

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization:

Threatening Human Rights or Providing Regional Cooperation and Stability?

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Remarks by: Damian Murphy, Senior Program Manager

Freedom House

Thank you Hans and the Congressional Human Rights Caucus for inviting Freedom House to participate in this important discussion on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a group that requires enhanced examination as it grows in stature and activity throughout the region.

Background

The SCO was started as an organization which would address border issues between China and the new countries of the former Soviet Union. Since then, it has morphed into a forum that helps to facilitate trade among member countries and promotes security within the individual countries.

It is in this area of security and specifically anti-terrorism measures that those of us in the human rights community have expressed concern.

At Freedom House, our concern also extends to a worldwide backlash against democracy led by countries like Russia and China. While other inter-governmental organizations like the OAS and OSCE have mechanisms that actively promote democracy and human rights, the SCO provides a forum for its member countries that carries no such restraints thus lending a modicum of international legitimacy to repressive efforts against civil society.

Furthermore, repressive anti-terror measures taken by the SCO target groups that may not pose legitimate security threats. With little political space in which to express dissent,

such repressive measures against legitimate opposition groups or NGOs may actually drive moderates into extremist groups, particularly in Central Asia.

So those are the two points I want to emphasize: First, the SCO provides a safe platform for member states to resist internal political reform by adding a measure of international credibility. Second, repressive anti-terror measures may have the opposite effect of creating more extremist elements within the member countries.

Freedom House Analysis and the SCO

Freedom in the World, Freedom House's annual survey on political rights and civil liberties, has produced reports on every country since 1972. All countries in the SCO ([Russia](#), [China](#), [Uzbekistan](#), [Tajikistan](#), and [Kazakhstan](#)) are described as "Not Free" by Freedom House, with the exception of [Kyrgyzstan](#), which is described as "Partly Free." It is truly a Community of Non-Democracies, an Alliance of Autocrats.

While there are questions of its strength and cohesion, the SCO should be taken seriously, if for no other reason than its members comprise 45 percent of the world's population, have 47-50 percent of the known natural gas reserves and 17 percent of the world's oil reserves.

Finally, and most importantly from our perspective, 56 percent of the world's "Not Free" population according to Freedom House live in SCO member states, most of them in China. While the SCO Charter includes language on defending human rights, its member states have among the worst human rights records in the world.

The International Backlash against Democracy

In recent years, an international backlash against democracy has become more pronounced as undemocratic leaders around the world have grown increasingly resistant to what they perceive to be U.S. dominance and a concern that their power is threatened by the same type of civil society movements that brought about democratic change in Ukraine, Serbia and Georgia. This backlash has taken the form of legislation restricting

civil society in several countries, crackdowns on opposition political parties and restrictions on press freedom, but nowhere is the international backlash against democracy as organized and prominent as it is within the countries of the SCO.

SCO countries have also placed a high premium on barring outside assistance to human rights and civil society activists. Article Two of the SCO charter, quite appealing to authoritarian regimes in the region, cites “mutual respect for states’ sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, the sanctity of borders, nonaggression, noninterference, in internal affairs, the non-use of force or the threat of force in international relations, and the renunciation of unilateral military superiority in contiguous areas.” Such standards serve to isolate human rights and civil society organizations from their natural allies in the international community.

Russia continues to play a key role in maintaining undemocratic regimes in the post-soviet space. For example, there are reports that Russia has played an active role in inhibiting the election monitoring and human rights work of OSCE, of which it’s a member. Kazakhstan, described “Not Free” by Freedom House, has garnered support from several European countries to chair that organization in 2009.

Terrorism, separatism and extremism, the “three evils” described by SCO members, are not distinct terms according to a globally accepted definition, but are instead defined by individual SCO member states, according to the respective challenges before them. Within this configuration, SCO member states can claim international legitimacy for their efforts to suppress disagreeable movements within their borders. Under these circumstances, the definition of an extremist organization could range from a serious armed insurgent or terrorist group to a civil society NGO promoting human rights.

There is evidence to suggest that these repressive regimes’ exclusion of moderate political voices and alternatives is generating prospects of precisely what they purport to fight: openings for radicals and extremists who are increasingly attractive to ordinary citizens, especially in Central Asia.

Anti-terror measures

Currently, the primary focus of the SCO is its 2001 Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism. This measure created a common understanding of each theme and commits member states to reciprocally extradite persons committing such crimes.

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established in 2002 in Tashkent and its anti-terrorist, anti-separatist, anti-extremist policies have caused concern on civic and human rights grounds. Within the SCO framework, members can be assured that fellow members will recognize their individual characterizations of “terrorist” groups and will engage in multinational efforts to suppress and close borders to such elements.

Russia and Uzbekistan

The July 2005 SCO summit characterized the Andijan massacre of hundreds of unarmed civilians as a wider threat of destabilization, not of government overreaction. This spirit of cooperation among these governments has taken place most substantially in regards to extraditions. For example, Russia has extradited, deported or returned numerous people to Uzbekistan, some of whom should find protection under international agreements. In one such example, in October 2006, Uzbek authorities requested the deportation from Russia of Rustam Muminov, a suspected member of Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Despite a European Court of Human Rights injunction to stop the deportation for fear that Muminov would be tortured or executed in Uzbekistan, Russia ignored the decision and opted to move ahead with the deportation.

In July 2007, the SCO compiled a list of religious organizations deemed “extremist” which were hereby banned. The list itself is not public nor is its criteria for categorizing organizations as extremist. Such moves also serve to provide ‘international legitimacy’ for cracking down on ‘terrorist’ or separatist threats. This issue has been particularly acute in Uzbekistan where authorities have used Hizb-ut-Tahrir as an excuse to crack down on non-violent devout practicing Muslims. Authorities have banned call for prayer

in parts of eastern of Uzbekistan, hijab has been banned in schools and in government organizations and teenagers have been banned from mosques. Without an opportunity for mainstream political expression, this repression can result in some youth resorting to joining extremist groups.

There are also indications that information exchange and networking at the civil society level has been taking place among anti-democratic forces. For instance, the pro-Kremlin group *Nashi*, which has thus far helped to quell internal dissent within Russia, recently opened a branch in Uzbekistan.

China

The deportation issue figures more prominently in China related to the Uighur population in the Xinjiang province. The Uighur independence movement seeks to reestablish the Turkic Uighur entity called “East Turkestan” in China’s Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region. Uighur activists are blamed for a series of bombings in Xinjiang and measures by the SCO to restrict crossborder movement seek to deny refuge to Uighur activists in neighboring Central Asian countries. Such repressive measures have also been applied to peaceful Uighur civil society activists not associated with violence.

Central Asian members of the SCO have actively silenced independent Uighur organizations on their soil and forcibly repatriated refugees wanted by China – some of whom have been executed upon their return. Given China’s record with regard to the Uighur population and the high rate of execution in the province, states returning refugees to China could be in violation of the UN Convention Against Torture or the UN Refugee Convention. In addition to the SCO, China has signed bilateral agreements with the presidents of Kyrgyzstan (June 2007) and Turkmenistan (April 2007) to crack down on extremism, specifically “East Turkestan terrorist forces.”

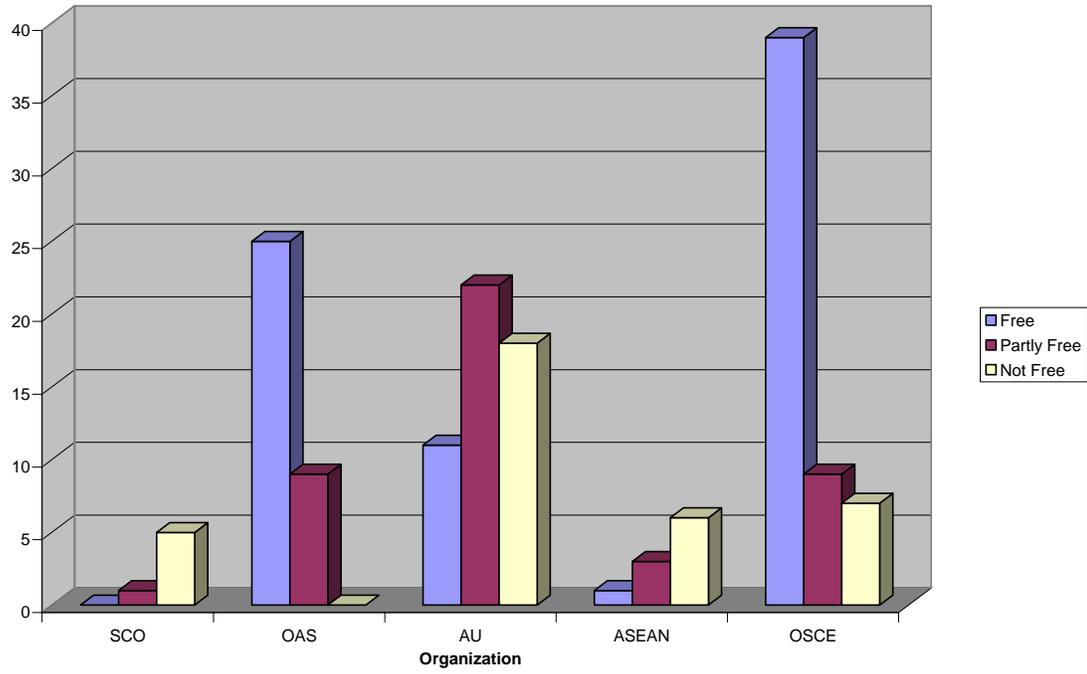
Despite this cooperation among the member governments, there are encouraging signs of crossborder civil society solidarity as Kyrgyz human rights groups have called upon their government not to deport members of the Uighur community to China for fear of their

execution. Such civil society activity, while certainly challenging in Central Asia, should be encouraged by the remaining international democracy promotion groups working on the ground.

In Conclusion: Does the SCO threaten human rights?

Yes. Defending human rights and promoting a vibrant civil society can be difficult even in the most open and free countries. The existence of a platform, like the SCO that accepts and condones human rights violations, provides the leaders of SCO member countries a degree of international legitimacy which can serve to discourage human rights activists working for change. Civil society and human rights defenders work in remarkably difficult circumstances in each of these countries – the U.S. and other international actors should work responsibly to support their efforts to counter this growing backlash against democracy.

Regional Organization Member Countries



Total Population Living in "Not Free" Countries

