China has basked for some time in the achievement of having promoted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), now in its eleventh year. Without a doubt, China sees the SCO as a useful foreign-policy instrument. But China cannot afford to rest on its diplomatic laurels. Open to opportunities to protect its stakes in Asia, China is very likely contemplating, albeit cautiously, an expanded role for the SCO that will include membership for India, its archrival. To Beijing, expanding the SCO beyond Central Asia is a political statement, exploring and helping to define a constituency to which it can appeal for diplomatic support in a range of regional projects that restrict US participation. Keywords: China’s policies in South Asia, Sino-Indian relations, Central Asia politics, Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In recent decades the global order has become increasingly multipolar, and new multilateral groupings have become a hallmark of global politics. Under the leadership of Hu Jintao, the Chinese have broadened their security thinking through a “new security concept” (xin angquan guan) that is linked with the so-called Beijing consensus, primarily aimed at establishing a progressive and alternative non-Western world order (Gurtov 2010). Placing security as the centerpiece of their approach, Beijing has steadily pushed “strategic partnership of a consultative character” through organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and ASEAN+3 (the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus China, Japan, and South Korea) (Gurtov 2010). Most recently China has moved its message further afield—in cross-regional settings like BRICS (Brazil, Russia,
India, China, and South Africa) and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China).

The catchphrases of policymakers in Beijing while designing these strategic partnerships are respecting the sovereignty of all nations, focusing on “mutual interest and common prosperity,” and promoting trust and nonhegemonic behavior. Against this backdrop, the Chinese foreign-policy approach considers multilateralism and multilateral bodies as components of an organizing principle attuned to the processes of globalization (quanqiu huahua) and multipolarization (duojihua).

The SCO is one of the prime successful examples of China’s identification with multilateralism. Established in 2001, it consists of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as well as China. The SCO became the first regional multilateral organization of the twenty-first century, and was an outstanding achievement in Beijing’s foreign policy inasmuch as it was the first multilateral security organization that the Chinese helped found and actively promote (Yu Jianhua 2003). China’s preeminence in the SCO is indicated by the fact that the organization is named after the Chinese city of Shanghai, that the first SCO secretary-general was Chinese, and that the SCO secretariat is located in Beijing. Though some would question the SCO’s achievements in enhancing security and its credibility in bringing stability to the region, an array of factors—for example, the dynamism of Central Asia, the role of prominent members such as China and Russia, and the involvement of observer states such as India, Pakistan, Mongolia, and Iran in SCO—underline its importance for regional multilateral politics. In addition, several new strategic trends such as the expansion issue within SCO, Afghanistan’s possible association with SCO, and the possibility that the SCO will rise to the level of a “comprehensive regional organization” put this Central Asian body in a different league today. Though limited to being a Central Asian body so far, the SCO aims to spread its influence over the entire Eurasian landmass by adding new members, potentially from South Asia.

This article discusses the Chinese perspective on SCO expansion. The Chinese acknowledge that the SCO’s scope is currently limited and needs to be expanded. Would they want to stick to the