Counterterrorism in the SCO and the emergence of a Central Asian Security complex

14 SEPTEMBER 2026

Lidia Rudiana



Photo by Nathan Gubler on Unsplash

On June 5, 2026, the ministers of internal affairs of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) convened in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to discuss regional law enforcement and security cooperation. Delegations focused on counterterrorism, extremist financing, drug trafficking and cybercrime. Tajikistan's Interior Minister Ramazon Rahimzoda called for the expansion of cooperation between member states' agencies and the development of specialised counter-radicalisation personnel (The Caspian Post, 2026). The SCO's secretary-general echoed these ambitions and announced concrete steps to counter the evolving security threats that members have to face (SCO, 2026).

This explicit call for more intense cooperation highlights how the countries of the Central Asian region are increasingly defining and man-

aging their own security on their own terms. This is a relatively recent development: for much of the post-Soviet era, Central Asia's security was understood through the lens of Russian influence and the great power competition that surrounded it. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory represents the most authoritative theoretical expression of this. The theory demonstrated that security threats primarily travel over short distances, making the regional level the most significant landscape for understanding dynamics of international security (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p.30). While the theory originally categorised Central Asia as a sub-complex gravitationally bound to Russia, this classification merits revaluation in light of the developments that have taken place since 2003. Moscow's inability to address security issues in its own periphery, particularly after the 2014 invasion of Crimea, has prompted Central Asian governments to detach the region's security agenda from Russia's (Dadabaev and Umarov, 2025, p. 1238). This article argues that there are now the conditions to categorise Central Asia as its own regional security complex, particularly by observing how counterterrorism has served as an engine for this transformation. Therefore, this article addresses the following research question: Does counterterrorism cooperation within the SCO demonstrate the existence of an autonomous Central Asian security complex, as defined by RSCT?

Answering it is a worthwhile pursuit for two reasons: First, because the SCO has been framed in academic literature primarily as a tool for regime survival (Allison, 2008; Cooley, 2012). Second, RSCT continues to be applied in international security analysis; therefore, revisioning it carries implications for the entire field of security studies. The article proceeds as follows. The first section lays out RSCT as it was originally formulated and examines how Central Asia was categorised as a security sub-complex. In the second section, the article conducts its analysis, adopting Central Asia's counterterrorism cooperation within the SCO as a structural empirical case to verify the presence of the conditions that RSCT provides for the transition from a subcomplex to an RSC. A concluding section reflects on the implications of the findings for RSCT and broader regional security studies.

Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in Regions and Powers (2003), emerged as a response to a fundamental gap in post-Cold War security analysis. Existing frameworks tended to operate at either the systemic or the domestic level, leaving the regional level theoretically underexplored. This theory addressed this gap by positioning the regional level as the primary arena of security interaction in the current international system, arguing that security threats predominantly travel over short distances (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, pp. 1-2).

The theory defines a Regional Security Complex (RSC) as "a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 201). Four structural variables define whether a given region qualifies as an RSC. The first is the *boundary*: what distinguishes the intense security interdependence of states inside an RSC from the weaker security interactions outside it. The second is *anarchic structure*: the absence of overarching regional authority, which compels neighbouring states to develop tight security interdependencies rooted in proximity and shared vulnerability. The third is *polarity*: the distribution of power among regional actors and the number of local poles that shape threat perceptions within the complex. The fourth is social *construction*: the patterns of amity and enmity through which states, shaped by historical experience and political discourse, come to perceive one another as threats or partners (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, pp. 40-82). Together, these four variables determine not only whether an RSC exists, but what type it is.

The theory distinguishes between three principal types of RSCs. The standard RSCs possess a regional polar structure with multiple local powers, such as South Asia or the Middle East. A single great power dominates centred RSCs. Finally, a security Sub-complex is a lower-level subsystem embedded within a larger RSC: it possesses its own internal security dynamics, but remains structurally bound to the parent complex and cannot be understood in isolation from it (Buzan and Waever, 2003, pp. 52-55).

It is in this third category that Central Asia, defined by Buzan and Waever as the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, was originally placed. The authors described it as "a weak subcomplex whose internal dynamics are still forming and in which the involvement of Russia is strong" (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 423). Crucially, however, the authors themselves acknowledged the provisional character of this classification, noting that Central Asia presented "*a* possibility of becoming an RSC" in its own right should three conditions be met: consolidation of the regional states, a gradual weakening of Russia, and the absence of any alternative external power stepping in decisively to fill the resulting vacuum (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 428). It is precisely these conditions that subsequent developments have brought closer to fulfilment. The remainder of this article assesses whether the SCO's counterterrorism architecture, and the security interdependence it has generated, constitutes sufficient evidence to conclude that Central Asia has crossed the threshold from subcomplex to autonomous RSC, and that RSCT's original classification is therefore due for revision.

SCO, terrorism and the emergence of a regional security logic

From subcomplex to RSC: the evolution of Central Asia

Before examining what counterterrorism under the SCO's framework reveals about the emergence of a regional security complex in Central Asia, it is necessary to verify whether the three conditions Buzan and Waever identified as necessary for the region to transition from subcomplex status have been met. The evidence suggests that they have. The first condition was state consolidation, and Central Asian governments turned out to be considerably more durable than the authors had anticipated in 2003. Incidents of overt separatism, warlordism, and large-scale internal insurgency have declined markedly since the early post-Soviet period, and the region's governments have effectively institutionalised their authority (Nanovsky and Knox, 2025). The second condition was the weakening of Russia's role as a regional security provider, and this is also consistently well-documented, particularly following 2022. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine redirected Russian military attention and resources away from its periphery at precisely the moment Central Asian states needed reassurance. Russia's failure to deter the violent 2022 Kyrgyz-Tajik border clashes pushed the governments of Central Asia to re-evaluate the reliability of CSTO's security guarantees and prompted open scepticism about Moscow's reliability as a security anchor (SpecialEurasia OSINT Unit, 2025). The third condition was that no alternative external power stepped in to replace Russia in its hegemonic role. This condition has also been satisfied, as the two main candidates that could have filled that vacuum, the United States and China, have actively decided to not do so. The US presence in Central Asia effectively collapsed following the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 (Akromov, 2024). China has deepened its economic footprint through the Belt and Road Initiative but has deliberately refrained from assuming a hard-power military stabilisation role in the region (Ziegler, 2024, p.71). The result is not a new overlay but a genuine power vacuum at the security level. With all three conditions met, the grounds for reclassifying Central Asia are credible.

Counterterrorism in the SCO

The following sections assess whether the SCO's counterterrorism architecture provides the empirical evidence that reclassification is warranted. RSCT treats threat perception not as a fixed, objective condition but as a social construct that is shaped by geographic proximity, shared meanings, and political discourse. At this level of social construction, the SCO's counterterrorism architecture makes its most compelling case for the existence of an autonomous Central Asian security complex. The SCO's core security mission was established in the first article of its Charter in 2001: fighting terrorism, separatism, and extremism (the so-called "Three Evils") is the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization's primary objective (SCO,2002). The framing of these three security issues as intrinsically linked to one another and their eradication as a guiding objective for the organization's activity can be found reflected in the majority of the agreements signed under the SCO: for example, between 2001 and 2015, nearly forty percent dealt specifically with combating the Three Evils, making it by far the most legislated domain within the organisation (Ambrosio, 2016). The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established as one of the only two permanent bodies of the SCO, a structural choice that signals the centrality of counterterrorism to the organization's institutional identity rather than its peripheral status. The regional quality and ideological character of the SCO's conceptualisation of terrorism appear quite stark when compared to the definitions adopted in Western security frameworks. The EU's definition, for example, links terrorism to threats to democratic structures and institutions while explicitly excluding legitimate political dissent (Directive 2017/541, 2017). The SCO's approach, by contrast, couples political and ideological threats inseparably, prioritising regime stability and state sovereignty above all else (Lain, 2016, pp. 387-388). This is not incidental but reflects instead the existence of a shared political logic among Central Asian governments that aims to deliberately blur the boundaries between terrorism and political opposition. The convergence between the SCO's security framework and the domestic legal architectures of Central Asian states is analytically significant for the argument of a Central Asian RSC: each of the five states has adopted internal definitions of terrorism that closely mirror the SCO's conceptualisation, emphasising threats to constitutional order, political decision-making, and regime stability. Kazakhstan defines terrorism as the "ideology of violence" aimed at influencing state authorities; Tajikistan criminalises acts intended to "undermine public security" or "weaken the foundations of constitutional order"; Uzbekistan extends the definition to any act destabilising the "socio-political situation" for political, religious, or ideological ends. Across the region, terrorism and extremism are treated as interchangeable categories, and the legal definitions set the context for counterterrorism implementation that would not be recognised as such in Western European legal traditions (Lain, 206, pp. 387-388). This alignment is precisely what RSCT's social construction variable describes: a region defining itself by what it collectively fears, and institutionalising that collective fear into shared legal, political, and operational frameworks. An illustrative example of how the Three Evils framework has now acquired an autonomous regional logic, and its framing predates and outlasts the dominance of any single external power, is the SCO Security Council Secretaries' meeting in Bishkek on May 14, 2026. Central Asian states actively campaigned to extend the Three Evils framework into cyberspace and artificial intelligence, explicitly targeting the digitalisation of terrorist financing and transnational cyber threats, and formulating plans for joint cyber counterterrorism exercises (SCO, 2026).

If the codification of the Three Evil framing of terrorism demonstrates that Central Asian states have constructed a shared threat perception, RATS represents the best example of how this construction translates into operational reality. This is a key aspect of RSCT: social construction is not sufficient to sustain a security complex; it needs to emerge with genuine security interdependence, manifest in the institutional structures through which states manage their shared threats collectively. Headquartered in Tashkent, RATS functions as a permanent specialised administrative organ linking the security services and law enforcement agencies of all SCO member states. Its activities span information sharing through a centralised database of terrorist and extremist organisations, coordination of joint operations, legal harmonisation to align member states' national legislation on extradition, and specialised expert groups targeting terrorist use of the internet and social media. Critically, RATS maintains a regional sanctions list of designated terrorist organisations mutually recognised by member states, mirroring the UN Security Council's 1267 list but on a regional level (RATS of the SCO, n.d.).

The legal architecture supporting RATS is where the evidence of genuine security interdependence becomes most compelling. The foundational principle of RATS is reciprocal recognition: member states commit to recognising a terrorist, separatist, or extremist designation regardless of whether their own national legislation recognises an act as one. The 2009 Counterterrorism Convention formalises this principle with binding legal force. Art. 10 obliges members to honour another member's terrorist designation even when the burden of proof does not meet national law. Art. 18 allows member states to dispatch personnel into another member's territory to participate in operations. Art. 14 mandates that extradition requests receive a response within thirty days (Cooley and Schaaf, 2017, p.167). These binding legal obligations clearly show that the security apparatuses of the countries of Central Asia are now structurally embedded in one another. As previously mentioned, RSC requires states operating without an overarching authority and managing shared threats through institutionalised interdependence rather than unilateral deference to great powers. While the broader SCO is often criticised as a forum for political declarations, RATS is widely recognised as its most functional wing, providing Central Asian states with a collective framework that is independent of their asymmetric bilateral ties with Russia and China (The Evolution of the SCO, 2018). This clearly points to Central Asia behaving like an independent security complex rather than a subcomplex.

It is worth addressing that what has been so far presented as strong indicators of a central asian RSC has also been explained in the literature as a more sophisticated form of authoritarian regime survival: Allison (2008) links this integration as a last-resort effort to resist external democratization pressure, while Cooley(2012) argues that the SCO remains the best tool for members to insulate themselves from external security agendas.

While these arguments have considerable explanatory power, and it is virtually indisputable that authoritarian solidarity is a key component of SCO cooperation, they cannot fully account for the range of observable behaviour in the 2020s from central asian goverments. Central Asia has been visibly distancing itself from Russia within SCO formats. Before the 2022 Samarkand Summit, Uzbek officials publicly contradicted Russia's characterisation of the SCO as "Russia's answer to NATO", insisting that SCO's credibility depended on remaining outside the logic of geopolitical blocs and confrontation (Imavova, 2022). Furthermore, Russia's lack of involvement in the mediations that followed the 2022 Kyrgyz-Tajik border clashes, resolved independently by the two central asian countries, shows how security in the region can be managed with a degree of independence never imagined possible for the post-Soviet architecture. Another structural piece of evidence is the emergence of the C5 format, the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia. Launched in 2018, this format brings together the presidents of all five republics annually, entirely outside of the SCO framework. The C5's "Central Asia 40" strategy explicitly prioritises the "international subjectivity of Central Asia" as a shared long-term objective (Eurasian Research, n.d.). Taken together, these developments suggest that what began as a protective integration has generated a regional security identity with its own independent trajectory.

Conclusion

This article found that the SCO's counterterrorism architecture, including the Three Evils securitisation framework, the operational depth of RATS, and the emergence of autonomous formats like the C5, offers a credible argument for the upgrading of Regional Security Complex Theory. Today, Central Asia is better understood as an emerging autonomous RSC than as a sub-complex of a Russian-centred one, a scenario Buzan and Waever anticipated could happen if Russia pulled back from its role as a security provider for the five Central Asian republics. The implications of this reclassification, however, extend beyond Central Asia: for security studies, it pushes for a more genuinely multipolar, regionalist understanding of the post-Soviet space. This reclassification also carries implications for how amity and enmity are understood in security studies to impact regional stability: while it was always assumed that countries form "security neighbourhoods" based on who they want to fight or who they are afraid of, Central Asia presents a different causal reason. These countries are cooperating because they are bound by shared internal fears and internal stability goals, instead of traditional military defence. Finally, and most significantly, the degree of independent regional cooperation that was found in Central Asia shows that it is no longer accurate or useful to analyse the five central asian republics as passive buffers between great powers. They are collective institutional

actors, capable of constructive security norms, managing external pressure, and defining their own regional agenda.

References

Akromov, O. (2024, September). *The US approach towards Central Asia revisited*. Hague Research Institute.

Allison, R. (2008). Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey*, *27*(2), 185–202.

Ambrosio, T. (2016, May 24). *The legal framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An architecture of authoritarianism*. The Foreign Policy Centre.

Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security*. Cambridge University Press.

Caspian Post. (2026, June 7). *Tajikistan calls for expanded SCO joint drills amid rising security threats*. https://caspianpost.com/tajikistan/tajikistan-calls-for-expanded-sco-joint-drills-amid-rising-security-threats

Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 7, 2002, art. 1.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A., & Schaaf, M. (2017). Grounding the backlash: Regional security treaties, counternorms, and human rights in Eurasia. In S. Hopgood, J. Snyder, & L. Vinjamuri (Eds.), *Human rights futures* (pp. 159–188). Cambridge University Press.

Dadabaev, T., & Umarov, A. (2025). A constructivist framework for the central Asian regional security complex: Identity, interests and security dynamics. *International Affairs*, *101*(4), 1237–1258. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf070

Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 88/6.

The evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (2018). *Strategic Comments*, *24*(5), vii–ix. https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2018.1495424

Eurasian Research Institute. (n.d.). *Can the concept "Central Asia 2040" strengthen the region's integration?* eurasian-research.org

Imamova, N. (2022, September 17). *Uzbekistan, Central Asia try to redefine Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. VOA News. https://www.voanews.com/a/uzbekistan-central-asia-try-to-redefine-shanghai-cooperation-organization/6751857.html

Lain, S. (2016). Strategies for countering terrorism and extremism in Central Asia. *Asian Affairs*, *47*(3), 386–405. https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2016.1225899

Nanovsky, S., & Knox, C. (2025). Political stability in authoritarian regimes: The case of Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey*, *44*(3), 346–369.

Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (n.d.). *Background and mission*. Executive Committee of SCO RATS Portal.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (2026, June 5). *Meeting of Ministers of Internal Affairs and Public Security of SCO Member States takes place in Bishkek*. https://eng.sectsco.org/20260605/2351988.html

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (2026, May 14). *Meeting of the Secretaries of the Security Councils of the SCO member states takes place in Bishkek*.

SpecialEurasia OSINT Unit. (2025, February 20). *CSTO in Central Asia: Perspectives and challenges* (Geopolitical Report Vol. 51, No. 9). SpecialEurasia.

Ziegler, C. E. (2024). Filling the void left by great-power retrenchment: Russia, Central Asia, and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. *Texas National Security Review*, *7*(4), 51–72.

EPIS