

## Türkiye's Search for New Trade Partners: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Beyond

Murat Mere<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The global order established after World War II has begun to be questioned by many countries following recent developments, and countries have evaluated these organizations as having become parties to crises rather than resolving them. These developments have also sparked discussions about alternative global orders. At this juncture, the organization, initially known as the Shanghai Five during its founding phase and later gaining considerable public recognition, has attracted the attention of many countries with its rising values. With its rapid institutionalization and resounding declarations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has transcended the status of a regional cooperation organization. Based on this framework, this study provides information on the historical development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its institutional structure. The rapprochement between Türkiye and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the trade relations between the organization's countries with Türkiye are evaluated.

### Introduction

Türkiye, thanks to its geopolitical location, civilization, deep-rooted history, and accumulated wealth, is a significant country in communication with a wide swath of the world. It also sits at a crucial nexus connecting two major continents: Asia and Europe. Besides possessing NATO's second-largest army, it is an active union member. It is also a member of numerous regional and international organizations. However, its long-standing, volatile relationship with the European Union and failure to achieve full membership have forced Türkiye to seek new opportunities. Türkiye's

1 Asst. Prof., Afyon Kocatepe University, Başmakçı Vocational School, Foreign Trade Department, meremurat@aku.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-8511-2583.

convenient transportation channels in all directions, coupled with recent investments in transportation, infrastructure, and the defense industry, have placed the country in an advantageous position. Leveraging this advantage will contribute to Türkiye's diversification of its relationships with other countries, particularly by increasing its share of foreign trade and achieving higher economic growth. In light of all these assessments, it would be appropriate to consider the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an organization through which Türkiye seeks alternatives to develop its trade relations and enrich its relations with different countries and geographies.

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of the bipolar structure in the international system. This marked the beginning of a new era globally and within Central Asia. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the countries within the bipolar international system, the United States (US) emerged stronger from the Cold War. In the context of Central Asia, the power vacuum resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union was addressed through various regional and global initiatives. In this context, the US will undoubtedly be one of the actors that can influence Central Asia in terms of economic and military power and fill the void. However, the Russian Federation and China, the successors of the Soviet Union, have also become influential actors in the regional power struggle (Pirinççi, 2008, p. 208).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the rapprochement with China continued during the Russian Federation's tenure. Three fundamental reasons brought the two countries closer, paving the way for the formation of the SCO. The first was the security of the long, historical borders between the Russian Federation and China. The protection of mutual economic interests constituted the second key element. The third key factor in the rapprochement between the Russian Federation and China was anti-Americanism. Anti-Americanism was not limited to the Russian Federation and China. The US's attempts to manipulate the internal dynamics of the Central Asian republics and its desire to disrupt the status quo established by the authoritarian regimes in these countries caused turmoil in these countries (Öz & Erasa, 2013, p. 36-37).

From its inception to today, the SCO has evolved from security cooperation to political, economic, cultural, and interpersonal cooperation. Security cooperation is one of the original driving forces behind the SCO's emergence as a regional organization. With the SCO's development, the scope of cooperation has been continuously expanded, and cooperation in political, economic, military, cultural, and other fields has been shaped based on security cooperation. Defense and security cooperation constitutes a priority area of SCO cooperation and has been a significant driver of its development. SCO security cooperation encompasses both traditional and

non-traditional security. Traditional security primarily encompasses border security, military exchanges, military exercises, and other military mutual trust practices. Non-traditional security constitutes an important component of security cooperation among SCO member states. It has also manifested itself in joint efforts to combat the “three forces” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, as well as combating drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration (Xue & Magengo, 2021, p. 190-191).

The study briefly explores the historical development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and provides information on its institutional structure. It then assesses the factors that led Türkiye to seek new trading partners and assesses its rapprochement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

### 1. Historical Development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

China and Russia’s long-standing border security issue has played a significant role in their rapprochement. Furthermore, anti-American sentiment plays a significant role in the Sino-Russian rapprochement. Despite Russia’s good relations with the West, its feeling of exclusion from global influences, particularly in Europe and Asia, significantly impacts this rapprochement. On the other hand, China is uneasy about the US’s criticism of human rights and increasing trade with Taiwan. As a result of all this, the growing relationship between China and Russia evolved into a constructive partnership and then a strategic one in the 1990s (Çolakoğlu, 2004, p. 175).

The Central Asian states that gained independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union were affected by political, military, security, and economic threats. Furthermore, the US presence in the region after the September 11 attacks influenced the relations and foreign policy strategies of Middle Eastern states. These developments influenced Russia, China, and Türkiye, which share borders with the Middle East, and led Asian states to collaborate on foreign policy (Deniz, 2013, p. 219).

Negotiations were held with the former Soviet republics to resolve existing border issues. On September 8, 1992, a meeting was held in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, with the deputy foreign ministers of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It was concluded that China should also be present at the meeting, as there would be no solution without China (Özdaşlı, 2012, p. 109).

The agreement, which would later be called the Shanghai Five, was signed in Shanghai, China, on April 26, 1996, to deepen military confidence

in the border regions during the summit talks held with the participation of the heads of state of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China, and Russia (Al-Qahtani, 2006, p. 129-130). The agreement, signed in 1996, agreed to take confidence-building measures to ensure security in the border region, a region characterized by numerous disputes between China and Russia, and to eliminate the possibility of armed conflict along the border. This agreement aims to prevent potential border conflicts between the five parties and foster better neighborly relations between China and other countries (Özdaşlı, 2012, p. 110).

Secondly, an agreement was signed at the summit held in Moscow on April 24, 1997, to reduce military forces in border regions. This initiative, essentially initiated by China and Russia and enriching interstate relations, presents a new global vision encompassing the principles of mutual trust, disarmament, cooperation, and security (Al-Qahtani, 2006, p. 129-130).

The third meeting, held in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan, in 1998, addressed for the first time issues beyond defense and border issues, such as economic cooperation, combating fundamentalist religious movements, and combating international crime. This meeting marked the first time the talks were multilateral among the five countries. Furthermore, the meeting emphasized support for efforts to halt the nuclear arms race in South Asia and reduce nuclear weapons worldwide, demonstrating that the organization was not limited to regional matters but rather a global voice (Yener, 2013, p. 74-75).

The member countries of the Shanghai Five have agreed on five fundamental principles for the organization's continued operations. These principles include: non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states; combating fundamentalism, separatism, and terrorism; not supporting the development of the US national missile defense system; developing political, economic, social, and cultural relations among member states; and developing communication channels among member states through meetings held between heads of state, foreign affairs and defense ministers, and various working groups (Özdaşlı, 2012, p. 114).

At a summit held in Shanghai on June 15, 2001, the city where the Shanghai Five emerged, Uzbekistan was admitted to full membership. With Uzbekistan's participation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established. Uzbekistan's participation marked the first time a country outside the border joined the organization established to ensure border security. Regulations regarding observer status were adopted at the 2004 summit of heads of state in Tashkent. Mongolia was accepted as an observer member at this summit, while Iran, Pakistan, and India were accepted as

observers at the 2005 Astana summit. Regulations regarding dialogue partner status were adopted at the 2008 summit in Dushanbe. Dialogue partners participate in meetings to develop cooperation on specific issues, but do not have decision-making authority. At the 2009 summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, Sri Lanka and Belarus were accepted as dialogue partners. At the 2012 Beijing summit, Türkiye joined the organization as a dialogue partner, and Afghanistan as an observer. Dialogue partner status was granted at the 2015 meeting in Ufa, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, and Nepal. At the 2017 summit in Astana, Pakistan and India were admitted as full members, bringing the number of full SCO members to eight. At the 2021 summit in Dushanbe, Iran was declared the ninth full member. The same summit also granted dialogue partner status to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt. At the 2022 SCO summit in Samarkand, procedures were initiated for Bahrain, the Maldives, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Myanmar to join the organization as dialogue partners. Belarus was accepted as a full member in 2024, bringing the total number of members to ten.

Table 1 summarizes the countries that are full members, observer members, and dialogue partners of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Table 1. The Constituent States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization		
Full Member	Observer Member	Dialogue Partner
China (1996)	Mongolia (2005)	Sri Lanka (2009)
Russian Federation (1996)	Afghanistan (2012)	Türkiye (2012)
Kazakhstan (1996)		Azerbaijan (2015)
Kyrgyz Republic (1996)		Armenia (2015)
Tajikistan (1996)		Cambodia (2015)
Uzbekistan (2001)		Nepal (2015)
India (2017)		Saudi Arabia (2021)
Pakistan (2017)		Egypt, Arab Republic (2021)
Iran, Islamic Republic (2021)		Qatar (2021)
Belarus (2024)		Bahrain (2022)
		Maldives (2022)
		Kuveyt (2022)
		Myanmar (2022)
		United Arab Emirates (2022)

**Source:** This table has been prepared by the author of the study using information from the SCO's official website.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) aims to cooperate in politics, security, economics, culture, and humanitarian affairs. The organization also exemplifies the regional strategy that became widespread after the Cold War, which envisions organizing at the regional level to address regional issues. It has been stated that cooperation within the organization will be conducted according to the principles of sovereignty, equality, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for territorial integrity. The Shanghai Spirit will prevail in all relations between members, encompassing the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, and shared development goals. This principle is reiterated in nearly all of the organization's official documents (Çakır, 2024, p. 1151).

Since its founding, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has long been described as the "New Warsaw Pact Organization" due to its operations within the framework of China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. The states within the organization were even treated as the Eastern Bloc in the new Cold War. However, the organization's subsequent geographical expansion has discredited these arguments. The 2017 summit in Astana ushered in a new phase in the organization's development. With granting full membership status to India and Pakistan at the summit, perceptions of the SCO began to shift. India and Pakistan's warm relations with the US also significantly influenced this shift (Hamzaoglu, 2024, p. 213).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has laid the groundwork for member countries to cooperate on common security challenges in the region. The United States' increasing influence in Central Asia, particularly following its invasion of Afghanistan in the early 2000s, has created the need for Russia and China to act together regionally against the US. Furthermore, Russia, through the organization, has sought to balance and control China's influence in Central Asia (Kaya, 2019, p. 67).

The SCO is not theoretically a defense alliance. However, depending on military-political developments in the Asia-Pacific and Central Asia, the SCO may transform into a military bloc. These military exercises always have the potential to establish a foundation. The SCO also holds observer status in the United Nations General Assembly. The Joint Declaration on Cooperation was signed in Tashkent in 2010 between the Secretaries of the United Nations and the SCO. In addition to the United Nations and its specialized agencies, the SCO has established cooperation with organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). These cooperation mechanisms have also elevated the SCO from a regional to an interregional level (Hamzaoglu, 2024, p. 214).

Countries	Surface Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Population (total)	GDP		Foreign Trade Volume current US\$ (million)	
			current US\$ (million)	per capita (current US\$)	Goods Exports	Goods Imports
China	9.562.950	1.408.975.000	18.743.803	13.303	3.408.991	2.641.015
Russian Federation	17.098.250	143.533.851	2.173.836	14.889	433.092	300.124
Kazakhstan	2.724.902	20.592.571	288.406	14.005	80.080	61.196
Kyrgyz Republic	199.950	7.224.614	17.478	2.419	2.253*	9.172*
Tajikistan	141.379	9.100.837	14.205	1.341	1.422	5.936
Uzbekistan	448.924	36.361.859	114.965	3.162	19.626	33.160
India	3.287.260	1.450.935.791	3.912.686	2.697	447.166	726.403
Pakistan	796.100	251.269.164	373.072	1485	32.122	55.675
Iran Islamic Republic	1.745.150	91.567.738	436.906	4.771	***	***
Belarus	207.630	9.133.712	75.962	8.317	39.496	44.197
<b>Total</b>	36.212.495 (%25.78)	3.430.185.227 (%42.13)	26.151.319 (%23.49)	7.624	4.464.250 (%18.94)	3.876.879 (%16.68)
The World	140.419.457	8.142.056.446	111.326.470	13.673	23.567.549	23.237.605

**Source:** Edited by the author from <https://data.worldbank.org/country>. \*Shows data for 2023. \*\*\* Data is not available.

Table 2 shows some economic data of the full SCO member countries for the year 2024. The data was obtained from the World Bank database. Since Kyrgyzstan's 2024 foreign trade figures were unavailable in the database, 2023 foreign trade figures were used. Additionally, the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign trade data from 2001 to the present could not be obtained because it was not available in the World Bank database. The total land area of the member countries is 36,212,495 km<sup>2</sup>, constituting 25.78% of the world's land area. The total population of the member countries is 3,430,185,227, corresponding to 42.13% of the world's population. The total GDP of the member countries is 26 trillion USD, constituting approximately 23.49% of the world economy. With a total export figure of \$4,464,250 million,

it accounts for 18.94% of global exports, and with a total import figure of \$3,876,879 million, it accounts for 16.68% of global imports. Since its inception, the SCO has attracted the attention of other countries. When data from observer and dialogue partner countries are added to these figures, it appears the organization will capture a larger global market share.

## **2. Institutional Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

Emphasizing cooperation in security, economy, and culture, the SCO is institutionally composed of seven main organs, which form the organization's foundation. These organs are (Hepaktan, 2017, p. 398-399; Öz & Erasa, 2013, p. 38-39):

**The Council of Heads of State:** Convenes regularly once a year in one of the member states. The Council is chaired by the head of state of the hosting country. It is the highest-level decision-making body, attended by heads of state, and important issues discussed and consulted in other councils are decided upon in this council. The Council makes decisions regarding relations with states and international organizations and the organization's institutional structure and functioning.

**The Council of Heads of Government:** It meets annually, like the Council of Heads of State. It is a secondary mechanism with primary responsibilities such as approving the budget and concluding economic agreements. The presidency of the Council of Heads of Government is chaired by the head of government of the country, who hosts the regular meetings.

**The Council of Foreign Ministers:** One of the organization's most functional bodies, it meets one month before the Council of Heads of State. The council sets the council's agenda, focuses on international issues, and determines the organization's current activities and the organization of council meetings. The council is chaired by the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs, who hosts the Presidential Council meetings.

**The Council of Representatives:** It is an important body that attempts to establish the infrastructure for meetings and agreements in which representatives of the member countries participate in areas where they cooperate.

**National Coordinators Council:** The council, comprised of national coordinators from SCO member countries, meets at least three times a year and directs all other bodies. It coordinates and carries out the organization's current activities.

**Secretariat:** The Secretariat of the Union is located in Beijing, the capital of China. The Secretariat is the Union's executive body, overseeing Union-related affairs and preparing the necessary documents for all activities. It assists with the organization's legal, technical, and institutional activities. The Secretary-General is nominated by the Council of Foreign Ministers and approved by the Council of Heads of State. According to Russian alphabetical order, he/she may be elected from among citizens of SCO member states for a rotating term of three years without the right to renew.

**Regional Counter-Terrorism Agency:** The Regional Counter-Terrorism Agency's executive committee is located in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Established to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism, the agency works on issues such as continuing to work with the authorized institutions of member states and international organizations, preparing counter-terrorism studies, conducting search operations at the request of relevant member states, and jointly drafting international legal documents related to the fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

### **3. Development of Relations between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Türkiye**

Located at the intersection of Asia and Europe, Türkiye has turned to the West for more than a century to ensure its political and economic development. Furthermore, it has been striving to become a member of the European Union (EU), as it is now known, since 1959. However, the recent stagnation of relations with the EU, the negative statements made by some European officials, and the uncertainty surrounding the future of the relationship with the EU have necessitated Türkiye's consideration and research into alternative integrations, organizations, or collaborations. While the EU remains Türkiye's most important partner economically and politically, it would also be appropriate to consider new foreign policy and strategy options. With its recent development, the SCO has become one of the most prominent among these options (Kartal & Sofyalıoğlu, 2011, p. 24).

Türkiye first applied for membership in the SCO in 2005. However, due to Türkiye's close ties with NATO allies and Western countries, it was rejected due to opposition from the People's Republic of China. Later, in 2011, it applied for "Dialogue Partner" status, and its application was unanimously accepted at the SCO Heads of State Summit in Beijing in 2012. In 2017, Türkiye was granted the rotating presidency of the Shanghai Energy Club, a subordinate organization of the SCO, despite not being a full member (Mere, 2021, p. 82).

Türkiye is one of the key countries holding “dialogue partner” status within the SCO. Due to its geographical location, it plays a key role in the Euro-Atlantic world and Eurasia. This status marked the first step in Türkiye’s official cooperation with the SCO. Regarding its foreign policy priorities, Türkiye has pursued a multifaceted and balanced policy among international organizations, striving to diversify its integration activities. The emergence of independent Turkic states following the dissolution of the USSR and the subsequent unification of these states on a common platform made the SCO attractive to Türkiye. Türkiye aims to improve its relations with Eurasian countries and strengthen its position vis-à-vis Western countries. Türkiye has aimed to increase its strategic autonomy by developing diverse political alternatives in its foreign policy, and in this regard, the SCO has been viewed as an important platform (Aksu, 2023, p. 947).

However, there are particular difficulties in Türkiye’s full membership in the SCO. These difficulties are as follows (Mere, 2021, p. 83; Saygın & Erdem, 2021, p. 95);

- Although Türkiye’s minimal and political support for Azerbaijan in the hot conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020 was an important turning point in resolving the South Caucasus issue, the problems with Armenia,
- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chechnya’s desire to secede from Russia and the problems that arose,
- In China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the Uyghurs’ desire for independence and the problems experienced,
- If Türkiye becomes a member of the SCO while being a NATO member, there is a possibility that it could be removed from NATO,
- Factors such as Türkiye being a NATO ally and its long-standing close relationship with European Union countries and the United States, which makes it appear on the Western front, concern Russia and China, who are at odds with the West in political and security matters.

There are also certain advantages that Türkiye’s membership in the SCO would provide. These advantages are as follows (Mere, 2021, p. 83; Eren, 2017, p. 86-87; Öz & Erasa, 2013, p. 45; Kalaycı, 2016, p. 395-396);

- The SCO has been heavily criticized for being perceived as anti-Western. These critics believe the organization is attempting to maintain a balance with the West. Türkiye, which has historically had

significant relations with the West, could benefit the organization by acting as a mediator if it becomes a member.

- In addition, Türkiye can be a role model in many areas for the Turkic Republics that are members of the organization, with its democratic structure and economic and social policies, and can contribute to institutionalizing the democracies and state structures of these Republics.
- Türkiye's location plays a significant role in energy flow as a bridge between East and West. Türkiye, aiming to become a key energy corridor for global oil and natural gas resources, will be more advantageous in achieving this goal and accessing natural gas, which it primarily uses in its industry.
- China's desire to revive the historic Silk Road to expand its trade potential and Türkiye's geopolitical importance.
- With its membership, Türkiye can elevate its positive relations with Russia and China to more strategic levels.
- Suppose the SCO can unite with Türkiye and create synergy, all tourism branches (health, culture, education, etc.) can develop for the countries in the region. In that case, the direct or indirect investment corridor can be expanded, and ultimately, sustainable regional peace, stability, and prosperity can be achieved.
- The cultural ties between the Central Asian member states of the SCO and Türkiye could accelerate the adaptation process of membership and strengthen Türkiye's position within the union over time.
- Developing relations with countries such as China and India, in particular, can increase the chance of opening up to new markets and our commercial potential by creating new market opportunities.
- Türkiye depends on Russia for its energy resources and projects; Russia is a member of the SCO, not the EU. As a result of its membership, Türkiye can import energy at discounted prices.
- Türkiye can use the political power it will gain from its close relationship with the SCO as a counterweight to Western states and contribute to accelerating its EU membership process.

Table 3 shows Türkiye's exports to SCO countries between 2013 and 2024. It also shows Türkiye's exports during this period and the SCO's share of Türkiye's exports during the specified periods. While export figures may

Table 3. Türkiye's Exports to Shanghai Cooperation Countries (Million \$)

Countries	Years											
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
China	3.756	2.971	2.501	2.379	3.038	3.079	2.726	2.866	3.663	3.281	3.306	3.388
Russian Federation	7.214	6.170	3.684	1.793	2.870	3.653	4.152	4.507	5.774	9.343	10.907	8.562
Kazakhstan	1.156	1.087	882	714	840	790	900	986	1.288	1.606	2.960	3.316
Kyrgyz Republic	432	468	317	328	379	392	442	418	749	903	1.201	1.380
Tajikistan	309	303	177	161	167	189	157	174	258	389	406	373
Uzbekistan	624	650	518	559	727	1.031	1.232	1.154	1.842	1.878	1.873	2.228
India	616	619	698	692	809	1.182	1.166	890	1.305	1.637	1.644	1.517
Pakistan	385	472	301	374	377	509	550	620	773	819	550	918
Iran Islamic Republic	4.456	4.142	4.115	5.462	3.861	2.766	2.737	2.253	2.771	3.067	3.226	3.231
Belarus	318	285	217	371	439	456	543	603	915	1.126	1.684	1.615
Total	19.266	17.168	13.412	12.833	13.506	14.046	14.606	14.469	19.339	24.048	27.757	26.528
Total Exports in Türkiye	161.481	166.505	150.982	149.247	164.495	177.169	180.833	169.638	225.214	254.170	255.627	261.778
Share of SCO Countries in Türkiye's Exports	11.93	10.31	8.88	8.60	8.21	7.93	8.08	8.53	8.59	9.46	10.86	10.13

Source: This table was prepared by the author of the study using information from the official website of the Turkish Statistical Institute (T.Sİ).

increase or decrease periodically, Türkiye's largest export destination was the Russian Federation. The smallest export destinations were Tajikistan and Pakistan. Türkiye's total exports to SCO countries in 2013 were approximately \$19 billion, reaching \$26 billion in 2024. The share of SCO countries in Türkiye's total exports was 11.93% in 2013 and 10.13% in 2024. SCO countries account for an average of 10% of Türkiye's exports. SCO countries account for a low share of Türkiye's exports.

Table 4. Türkiye's Imports to Shanghai Cooperation Countries (Million \$)

Countries	Years											
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
China	25,261	25,733	25,284	24,852	23,754	21,506	19,128	23,041	32,238	41,355	45,048	44,928
Russian Federation	26,047	25,412	20,744	15,467	20,097	22,711	23,115	17,829	28,959	58,849	45,600	44,018
Kazakhstan	1,758	1,223	1,115	1,132	1,494	1,602	1,404	1,181	1,595	3,515	3,501	3,386
Kyrgyz Republic	107	120	118	132	155	64	77	91	86	120	274	168
Tajikistan	442	240	223	160	224	265	198	149	196	171	123	247
Uzbekistan	853	846	723	723	838	870	1,140	970	1,800	1,683	1,209	1,134
India	6,740	7,196	5,599	5,664	6,116	7,525	6,635	4,830	7,936	10,697	7,932	7,021
Pakistan	435	439	291	274	350	346	306	269	315	432	456	440
Iran Islamic Republic	10,546	10,076	6,162	4,801	7,608	7,041	3,608	1,193	2,824	3,354	2,181	2,454
Belarus	194	148	219	101	184	169	165	176	270	292	244	234
Total	72,382	71,433	60,477	53,307	60,820	62,096	55,778	49,729	76,220	120,467	106,568	104,031
Total Imports in Türkiye	260,823	251,142	213,619	202,189	238,715	231,152	210,345	219,517	271,426	363,711	361,967	344,010
Share of SCO Countries in Türkiye's Imports	27.75	28.44	28.31	26.37	25.48	26.86	26.52	22.65	28.08	33.12	29.44	30.24

Source: This table was prepared by the author of the study using information from the official website of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TSH).

Table 4 shows Türkiye's import figures to SCO countries between 2013 and 2024. It also shows Türkiye's import figures during this period and the SCO's share of Türkiye's imports during the specified periods. While import figures vary periodically, Türkiye's most significant imports were to the Russian Federation and China, both founding members of the organization. The smallest imports were to Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Belarus. Türkiye's total imports to SCO countries were approximately \$72 billion in 2013, reaching \$104 billion in 2024. The share of SCO countries in Türkiye's total imports was 27.75% in 2013 and 30.24% in 2024. SCO countries account for an average of 30% of Türkiye's imports. The SCO countries carry out approximately one-third of Türkiye's imports from the SCO countries.

#### **4. Factors Leading Türkiye to Seek New Trade Partners and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

From its founding to the present day, the Türkiye state has maintained close relations with Western countries in numerous areas, from the economy to the legal system, from education to trade. After World War II, it joined many international organizations such as the IMF, NATO, and the World Bank. With the signing of the Ankara Agreement on September 12, 1963, Türkiye's EU accession process, as it is now known, began. However, EU membership has not materialized. At the end of each challenging period in Türkiye-EU relations, an increase in relations with Eastern Bloc countries outside the Western bloc has been observed, particularly in the media and the government.

The unresolved Cyprus issue is one of the biggest obstacles to Türkiye-EU relations. Türkiye's refusal to open its ports and airports to Southern Cyprus ships and aircraft, coupled with the EU's decision not to open eight negotiation chapters and not to close all other chapters, remains in effect. It should also be noted that Ankara severed all political dialogue with the EU from July to December 2012, when Southern Cyprus held the EU presidency. Especially after the 2000s, Türkiye prioritized aspects of Turkish foreign policy beyond the traditional US-NATO-EU dimension, such as Eurasia, the Middle East, the Balkans, Africa, and Latin America. In this context, new embassies and consulates-general have been opened in many countries (Erşen, 2013, p. 18-19). Another issue causing problems in Türkiye-EU relations is visas. While citizens of EU candidate countries are not required to have a visa, this practice against Turkish citizens creates an unfair situation.

Certain negative aspects should not be overlooked when considering

Türkiye's potential for full EU membership. Chief among these is the EU's rejection of Türkiye's candidacy at the Luxembourg Summit 1997. Furthermore, the path was cleared for candidate countries to hold a referendum on Türkiye's accession to the EU in 2005. However, the inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania, countries less economically and legally advanced than Türkiye, in 2007 diminished Türkiye's enthusiasm and motivation for the EU and was met with an adverse reaction. The negative views of EU member states regarding Türkiye's full membership are based on several reasons. These include the fact that Türkiye, due to its large population, will play an active role in the EU's decision-making mechanism; the fact that aid it will receive from EU funds could significantly burden the EU budget; and that religious and cultural differences would create difficulties in the harmonization process. Despite all this, the reasons why the EU has not completely broken away from Türkiye are as follows: Its geopolitical position, acting as a buffer zone between Europe and the Middle East, is believed to contribute to Europe's security. Therefore, Europe, reluctant to pursue full membership, has developed the concept of a privileged partnership as a middle ground. However, as previously mentioned, this vague concept alienates Türkiye from the EU (Saygın & Erdem, 2021, p. 83-86).

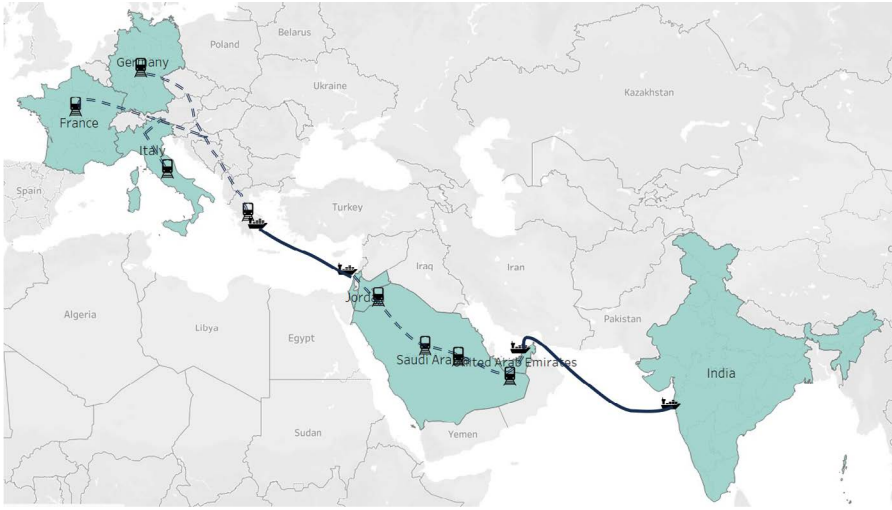
Following the failed military coup attempt in July 2016, Türkiye's political standing in European and transatlantic security cooperation plummeted to an all-time low. This resulted in a lack of solidarity and the security-focused policies Türkiye was forced to adopt, which negatively impacted our relations. Türkiye's position within NATO has become increasingly complex. The difficult relations with the Obama administration in the United States (US), particularly following the coup attempt, and the recent disappointment with the Trump administration's "Muslim ban," have further diminished Ankara's appetite for close transatlantic cooperation. NATO members have also become much more distant toward their ally, Türkiye. As a result of increasingly volatile relations with the EU and NATO, the Turkish government has begun to consider alternatives to security cooperation seriously. Given the limited options, Türkiye has turned to Eurasian security integration, particularly the SCO, which was established in 2001 and co-chaired by China and Russia since then. It became a "dialogue partner" of the SCO in 2012 (Huotari & Eder, 2017, p. 1-2).

The fact that China alone hosts one-fifth of the world's population demonstrates that, with the inclusion of large-populated countries like India, the SCO will not face labor shortages like the EU in the long term, and therefore its economy will grow steadily. China's favorable,

cooperative policies in Central Asia further develop and strengthen the SCO institutionally. China's population, economy, technology, Russia's energy resources, and its global presence in space technology and weapons production are at least as significant as those of the US, further enhancing its importance (Saygin & Erdem, 2021, p. 90-91).

Recent developments, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine-Russia war, and the China-Taiwan tensions, have made Western Bloc countries, particularly the US and the EU, question their trade relations with China. Western countries have begun considering shifting their investments from China to alternative countries, particularly India, Vietnam, and Indonesia, and have aimed to create alternative trade corridors (Mere, 2024, p. 225).

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced at a meeting co-chaired by the US and India during the G20 summit held in New Delhi, India, in September 2023. The memorandum of understanding was signed by several members, including India, the US, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the European Union (EU), Italy, France, and Germany. The proposed economic corridor is envisioned to foster economic growth and development by connecting three regions: Asia, the Arabian Gulf, and Europe (Bahht & Roychoudhury, 2023, p. 3). In fact, the US aims to create an alternative trade corridor to the Belt and Road Initiative by drawing India to its side against China's rise, which has recently become a rising star (Özalp, 2024, p. 34). The IMEC project aims to bring the US and EU countries closer to India and reduce Chinese influence. On the other hand, India hopes that establishing a trade corridor will support its strategy of breaking free from China's siege and gaining prominence among developing countries (Rizzi, 2024, p. 1).

**Figure 1. India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)**

**Source:** Bahlt & Roychoudhury, (2023:3).

As shown in Figure 1, India is the starting point for implementing the trade corridor. The aim is to connect the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel by road and rail, and transport the goods that have already reached Israel back to Greece via sea from Israeli ports to the EU market. This trade corridor, which some EU countries, led by Türkiye's ally, the US, Italy, Germany, and France, are seeking to limit China, also excludes and bypasses Türkiye. However, China's New Silk Road Project, announced in 2013 to revitalize the historic Silk Road, is likely to directly or indirectly impact many countries, including Türkiye. The third train line, which passes through Türkiye, became operational in December 2015. This line begins in Lianyungang, a port city in northeastern China, and extends to Türkiye via Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (Sayar, 2023, p. 325). These trains, coming from Asia (Baku-Tiflis-Kars line), enter Turkish territory via the Caucasus route and provide access to other railway connections of the Marmaray Line, making it possible to access European railways (Ece, 2023, p. 40). All these developments have led Türkiye to new alternatives and formations and brought it closer to the SCO.

## Conclusion and Evaluation

Türkiye's geopolitical location occupies a key position at the heart of a region extending from the Middle East and the Caspian Basin, home to significant oil reserves; the Mediterranean Basin, a hub of maritime routes; the Black Sea Basin and the Turkish Straits; and the Balkans to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Furthermore, its cultural ties with the Balkan countries

and location on a key route for Central Asia and the Caucasus' natural gas and oil to reach Western countries are key factors that enhance Türkiye's geostrategic importance (Çatal, 2019, p. 103; Yaşar and Korkmaz, 2017, p. 384). When this geopolitical advantage is combined with its superiority in the region, both in terms of numerical and skilled human resources, as well as economic and military power, it is conceivable that Türkiye could become a regional power. Even considering this information, it is clear that Türkiye is located in a significant and problematic region (Ongan, 2021, p. 264).

China's planned New Silk Road Project is one of the 21st century's most significant initiatives. Central Asia is one of the most important routes in this historic initiative, which connects the Far East, Central Asia, North Africa, and Europe. The disruption of the China-Mongolia-Russia-Europe trade route due to the Russia-Ukraine war and the United States' presence in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea has led China to view Central Asia as its gateway to the world (Şener & Sugözü, 2022, p. 1). This proposed project is expected to directly or indirectly impact many countries, including Türkiye (Zorbay, 2019, p. 57).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Turkic Republics have led to an increase in Türkiye's interest in regional countries. To leverage its relations with regional countries more effectively, developing multifaceted policies that are consistent, vision-based, and aligned with the region's political, historical, and cultural structures would be appropriate. Türkiye's historical, cultural, and genetic ties with regional countries have made SCO membership attractive. However, Türkiye's long-standing historical, political, and economic relationship with the West and its negotiations with the EU and NATO membership could pose challenges to SCO membership. Furthermore, Türkiye's shift toward a Eurasian alternative to the EU and NATO could lead to a significant disruption in its relations with these organizations. However, the SCO's natural resources, economic, political, and military power, Türkiye's geopolitical position, and recent success, particularly in the defense industry, create a mutually beneficial relationship. On the other hand, the European Union's impositions on Türkiye, particularly on human rights and the rule of law, as well as on occasional issues such as the alleged Armenian genocide, the Cyprus issue, ethnic issues, and the fight against terrorism, have led Türkiye to approach EU membership with greater caution. Furthermore, this political deadlock has brought to light the inherent cultural, ethnic, religious, and lifestyle differences between Türkiye and the European Union (Eren, 2017, p. 86).

The inadequate and biased stance of the United Nations (UN) in

addressing global security challenges, particularly in the face of recent global events, coupled with the inability of international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to provide effective and lasting solutions to economic crises, has paved the way for a global governance vacuum, necessitating the need for new initiatives. In light of all these developments, the challenging geopolitical situation in our region, the instability in border countries, and the conflicts in the region have made it inevitable for Türkiye to form partnerships with other countries. Recent problems with Western bloc countries have led Türkiye to seek new trade partners. From this perspective, the recent rapprochement with the SCO has resonated strongly with global public opinion. Türkiye's potential SCO membership is not perceived globally, nor in our country, as an opposition to the EU and NATO, and if this partnership can be maintained together, Türkiye will be able to attain a stronger strategic position.

In short, given its geopolitical position, Türkiye can neither turn its back on the West nor ignore the recently rising and rising stars of the Eastern economies. Türkiye's geographical location and economic interests make choosing between the West and the Eastern Bloc unwise. The realistic path for Türkiye is to maintain a balanced economic partnership with the West and the East (Mere, 2024, p. 266). It would be appropriate to evaluate Türkiye's interest in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization not only as a reflex towards opening up to the East, but also as a reflection of dissatisfaction with the Western system.

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