radicalization. Of paramount importance, especially in the field of extremism prevention, is also the development of rehabilitation and deradicalization structures, presented as a set of measures aimed at restoring lost social ties for people who have, to some extent, been involved in extremist activities.

Among the hard measures implemented by SCO countries in the fight against the "Three Evil Forces", special attention is paid to the implementation of legislation restricting access to extremist content on the Internet. As pointed out by several scholars, the incitement to extremism and violence on social media plays a growing role in the radicalization of the youth in sectarian or political groups ([Séraphin Alava, 2017](#)). Extremist groups have, on the Internet, a global outreach to conduct violent propaganda, recruit supporters and increase their number of "sympathizers" ([Kubyakin, 2011](#)). This is why in parallel with the development of soft counterterrorism instruments, SCO State Members have also specialized in strengthening hard coercive surveillance policies. New Internet security measures were adopted by all SCO Member States, especially in the last few years ([Lain, 2016: 386-405](#)). For example, since 2016 the Republic of Uzbekistan, as indeed the Russian Federation through the Yarovaya law passed in 2016, requires ISPs to keep the metadata of their users for a period of three months ([Prikaz Ministra po razvitiyu..., 2016](#)).

Moreover, the Chinese law requires telephone operators and Internet service providers to “*Provide technical support and assistance, including decryption, to police and national security authorities in prevention and investigation of terrorist activities*” (Prikaz Ministra po razvitiyu..., 2016). The Republic of Tajikistan, for its part, decided in 2015 to transfer the services of Internet providers and telecommunications companies through a single communication center under the control of the government (Lain, 2016: 402). In July 2016, amendments to the Civil Procedure Code of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan were adopted to allow prosecutors to block websites deemed as extremist or terrorist for up to five days before obtaining court approval (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The national approaches of SCO Member State cyberspace surveillance fully meet the information security guidelines supported by the SCO on the international stage. In 2011, the SCO Member States submitted “The International Code of Conduct for Information Security” (the “Code”) to the UN General Assembly. The document was later revised in 2015 and aims to develop information security rules of behavior, as well as to extend the notions of sovereignty and territorial integrity to the virtual sphere, which according to scholars, may be problematic under international human rights law. Unrestricted control over the digital medium and its content could indeed contradict to rights to privacy, freedom of opinion and expression (McKune, 2015). Since the beginning of the Global War on Terror, attempts to prevent online radicalization processes pose a major challenge to the safeguard of freedom of expression worldwide. To strike a balance between security imperatives and human rights, key international standards must be observed to avoid indiscriminate blocking and prosecution, censorship over-reach and privacy intrusions.

The soft dimension of the SCO’s strategy against the “Three Evil Forces” is reflected above all in the area of cultural and humanitarian cooperation which covers a broad spectrum of domains such as education, energy policy, trade, infrastructure and finance. Although cultural and humanitarian cooperation is a key priority for the SCO, it has developed very gradually. The cultural and confessional heterogeneity of the SCO area encompassing Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, Russian Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Muslims in Central Asia makes the task of developing humanitarian partnerships difficult (Xia, 2015). The foundation stone of cultural and humanitarian cooperation within the SCO was laid in 2002, when the culture ministers of SCO Member States first met and decided to organize the SCO “Days of Culture” to give visibility to artist collectives. Since then, numerous cultural events have been organized to commemorate the important historical dates of SCO Member States, as well as art festivals, concerts, exhibitions and educational weeks (Xia, 2015). Besides, an intergovernmental agreement on cultural cooperation was signed in 2007 in Bishkek. The areas of cooperation include literature and art, research and science, information sharing, personnel exchanges and the prohibition of illegal and criminal activities (Xia, 2015). Under Article 4, the agreement provides for cooperation measures to combat the unlawful expropriation of the cultural property of its Member States.

In the 2000s, the SCO initiated non-governmental cooperation in the humanitarian field which gave rise to multiple civil platforms such as, for example, the SCO Forum of experts, the SCO Business Club and the SCO University Network. The main focus in this paper is on the SCO Youth Council, the junior and civil platform for dialogue of the Organization. At the meeting of SCO Heads of State in June 2006, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the idea of a Youth Council. In Beijing the following year, SCO Member States signed the Convention on the establishment of the SCO Youth Council, composed by national youth organizations: the Russian Youth Union and the Russian Youth Public Chamber; the Kazakhstan Youth Congress and the “Zhas Otan” youth wing of the “Nur Otan” People’s Democratic Party; the Youth Federation of China, the Civil Youth Council of Kyrgyzstan and the Youth Union of Tajikistan (Molodezhnyi Forum ShOS). The aim of the SCO Youth Council is to build synergies among SCO youth organizations within the framework of cultural exchanges, festivals, exhibitions and art competitions (Molodezhnyi sovet...). An initiative of the Youth Council is the “SCO Youth Card” designed to encourage and facilitate youth mobility within the SCO area (ShOS). The initiator of the “SCO Youth Card” is Aleksey Karpenko, representative of the Russian delegation to the SCO Youth Council, who developed this concept with his Kirgiz counterpart. Aleksey Karpenko described this joint project as “a service of sensations and experiences that allows people to immerse themselves in the culture and traditions of SCO countries” (Karpenko, 2018). The main task set forth is to raise awareness among the youth on the cultural diversity of SCO countries through leisure activities and tourism. In Karpenko’s words: “*As tourists encounter other cultures,*



*learn about their lifestyle and traditions their attitude toward neighboring countries change. This is why I believe such projects as the SCO Youth Card are key to preventing extremism in the SCO area, especially bearing in mind that Afghanistan is an observer state to the SCO and Syria might also soon join the Organization” (Karpenko, 2018).* Denis Turin, director of the SCO Business Club and founder of the media platform “InfoSCO”, noted that initially the fight against the ideology of extremism and terrorism was supposed to be one of the main spheres of activity of the SCO Youth council. There was indeed the idea of creating a common fund to consider proposals and projects from youth and civil society organizations on the fight against the spread of the ideology of extremism and terrorism. However, if Russia and China supported this initiative, Uzbekistan did not. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were reluctant to invest money on new structures even though, paradoxically, they were the countries which more than any other could have benefited from a civil fund against extremism and terrorism (Turin). Another idea carrying great potential regarded the creation of a regional network dedicated to the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan (Vasilenko et al., 2017). However, this project seems to have fizzled out after having left the negotiating table.

One of the main obstacles to the development of youth cultural and humanitarian cooperation was, until very recently, Uzbekistan’s longstanding refusal to support the SCO Youth Council (Karpenko, 2018). Islam Karimov’s administration was opposed to the idea of having an Uzbek delegation to the SCO Youth Council composed by national civil society actors (Dajyrbekov, 2018a). The SCO Youth Council maintained dialogue with Uzbek youth associations but could not however invite Uzbek representatives to their events as the Karimov administration refused to grant them visas to leave the country (Dajyrbekov, 2018a). In 2017, Uzbekistan’s new administration under Shavkat Mirziyoyev declared its support to the SCO Youth Council and its civil national delegation was successfully founded in 2018 by the Youth Union of Uzbekistan (Dajyrbekov, 2018a). Seen as the SCO functions on the basis of consensus, a vital missing piece has now been added to the SCO youth diplomacy enabling it to climb up a new step in its development with the support and recognition of all SCO founding Member States and, as a result, of the SCO Secretariat. Uzbekistan’s approval of the SCO Youth Council was accompanied by a renewed attention of SCO Member States to the role of the youth in the fight against extremism and terrorism.

This innovative leap forward is reflected in the Joint Address of the Heads of the SCO to the Youth, adopted at the SCO summit in Qingdao on 10 June 2018. An Action Program followed so as to implement the provisions contained in the address which includes practical steps to support and stimulate the youth to play an active role in the prevention of terrorism and extremism within the SCO framework. The Address underlines the fundamental values the SCO pledges to enhance in its fight against youth terrorism and extremism, namely patriotism, high morality, tolerance, humanity and mutual respect. It further emphasizes the “rich and unique historical, cultural and civilizational heritage” of SCO Member States and praises the way they adhere to “traditional principles and commonly accepted rules of behavior as an alternative to the norms and values of alien morality” (Sovmestnoe obrashchenie..., 2018). In addition, as suggested by the Chairman of the SCO Youth Council, Taalajbek Dajyrbekov, a unifying value which holds great potential for preventive counterterrorism purposes within the SCO is the “Shanghai spirit”; a concept which refers to mutual understanding, mutual support and mutual trust. Commonly known as the Eastern Paris, Shanghai is the city where the SCO was founded in 2001. Its diversity of cultures is a strong symbol for SCO Members States and a constant reminder that together and through mutual understanding many goals can be achieved, including the suppression of extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking (Dajyrbekov, 2018b). Determined to address the “root causes” of terrorism, the SCO declares indeed it fosters a “constructive” dialogue among its Members States intended to find substantive solutions to regional and global challenges through the construction of a more equitable and just world order (Ufimskaya deklaratsiya..., 2015). The measures suggested in the Address to counter the “Three Evil Forces” are ensuring favorable socio-economic conditions, education and job opportunities, self-expression and the discovery of one’s creative potential (Sovmestnoe obrashchenie..., 2018). The SCO thus call upon its youth to implement jointly a set of priorities and tasks in order to prevent extremism and terrorism. These include the development of a culture of tolerance and humanism, the strengthening of interethnic harmony and mutual understanding, the cultivation of patriotism and

internationalism; the promotion of joint economic and humanitarian initiatives aimed at mobilizing the youth in entrepreneurial activities and innovative projects in order to increase their employment; the intensification of scientific and technical exchange and the conduct of joint research ([Sovmestnoe obrashchenie..., 2018](#)). When mentioning the SCO Youth in its Address, the Organization mainly refers to the SCO Youth Council and the SCO Youth League.

The Action program on the implementation of the provisions of the Joint Address of the Heads of the SCO to the Youth (2018) includes four areas of collaboration: politics, science and education, culture, information and communication technologies. In the political sphere, the SCO Youth Council commits to develop and promote proposals on youth rights and the prevention of the “Three Evil Forces”; takes measures to improve national legislations of SCO Member States on combating the ideology of terrorism, separatism and extremism; attracts young generations in entrepreneurial activities and innovative projects in order to enhance their potential and employment opportunities ([Programma deistvii po realizatsii...](#)). In the dimensions of science, education and culture, annual conferences, seminars, round tables, exhibitions and contests on the education of the youth in the spirit of interethnic and interreligious harmony with the participation of religious research centers are on the agenda. The organization of Arts, sports and culture festivals and the development of tourism also appear among the tasks of the SCO Youth Council. Furthermore, the Action plan mentions the initiative of creating an association of young scientists in the framework of the SCO. Projects in the area of information and communication technologies aimed at preventing the spread of radical narratives comprise research and creatives work, documentaries and explanatory guides proving information on the threats of terrorism and extremism as well as on ethnic and religious hatred ([Programma deistvii po realizatsii...](#)).

The first SCO Youth Assembly in the history of the Organization was held in Dongfang (Hainan Province, China) on 8-12 November 2018 under the title “The SCO Youth against Terrorism and Extremism”. As stressed by the Chairman of the SCO Youth Council, Taalajbek Dajyrbekov, the title of the event fully mirrors the essence of the SCO’s creation and activities ([Dajyrbekov, 2018a](#)). The Assembly was organized by the SCO Youth League and launched under the personal initiative of SCO Secretary General, Rashid Alimov ([Zolochevskiy, 2018](#)). It also symbolized the first event by the means of which the SCO Secretariat chose to pay special attention to the SCO Youth Council ([Dajyrbekov, 2018a](#)). The assembly was inaugurated within the framework of the practical implementation of the Joint Address of the Heads of the SCO to the Youth and welcomed the representatives of the SCO Youth Council. During the Assembly, SCO Secretary General Rashid Alimov, while commenting the key importance of the prevention of radical ideologies and narratives among the youth, stated that: “Mass information, ideological and psychological pressure, the imposition of alien values and false religious ideas have broken many young lives, led to terrible human tragedies, caused the death of many people. Those young people who choose such a slippery path are moving away from traditional moral values, losing their moral core, taking the road of life which leads to a dead end” ([Ofitsial’nyi sait Shankhaiskoi...](#)).

As a follow-up to the SCO Youth Assembly and a contribution of the SCO Youth Council to the fight against extremism and terrorism, two main events will be organized next year: the Forum on Tourism Development and the Festival of Arts. Within these events, tourism will be perceived as an instrument to promote cultural diversity and tolerance against extremism, whereas exchanges on humanitarian values will serve as a platform to reveal the beauties of the artistic heritage of SCO Member States. Painting, drawing and singing workshops will also be on the agenda at the Festival of Arts with the goal of expressing, through creativity, the destructive impact of extremism and terrorism on the cultural heritage of the SCO area ([Dajyrbekov, 2018a](#)).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The SCO has entered a new phase in its development supported by the firm commitment of collaboration between its founding Members, including Uzbekistan, and SCO youth organizations. At the heart of this collaboration is a comprehensive work plan addressing the patriotic, spiritual and moral education of the youth to prevent it from engaging in radical activities. The adopted Program of Cooperation of SCO Member States on Combatting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for 2019-2021 should further contribute to strengthening practical cooperation in this area ([Informatsionnoe soobshchenie..., 2018](#)). For several years now, each SCO Member State organizes separately and unilaterally forums, roundtables and conferences resulting from the

collaboration between national youth associations and state entities to which all SCO youth organizations are invited. Such meetings form the basis of the SCO's youth multilateral soft diplomacy and follow two main forms of action: cultural activities and explanatory work. On the one hand, SCO Member States promote the initiatives of civil society youth associations aimed at cultivating patriotism, tolerance and multiethnic harmony. In these events, the topic of extremism is addressed indirectly through the promotion of tourism, arts and cultural diversity. On the other hand, explanatory work is carried out on the mechanisms involved in the spread of radical ideology and on the behavior to adopt in order to comply with national counterterrorism legislations. Within the SCO youth organizations, this form of action is carried out in an open non-binding discussion format among the young leaders of the SCO Member States. Specific joint projects do not necessarily arise from these forms of action. Hence, the SCO Youth Council mainly functions as a dialogue platform to forge closer links among national delegations which implement educational and cultural programs autonomously or in bilateral forms.

Uzbekistan's lack of support until last year as well as a lack of budgetary funds are the main reasons for which the SCO Youth Council does not take the form of a full-fledged network of youth organizations that jointly and simultaneously elaborate and implement interregional programs on the fight against the "Three Evil Forces". Some SCO activists might however argue that such a network already exists informally. What is certain is that SCO founding Member States have a very similar approach to soft counterterrorism, especially Russian and Central Asian Republics due to their shared historical past and principles. Moreover, the Joint Address of the Heads of the SCO to the Youth undoubtedly reflects a common vision and action program with regard to the instruments which should be implemented multilaterally to prevent the radicalization of the youth in the SCO area. It follows from the above, that such soft counterterrorism instruments already exist in the national systems of each SCO founding Member State and have great potential to unite into a joint, coordinated and interregional struggle against the "Three Evil Forces" led by youth civil society organizations, for example in the form of an antiterrorism civil network. The main stumbling blocks in this area of cooperation will be to attract the marginalized and at risk of radicalization components of the youth, to ensure the funding of counterterrorism multilateral programs, to coordinate interregional partnerships on such a vast geographic area and to retain autonomy of action.

The SCO's soft diplomacy and inclusive fight against violent extremism deals with the complexity of enacting a comprehensive and participatory strategy due to the multiplicity of actors implied, the variety of cooperation areas to cover, the immensity and cultural diversity of the SCO zone. The consensus-based functioning of the SCO and its budgetary limitations, based on the equitable sharing of expenses among founding Member States, further hinder the development of SCO soft diplomacy. Ultimately, the broad and blurry definitions of terrorism and extremism and their interchangeable usage also make the SCO's ideological and practical struggle against the "Three Evil Forces" a very difficult and ambiguous task. Hence, the SCO youth, empowered by its new role of actor in the fight against violent extremism, faces the twofold challenge of preventing radicalization and of improving the SCO's counterterrorism strategy.

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