

Internal conflict within Asian security arrangements

by

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Author's declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This dissertation examines a puzzle: allies and interoperable security partners that fight each other. The dissertation gathers and generates data on this confusing state of affairs and explains the factors that can cause this outcome. The dissertation consists of three papers. The first paper devises a new formula to measure the amount of internal conflict in a particular arrangement. I use this method to measure the amount of conflict in over thirty different security arrangements. The data flag anomalous arrangements, which are those alliances and interoperable security partnerships with several members that fight each other. The second paper is a case study on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO is a salient arrangement because five of the ten SCO members have fought another SCO member in the short span of five years. The third paper broadens the scope of this research to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While not an interoperable security partnership, ASEAN is a pertinent case study because it has claimed to be a security community; yet some of its members have fought each other in limited wars, and many members have serious contestations with other members on security issues. The findings of this research have both practical and theoretical significance. During the research design phase, I initially did not consider democratic peace theory as relevant to the dissertation's topic; however, the findings ended up showing strong support for the significance of regime type in international relations. When there is internal conflict in security arrangements, often it is because of divergent regime types (democratic versus authoritarian regimes). Moreover, the fact that there is so much conflict within the SCO – an authoritarian security arrangement – reinforces the notion that authoritarian states are qualitatively more aggressive than democratic ones. That is, beyond waging conflict on their adversaries, authoritarian states are far more likely to wage conflicts on their so-called friends. Finally, since ASEAN has such a variety of regime types, it became clear why the association has struggled to develop deeper security commitments.

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Dedication

To my late father, Abraham Benjamin.

Contents

List of figures.....	x
List of tables	xi
List of acronyms	xii
1. Introduction: Internal conflict within Asian security arrangements	1
Key terms and contributions to the literature	2
Historical examples of allies fighting each other	9
Structure of the dissertation	14
2. Typologizing security arrangements and measuring bilateral conflict.....	16
Overview	16
Introduction	16
A typology of security arrangements.....	17
Why quantify conflict in security arrangements?.....	21
Clarifying inclusions and exclusions	23
Arrangement type and conflict: Identifying anomalies	27
Analyzing anomalies: Bilateral conflict and the weakness of the CIS and CSTO	30
Conclusion and contribution to the IR literature	37
References	38
3. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation paradox: An arrangement of military partners and adversaries	41
Overview	41

Introduction	41
What is the SCO?	43
The extant literature on the SCO	47
Bilateral conflict in the SCO: What does it mean for the organization?	50
What rationale do states have for committing to the SCO?	53
The SCO as a comprehensive, economic partnership	54
The SCO as a political-security partnership	58
Anti-Westernism as a primary goal of the SCO	65
Conclusion and implications	68
References	70
4. Conflict and contestation within ASEAN: Re-examining ASEAN security cooperation.....	77
Overview	77
Introduction	77
The conventional wisdom on ASEAN security cooperation.....	79
The ASEAN Way	79
The ASEAN Security Community	81
Scrutinizing the scholarship on ASEAN security cooperation.....	83
Intra-ASEAN conflict and contestation over security issues	89
Conclusion	100
References	101
5. Conclusion: Internal conflict within Asian security arrangements.....	109

Key findings and contributions to the literature	109
References	114

List of figures

Figure 1-1. A Google Ngram of the word “security arrangement.”	4
Figure 1-2. A qualitative depiction of the relationship between state commitments and the four types of security arrangements.	6
Figure 1-3. The rise in interstate and internationalized intrastate conflict.	14
Figure 2-1. A scatterplot visualizing the <i>cv</i> data.	28
Figure 3-1. SCO participation and democracy scores	62

List of tables

Table 2-1. A typology of security arrangements.	19
Table 2-2. Codifying arrangements by type and measuring the degrees of conflict (2024).	24
Table 2-3. Describing regional security architectures.	31
Table 4-1. Conflicts between SCO members.	51
Table 4-2. Overview of conflicts and contestations in Southeast Asia precluding higher-commitment security cooperation in ASEAN.	92

List of acronyms

ADMM+	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
ADMM	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CBM	confidence-building measure
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
cd	contentious dyad
CoW	Correlates of War
CDB	Chinese Development Bank
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
cv	conflict value
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
EAS	East Asian Summit
EU	European Union
FPC	Five-Point Consensus
FPDA	Five Powers Defence Arrangements
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GSDB	Global Sanctions Database
HADR	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IR	International Relations
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure
ROK	Republic of Korea
SAC	State Administration Council
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
TAC	Treaty of Amity and Cooperation
td	total number of dyads
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

1. Introduction: Internal conflict within Asian security arrangements

This dissertation is about conflict within security arrangements. I conceptualized this dissertation based on a simple puzzle: Interoperable security partners are, by definition, aligned and trained to fight a common enemy, but they are often fighting each other on the battlefield.¹ We see this paradox play out in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a central case study of this dissertation. Even more puzzling, in some formal alliances, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), allies wage kinetic or proxy conflict against each other. Additionally, there is a contradiction observed in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) where states that claim to be a part of the same security community wage kinetic conflict on each other or have contestations serious enough to make conflict a real possibility. This situation is a contradiction, as interstate conflict is meant to be unthinkable in true security communities, yet it is not only plausible – it transpires.

Three research questions guided the writing of this dissertation. First, how can scholars measure the extent of internal conflict within security arrangements, to better inform systematic analysis of intra-arrangement conflict? Second, why do security arrangements include members that wage conflict against each other? Third, what factors significantly contribute to intra-security arrangement conflict?

The empirical findings of this dissertation offer evidence to support both the monadic and dyadic versions of democratic peace theory. The monadic version of democratic peace theory finds that, due to their distinct qualities (Paine 1776, 15; Kant 1795; Barnhart et al., 2020),² democracies behave more

¹ I often use the term “fight” as a shorthand for conventional kinetic warfare, which means exerting physical force – usually military force – against an adversary.

² A classic monadic argument is Thomas Paine’s (1776) that monarchical governments are prone to “ruptures” with foreign powers due to their pridefulness (15); another is Immanuel Kant’s (1795) that republican constitutions render a state more peaceful (8). A contemporary case for the peacefulness of democracies is reflected in the

peacefully than autocracies. In support of the monadic theory, this dissertation finds that cases of democratic states fighting their allies and security partners are rare, whereas cases of authoritarian states fighting their counterparts are significantly more common. The dyadic version of democratic peace theory finds that pairs of democracies are significantly less likely to have kinetic conflict and wars with other democracies (Doyle 1986; Schweller 1992; Russett 1993; Owen 1994; Chan 1997, 62), although there is a statistically significant frequency of conflict between authoritarian and democratic states, respectively. Relatedly, cases of internal conflict between allies and partners often consist of an authoritarian state fighting either a democratic state or a state that is in the process of democratizing; moreover, democratic allies and partners almost never have kinetic conflicts with other democratic allies and partners. Thus, the findings of this dissertation support the extant wisdoms from dyadic democratic peace theory literature. Ultimately, regime type is central to most explanations for why allies and partners fight one another.

Key terms and contributions to the literature

This dissertation largely draws from established terms and concepts in the corpus of International Relations (IR) literature. To ensure conceptual clarity, the passages below clarify the meaning of the terms and concepts that I refer to throughout this dissertation.

Conflict. I use the term “conflict” to include full-scale war, limited wars, border wars, proxy wars, and violent skirmishes. I also categorize sanctions against other states’ governments and non-recognition of another state’s existence as a form of conflict in international relations.

It is important to distinguish the concept of “conflict” from a “dispute” because conflict between allies and partners is puzzling, but disputes between them are not. By definition, a conflict is more serious because a dispute is not in and of itself a strain to a dyadic relationship. Many disputes are resolved

empirical research of Barnhart et al. (2020), who find that states with women’s suffrage are significantly more peaceful than those without it.

peacefully, both within and outside the context of international relations. Civil disputes often go to court and are resolved without much agitation, and most business disputes are considered “just business.” In the international sphere, some territorial disputes go to the International Court of Justice and are not the focal point of bilateral tension again. Throughout this dissertation I aim to differentiate between the disputes that are semi-regular in international relations, and the conflicts that are not regular expressions of politics. I exclusively focus on conflict in security arrangements, not disputes.

Security arrangement. “Security arrangement” is a common term found in IR scholarship. It sounds like academic jargon, but it is not. Journalists frequently use the term without an accompanying definition (Valencia 2023; Hale 2024; Le Poidevin 2025). This suggests its meaning is intuitively understood by non-IR experts. Curiously, IR scholars have not precisely defined the term “security arrangement,” despite its relevance. This is probably because the term is meant to encompass various types of arrangements, spanning from formal alliances to consultative bodies. Nevertheless, defining the term is necessary. For this dissertation, I define a security arrangement as a formal accord in the security domain between two or more states that facilitates some sort of interaction, ranging from an alliance that formalizes collective defence to a yearly security dialogue of defence ministers.³

Figure 1-1 charts the frequency of the term “security arrangement” in Google’s large corpus of literature.⁴ As Figure 1-1 shows, a rise in the use of the term correlates with the end of the Cold War. The end to bipolarity brought about prominent new arrangements such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and with these new arrangements, vibrant discourse about the value and

³ Throughout this dissertation I find that security arrangements populated with democratic states function differently from security arrangements composed of illiberal states. Seeking regime security through their foreign policies, authoritarian states often pursue regime security as their principal end when participating in security arrangements (Libman and Obydenkova, 2018). Arrangements also function differently when they are composed of mixed government types. A mix of regime types within an arrangement tends to constrain the amount of policy coordination that a security arrangement can achieve, which is the case with ASEAN.

⁴ Figure 1 uses a smoothing of 3, Google’s default setting. On the y axis, Ngrams shows the amount, in terms of percentage, that a word is used in the total of corpus of literature. Ngrams are useful for showing changes in the frequency that a word is used in a corpus (Google 2024). Basically, Ngrams are a form of a quantitative literature review.

limitations of them for international security. At that time, scholars debated the future of security arrangements in a new global security context (Glaser 1993). The popular post–Cold War concept of “cooperative security” framework placed a high importance on security arrangements as playing a key role in a new international order (Carter et al. 1992; Evans 1994).

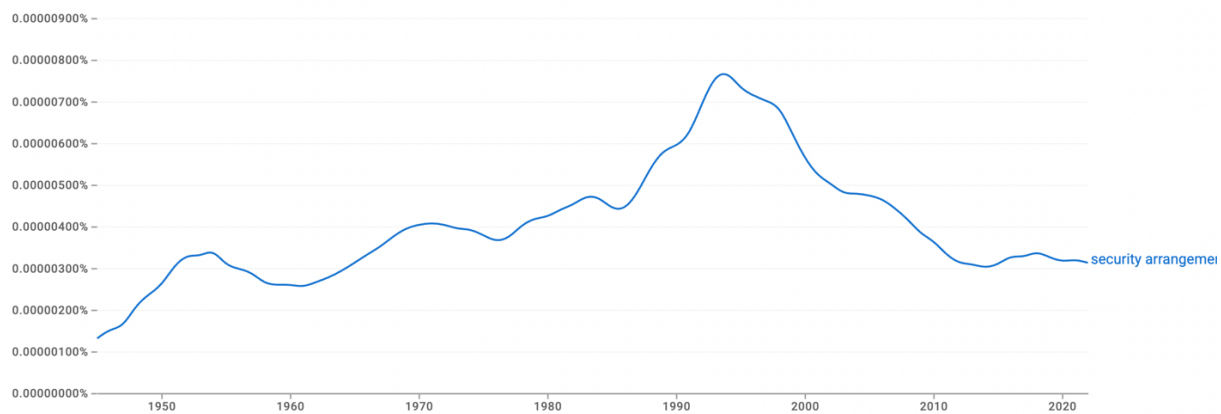


Figure 1-1. A Google Ngram of the word “security arrangement.”

“Security architecture,” which is related to a security arrangement, is a term that policymakers and politicians commonly use but has not received enough academic scrutiny, with some exceptions (Tow and Taylor 2010). In this dissertation, I define security architecture as a configuration of a region’s security arrangements.

Commitment. I use the term “commitment” to refer to the formal intentions declared by a state to engage with or support an arrangement. The term was intellectually developed early in IR academic history and became ubiquitous in the corpus. It is often a central focus of well-cited works in IR. Weinstein (1969) wrote an article titled “The Concept of a Commitment in International Relations” that laid the groundwork for the meaning of commitment in IR; in it he analyzed the different kinds of commitments that states make to alliances and each other. Fearon then developed the concept of commitment as essential to his bargaining model (1995). Gaubatz (1996) conducted a regression analysis to examine the still-relevant question about the relationship between democracy and credible and lasting international

commitments, finding positive results for democracies.⁵ Powell (2006) expanded on Fearon's (1995) notion of war as a commitment problem by arguing that, fundamentally, Fearon's "bargaining indivisibility" explanation for the outbreak of war is also a commitment problem. These are a few examples of seminal IR works that studied the concept of commitment.

The term "commitment" is employed in most of the works considered canonical to IR. Examples are myriad. See, for instance, Schelling's *Strategy of Conflict* (1960) and *Arms and Influence* (1966); in the latter work, Schelling's chapter entitled "The Art of Commitment" teased out the logic of deterrence in state commitments, and discussed how states communicate commitments to signal their intentions. Throughout his seminal 1978 essay, Jervis discussed expansions of state commitments in his ontological assertion that the security dilemma exists in international relations. Commitment features briefly in Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979), where Waltz discusses issues of credibility and commitment (207–09) in a context similar to Schelling's. The study of the commitments of states is at the core of the discipline of IR, and it is of course prevalent in the subfield of Global Governance, too: Buchanan and Keohane (2006), for example, argued that "moral commitments can preserve support for valuable institutions" in circumstances where self-interest may lead states to turn support away from institutions (410).

I create a new typology of security arrangements based on the degree of commitment that states provide to different types of arrangements. In other words, it is commitment that distinguishes types of security arrangements from each other (Singer and Small 166, 2-3). Since I seek to study conflict within alliances and interoperable security arrangements, not confidence-building measures (CBM) or dialogue partners, the typology is crucial for distinguishing the puzzling cases of intra-arrangement conflict from the non-puzzling cases.

⁵ Even though democracies tend to change governments far more often than authoritarians, hypothetically, decision-makers of democracies "should also be more able to demonstrate resolve and make lasting commitments because allies and adversaries can assume that what they are being told is sincere and not duplicitous" (Rasler and Thompson 2005, 7).

An explanation of this typology is as follows. If the states involved in a security arrangement are only committed to dialogue, that arrangement is obviously a security dialogue. If the states are committed to finding methods of best practices for their militaries (but not interoperability), that is probably a CBM. If the states are committed to military interoperability as part of an organization that hosts joint forces or high-intensity military drills, then that is what I term a “high-commitment security partnership.”⁶⁶ If the states are fully committed to the joint defence of each other’s territory, and bound by a legal treaty, that is an alliance. Figure 1-2 depicts this logic.

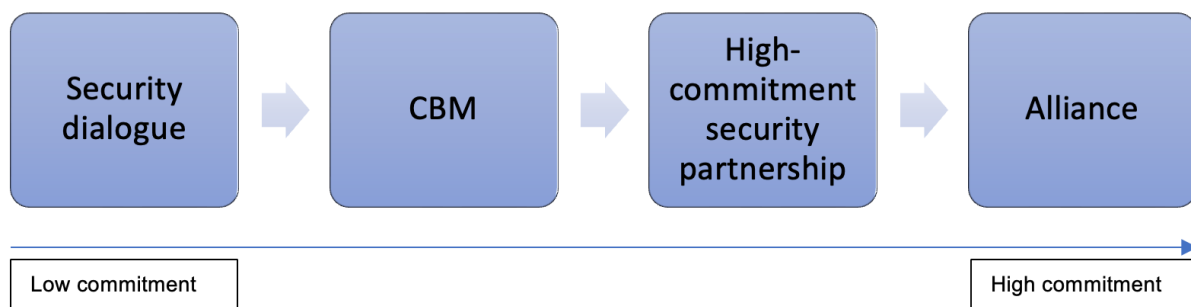


Figure 1-2. A qualitative depiction of the relationship between state commitments and the four types of security arrangements.

There are varying expectations for how much conflict exists within the four types. Alliances are reasonably expected to have a very low degree of intra-conflict, or even none at all. Security dialogues are expected to have anywhere from a low to a very high degree of intra-conflict.

High-commitment security partnerships. This is a novel term that I propose is a useful contribution to the field of international security. A defining quality of high-commitment security partnerships is interoperability. High-commitment security partnerships are arrangements that include commitments such as joint forces, institutionalized joint exercises, and political alignments on security issues. They fall short of formal alliances but are qualitatively different from CBMs. Examples of high-commitment security partnerships include the SCO, the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and

⁶⁶ This term is further explicated in the subsequent passage.

the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The SCO, the CSDP, and the FPDA facilitate higher-commitment security cooperation than CBMs, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). When high-commitment security partners fight each other, this is paradoxical: Even if they are not allies, these partners are simultaneously training together to combat a common adversary while being each other's adversary. An example of high-commitment security partners fighting each other is Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which wage war on the battlefield but their forces develop interoperability together within the context of SCO joint military exercises.

Alliance. Alliances are a type of security arrangement. For this dissertation, I mostly subscribe to Lanoszka's definition of alliances: "arrangements made between two or more sovereign states on the basis of a written treaty that services to coordinate military policy toward at least one common goal" (2022, 13–14). To reiterate Lanoszka (2022), an alliance is based on legality. Two states in clear military alignment are not allies if they do not have formal legal commitments; two states unaligned in their interests are still allies if a legal commitment exists formalizing mutual defence and military support between them.⁷ Because alliances are the strongest form of security arrangements, internal conflict amongst allies is especially puzzling.

Security community. A security community is not a type of arrangement; it is a special relationship that exists between states. In a true security community, war does not occur between members of the community. In fact, war is practically unthinkable between them.

The concept of the security community originated from the work of Van Wagenen in the early 1950s (this is highlighted in Adler and Barnett [1998, 6]), but most scholars attribute the security community concept to the influential book by Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic*

⁷ Thus, scholars ought to reject broad definitions that do not appreciate that alliances are, by definition, formal. For an example of a broad definition, see Walt (1987, 12).

Area (1957). Fundamentally, Deutsch et al.'s 1957 book set out to identify the conditions that form international peace by examining the qualities that underpin cases of security communities. Three decades later, Adler and Barnett's 1998 volume advanced the literature on security communities by contributing an ideational and sociological quality to the theoretical discourse. Scholars gravitated to Adler and Barnett's creation of a "three-phase model of the development of a security community: nascent, ascendant, and mature" (1998, 414); saliently, Acharya's (2001) well-cited book employed this tier by concluding that ASEAN is a nascent security community.⁸ Acharya's work on the security community and ASEAN is some of the most distinguished scholarly literature on this topic (1991; 1995; 1998; 2001; 2021). Reflecting its impact, ASEAN (2003, 3; 2009) adopted Acharya's thesis that the association is a (form of a) security community. Although security community theory originated in the study of the North Atlantic area, the concept has become closely tied to contemporary IR literature on ASEAN (Martel 2020; 2022).

This dissertation will scrutinize whether ASEAN empirically meets the standard of a security community by examining the frequency and intensity of security issues amongst ASEAN members.

Regime type. The significance of regime type to state behaviour was not presupposed in the research design – it is a finding of this research. A focus on regime type explains the central puzzle of this dissertation: why allies and partners fight each other. Moravcsik (1997) argued that regime type can explain a lot of variation in state behaviour (527).⁹ In a similar vein, stark differences in regime type within security arrangements can often explain why internal conflicts in alliances and partnerships break out; moreover, authoritarians are more aggressive than democracies, which is why they fight their fellow

⁸ Adler and Barnett (1998) define a nascent security community as follows: "In this initial phase, governments do not explicitly seek to create a security community. Instead, they begin to consider how they might coordinate their relations in order to: increase their mutual security; lower the transaction costs associated with their exchanges; and/or encourage further exchanges and interactions" (50).

⁹ Democracies are different from authoritarian states, and they behave differently, too. This proposition differs from the neorealist viewpoint that regime type is a superficial quality (Mearsheimer 2001).

authoritarian allies and partners, not to mention their democratic adversaries. The third paper in this dissertation finds that, because governance in ASEAN varies so widely, this mix compounds the contestations amongst the ASEAN states on security issues and hinders the depth of the association's security cooperation.

Historical examples of allies fighting each other

It is necessary to clarify that this dissertation is not a study of alliance defections; history is plentiful in those cases, and they are not so puzzling. Rather, this dissertation is about states that fight each other while they are still allies, high-commitment security partners, or members of the same purported security community (Deutsch et al. 1957). Historically, cases of allies and interoperable security partners fighting each other are rare. The following passages examine cases of the most puzzling kind of intra-arrangement conflict: that between formal allies.

The Spartans repeatedly used their hegemonic power to threaten and coerce their Peloponnesian allies, particularly in the period after the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). The relatively small democratic polity of Mantinea was part of the Delian League during the Peloponnesian War but then had to join Sparta after the city's fall.¹⁰ After the war, Sparta became fearful and concerned about the commitment and loyalty of its alliance network. In 385 BCE, Mantinea bore the brunt of this dissatisfaction when Sparta launched a siege of the city (Funke and Luraghi 2009, 13).¹¹ As described in Xenophon's *Hellenica* (1985, 5.2.1.), Sparta rationalized its siege of Mantinea and the dismantlement of

¹⁰ The Delian League, established in 478 BCE, was an Athens-led alliance of Greek city-states that initially formed to balance against the Persian Achaemenid Empire. The Delian League's principal adversary then became the Sparta-led Peloponnesian League during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). The Delian League lost this war, bringing about the downfall of Athens and Sparta's ascendancy.

¹¹ Funke and Luraghi (2009) describes these circumstances well: "The fact that in these circumstances Sparta treated its own allies in the Peloponnese particularly harshly shows how tense the situation within the Spartan alliance had become. With targeted punitive measures the Spartans tried to re-establish their authority over the Peloponnese and to prevent any further disloyal behavior on the part of their allies. At first, in 385/4, they made of Mantinea an example that cannot have failed to impress the other allies. Since the Mantineans had rejected the request of the Spartan envoys to pull down their city-walls as a token of loyalty to the Peloponnesian League, the Spartans started a siege that ended up with the conquest of Mantinea" (13).

the city-state's democracy and defences (that is, Sparta wanted to destroy the city-state's outer city walls) through the perceived need "to chastise [the Mantineans] and put them in such a situation that they could not be disloyal."¹² By making an example of Mantinea, Sparta was trying to extract more commitments from its other allies (Funke and Luraghi 2009, 13). In the minds of the Spartans, Mantinea was likely perceived as an ally – albeit a disloyal one – while Spartan troops were razing the city-state.

In 1968, four members of the Warsaw Pact collectively invaded Czechoslovakia, which was itself a member of the Pact. This move caused considerable contestation within the alliance. The People's Socialist Republic of Albania and the Socialist Republic of Romania protested the invasion, largely because they feared the precedent that it set and the implications the move had for their own dictatorships (the former would withdraw from the Pact following the invasion). The Soviet Politburo's decision to invade Czechoslovakia stemmed from its fear over the Prague Spring (1968), which was a short period of reforms that was generating a de-Stalinization process, in contrast to the stricter authoritarian regimes to Czechoslovakia's east. Communist hardliners both within and outside the Kremlin refused to accept these reforms (Crump 2025, 288). Thus, the Politburo ordered the Soviet Armed Forces to invade Czechoslovakia to eliminate what it perceived as a "counter-revolution." In the eyes of many communists, Soviet heavy-handedness had an adverse effect: The invasion was condemned by several communist parties in Europe (Goodman 1969, 42), and it largely advanced a viewpoint that the Soviets were not to be trusted. After all, the Czechoslovakian communists had been assured that the Soviet tension with Prague was thawing, because they signed an accord (the Bratislava Declaration) with the Kremlin just two and a half weeks earlier. The invasion was a shock globally – it shocked even the Western governments that were most cynical of Soviet intent (Valenta 1979, 55–56). Perhaps it was so shocking because of how damaging it was to the Soviet Union's own interest. It made membership in the North American Treaty

¹² To quote the relevant passage from Xenophon (1985): "...the Lacedemonians resolved, in the case of all among their allies who had been hostile during the war and more favourably inclined toward the enemy than toward Lacedemon, to chastise them and put them in such a situation that they could not be disloyal. Firstly, therefore, they sent to the Mantineans and ordered them to tear down their wall, saying that they could not trust them in any other way not to take sides with their enemies" (5.2.1).

Organization (NATO) appear more valuable and crucial for European security (Goodman 1969, 78). It also rendered the People's Republic of China – which condemned the invasion – more plausible as a U.S. counterbalance for Soviet hegemonic ambitions around the height of the Sino-Soviet split (Shub 1969). The invasion was driven by Soviet fear rather than a cost-benefit calculation.

The 1968–69 Sino-Soviet border conflict was waged between two bilateral allies under the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance (People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union 1950). As the Cultural Revolution wreaked havoc in China, international tensions with the Soviets intensified in the mid- to late 1960s, particularly along the Ussuri River (Gerson 2010, 19). Sino-Soviet violence escalated in 1968 on Qiliqin Island; in one bloody incident, the Soviet troops killed four Chinese workers (Yang 2000, 24). In March 1969, elsewhere on the Ussuri River, on Zhenbao (Damansky) Island, the situation escalated drastically to a heavy weaponry battle between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Soviet Armed Forces. Later that same year, the Soviets ambushed and killed a PLA squadron with air support at a location across the Chinese border in Tielieketi, Xinjiang. The situation escalated so gravely that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were terrified by the prospect of a Sino-Soviet nuclear war breaking out; Chinese leaders took steps to protect themselves while placing China on a war footing (Yang 2000, 35-37). Since neither wanted a full-scale conflict, why was the conflict amongst these two allies fought in the first place? An escalation due to a simple territorial dispute is a reductive explanation: The Chinese and Soviets had contested territory for quite some time, and it never came to the point of a possible nuclear escalation. According to historical research, although the Soviets provoked escalations and relatively lower-level violence in the years between 1966 and 1968 (Yang 2000, 24), the Chinese side very likely instigated the heavier fighting in 1969: PLA troops were well prepared and had placed a tactical trap so that the Soviets incurred heavy losses when they took the bait (Robinson 1972, 1188; Yang 2000, 27). Yang's research (2000) indicates that the Chinese chose to initiate the conflict because, at the time, Mao was eager to find new reasons to enact purges and crackdowns while the domestic calamity of the Cultural Revolution was underway; Mao was also especially paranoid and confused in this era, translating into incoherent strategic decisions.

The First (1958–1961), Second (1972–1973), and Third (1975–1976) Cod Wars were a series of confrontations over the United Kingdom’s rejection of Iceland’s expanding exclusive economic zones. Both, of course, were NATO allies. Aiming to ensure that the U.K.’s economically essential fishing industry could continue to catch for its voracious population, U.K. naval vessels confronted Icelandic trawlers at sea. Politically, the Cod Wars escalated to the point where Icelandic officials warned that their government would “withdraw Iceland’s membership of NATO and expel US forces from Iceland unless a satisfactory conclusion could be reached to the dispute” (Steinsson 2016, 258). It was this warning that cooled tensions, conditioning an agreement that was considered highly favourable for Reykjavik. The Cod Wars pitted a small state and a great power in a militarized maritime dispute. For IR, the case marks an instance where a small state exerted bargaining power that far outweighed its military and economic power (Steinsson 2016). Yet, despite the name, the “Cod Wars” is a misnomer. This was not a war – it was a series of disputes that ended diplomatically between otherwise friendly allied countries. Thus, although the case ought to be noted, it is far less relevant than the other cases underscored in this section.

In 1974, a war over Cyprus was fought between Greece and Türkiye – two historical archrivals and NATO members that joined the alliance simultaneously in 1952. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to appraise a precise cause of this very complex conflict; however, an underappreciated aspect of why this conflict started is regime-type confrontation. The critical juncture that led to a conflict spiral was the coup d’état by Greek colonels in 1967, which overthrew the government in Athens. This coup set the dyad spiralling toward conflict, as the newfound dictatorship unleashed enosis and pursued an adventurist agenda.¹³ In 1974, the junta staged a coup in Cyprus and ousted President Makarios III,¹⁴ planting its own leader. With this move, Ankara responded by launching its military operation. It is important to underscore that the regime in Athens that combatted the Turkish intervention or invasion of Cyprus was a different regime entirely than the one was admitted to NATO in 1952. The 1967 coup,

¹³ Enosis usually refers to the Greek political movement to unite Greece and Cyprus under Athens’ leadership.

¹⁴ The birthname of Makarios III was Michael Christodoulou Mouskos, but he is widely known by his aforementioned clergy name.

which turned Greece from a democracy into a military-run authoritarian regime, was a critical juncture that eventually pitted two NATO allies against each other. In that context this conflict is not a case that contradicts the democratic peace thesis. In fact, it bolsters the dyadic democratic peace thesis. The dogfights between Greek and Turkish fighter jets over the Aegean Sea, in addition to the naval and coast guard confrontations in the waterbody, are more complicating for democratic peace theory. Yet, both Greece and Turkey have managed to not escalate these disputes even if diplomatic negotiations between Ankara and Athens have proven difficult (International Crisis Group 2021).

A short review of historical cases reveals only a few cases of allies fighting each other. This is not surprising. What can be appraised is that authoritarians tend to fight their counterpart allies more than democracies, which bodes well for democratic peace theory (Kant 1795; Wilson 1917; Doyle 1986). This dissertation will discuss several contemporary cases of allies and interoperable security partners fighting each other. It appears that, in the post–Cold War period, there are more and more cases of this occurring, in correlation with a known rise in interstate and internationalized intrastate conflicts globally (see Figure 1-3).

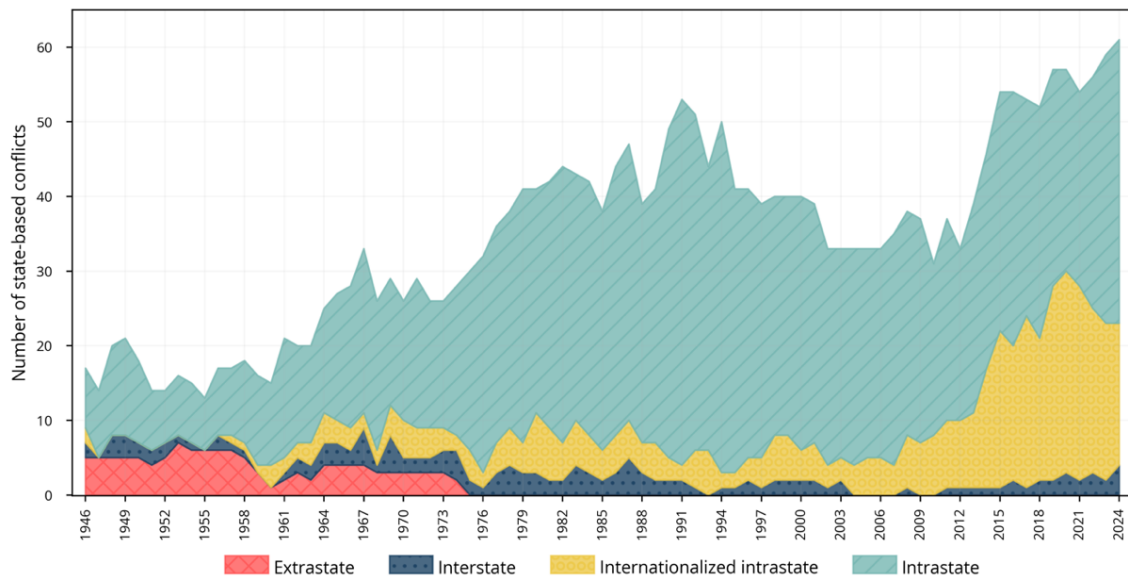


Figure 1-3. The rise in interstate and internationalized intrastate conflict. Rendered by Uppsala Conflict Data Program using their 25.1 data (Davies et al. 2025).

Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured as follows. The first paper, “Typologizing security arrangements and measuring bilateral conflict,” is both methodological and empirical. In this paper, I seek to gain knowledge on how much conflict exists in security arrangements around the world. I first create a new typology, proposing that security arrangements fall under four different types of arrangements: (1) alliances; (2) high-commitment security partnerships; (3) CBMs; and (4) security dialogues. To measure internal conflict across different types of security arrangements, I create a novel formula called the “conflict value.” I then apply this formula to measure the degree of conflict in 31 different arrangements. Building on the insights of the first paper, the second paper concentrates on the internal conflict of a single organization: the SCO. This paper, titled “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation paradox: An arrangement of military partners and adversaries,” offers detailed analysis of the internal conflict that is pervasive in the SCO. It concludes by arguing – somewhat ironically – that the SCO, an authoritarian

club, demonstrates the validity of monadic democratic peace theory. The SCO shows that authoritarian regimes are aggressive not only toward their adversaries, but even their interoperable security partners. The third paper, “Conflict and contestation within ASEAN: Re-examining ASEAN security cooperation,” concentrates on ASEAN, which asserts itself as a security community. In this paper, I detail the internal conflicts and contestations between the members of the community, calling into question whether security community theory truly applies to the association.

As highlighted above, this dissertation generates practical knowledge on two specific organizations: ASEAN and the SCO. Although their regions are distinct, there is good reason to analyze these organizations as part of the same research program. In fact, several scholars before me have compared ASEAN and the SCO (Aris 2009a, 463–64; 2009b; Tang 2019; MacHaffie 2024, 32). ASEAN and the SCO are said to have similar qualities: a self-declared preference for informality over legality; an (ostensible) aversion to collective defence; and mutual norms such as non-interference, which are captured under catchy banners such as the “Shanghai Spirit” and “the ASEAN Way.” Above all, the reason I specifically examine ASEAN and the SCO is because both are puzzling cases of arrangements with pervasive internal conflicts and contestations.¹⁵

¹⁵ The reference list for the introduction and conclusion of this dissertation is on page 114.

2. Typologizing security arrangements and measuring bilateral conflict

Overview

This paper analyzes bilateral conflict in security arrangements, particularly alliances and security partnerships. I create a typology of security arrangements, and thereafter typologize dozens of security arrangements. I develop a quantitative metric to measure the degree of bilateral conflict in each arrangement. The data generated by the metric allow for comparative analysis and for the identification of anomalies. Most of the anomalies are China- and Russia-led organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Introduction

Alliances and other interoperable security partnerships are relationships between friendly and aligned states that are willing to commit to one another's defence and security. But in many contemporary alliances and interoperable security partnerships, allies and security partners are engaged in tense conflict over security issues.¹ Some allies and partners even wage kinetic conflict against other allies and partners. This state of affairs is a paradox, yet it occurs more than expected in international relations. Hence, it presents a puzzle. This paper analyzes the situation of adversaries simultaneously engaging as defence and security allies and partners.

¹ Examples of allies fighting each other are historically rare, for obvious reasons. One example is the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, where Turkish and Greek forces – two allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – fought each other.

To systematically conduct this analysis, the paper proceeds as follows. First, I devise an improved typology of security arrangements, one that is more useful than the typologies used in the extant literature. Then, I develop an innovative measure for the degree of conflict within security arrangements – a *conflict value* (*cv*). Using the measure, I visualize the data and compare different security arrangements based on the amount of bilateral conflict within them. I use these data to develop comprehensive descriptions of four different regional security architectures: Central Asia and the Caucasus, Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). I identify several alliances and partnerships that contain high degrees of bilateral conflict, namely the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). As expected, the CSTO and the CIS are becoming more dysfunctional due to internal bilateral conflict. With that said, based on the global data on conflict and regional security arrangements, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a salient anomaly. It is salient because the SCO is an expanding security partnership that simultaneously consists of combatants in conflict. Overall, this paper is a methodological contribution to the field of international security and the study of international organizations. By developing a method to measure internal conflict in security arrangements, researchers can better understand the security arrangements themselves, as well as the differences between security arrangements.²

A typology of security arrangements

Different types of arrangements are expected to have different degrees of bilateral conflict. Thus, I create a typology to ensure that the conflict values are understood relative to type. This new typology is also important because it reflects new realities of security cooperation in international relations. The Correlates of War dataset on Formal Alliances (Gibler 2009; Singer and Small 1966), for instance, typologizes according to defence pact, non-aggression pact, and entente. But this three-part typology

² For further reading, see Haftel and Hofmann (2019), who found that regional economic organizations “encroach” on the domains of regional security organizations when there is too much internal “rivalry” in the latter.

reflects pre–World War II international relations, rather than the more complex web of post–Cold War security architectures. The new typology I present aims to improve upon the Correlates of War dataset. In contemporary international politics, security arrangements fall under these four main varieties:

- Formal alliances (e.g., North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]);
- High-commitment security partnerships (e.g., Five Powers Defence Arrangements);
- Confidence-building measures (CBMs; e.g., the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] Regional Forum);
- Institutionalized security dialogues (e.g., the East Asia Summit).

In formal alliances, states are aligned on key foreign policy and international security interests and are committed to and bound by treaties. Alliance commitments often include mutual defence clauses. Security partnerships come in many varieties, so for this research I focus on security partnerships that are high commitment, such as the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). These types of arrangements involve joint forces and interoperability (by contrast, low-commitment partnerships are more technical and domain-specific, such as cybersecurity partnerships). High-commitment security partnerships fall short of binding joint defence commitments that are commonly found in alliances treaties, such as Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty or Article V of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (NATO 1949, art. 5; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1960, art. V). Unlike alliances, high-commitment security partnerships are usually executive agreements (e.g., U.S.-Ukraine 10-year bilateral security agreement [Bowen 2024]). The third type is CBMs. CBMs are institutions that deal with peace-oriented initiatives and technical cooperation, such as arms control and humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR). The parties to CBMs are often not aligned on international security issues. For example, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) emerged from the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was formed on the ethos of mitigating flashpoints between rival Western and Eastern blocs amidst the Cold War. The fourth

Code	Type	Example	State commitments	Maximum conflict expectation
1	Alliance	NATO	<i>High</i> : Formal alliance treaty; mutual defence pact; weapons sharing; military policy coordination (Lanoszka 2022, 13-18). ¹	Marginal
2	High-commitment security partnership	Five Powers Defence Arrangements	<i>Medium</i> : No legally binding joint defence clause but regularized combat joint-military exercises; interoperability; signed defence agreements; politicized alignments.	Low
3	Security forum with CBMs	OSCE	<i>Low</i> : Domain-specific security cooperation (e.g., humanitarian assistance and disaster relief; cybersecurity); peace-oriented initiatives or conflict resolution mechanisms; emphasis on technical cooperation (rather than foreign policy/political alignment).	Medium-High
4	Security dialogue	East Asia Summit	<i>Virtually none</i> : Attendance at dialogues.	High

Table 2-1. A typology of security arrangements. The degree of bilateral conflict will vary depending on the security arrangement.

type of security arrangement is security dialogues, which entail few to no state commitments other than showing up. Type 3 and 4 arrangements are meant to convene rivals in conflict resolution processes or preventive diplomacy. The logic behind these arrangements is captured by a maxim attributed to former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin: “You don’t make peace with friends, you make it with very unsavory enemies” (Haberman 1993).

In Table 2-1, the code from 1 to 4 is an ordinal scale based on the degree of state commitments to the arrangement as well as the degree of alignment typically underpinning the arrangement. “Conflict expectation” denotes the degree of conflict expected in each arrangement. One would expect less conflict in an alliance than in a security dialogue.

Table 2-2 shows a column called the “C value,” which stands for conflict value. This variable is a measure of the amount of conflict in a security arrangement. “C dyads” lists the dyads codified as in conflict with one another.

To create the measure of a conflict value, I codify dyads as binaries. A dyad is either a 0 or a 1, a contested pair or not. Of course, in reality, bilateral relationships are more complex; but quantification is meant to be parsimonious, not granular. With *cd* standing for the number of contentious dyads and *td*

standing for the total number of dyads in an arrangement, the simple equation used to calculate an organization's conflict value is:

$$\frac{cd}{td} \times 100 = cv$$

“Conflict” as I define it requires some precision. Here it means two states engaged in conflict over issues specifically relating to national or international security. War and militarized interstate disputes are straightforward indicators of conflict. Also, if two states contest over sovereignty disputes that challenge another state's existence (for example, this is the case in Türkiye's non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus), then this dyad is in conflict. Economic sanctions on a state due to international security events, such as EU member states sanctioning Russia for its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, also indicate that dyads are in conflict. What follows are the indicators that I use to codify a dyad as a conflict dyad:

- interstate war (e.g., Russia-Ukraine)
- military clash between 2010 and 2024 (e.g., India-Pakistan)
- proxy war (e.g., Iran–Saudi Arabia)
- unilateral or mutual sanctions due to an international security issue (e.g., EU member states sanctioning Belarus for its involvement in Russia's war in Ukraine)³
- non-recognition of sovereignty due to international disputes and historical tensions (e.g., several Arab League states and Israel).

If a dyad contains one of the above conditions, then this codifies the dyad as in conflict – a 1. If the above does not apply to the dyad, then the relationship is a 0.

³ The Global Sanctions Database (GSDB [Felbermayr et al., 2020]), a premier dataset on sanctions, was helpful for partly informing this codification. The GSDB dataset categorizes the intent of sanctions. Of the GSDB's categories of sanctions, only the sanctions applied for security reasons are relevant to this research (e.g., territorial conflict), as opposed to sanctions imposed for other reasons (e.g., human rights or democracy).

Why quantify conflict in security arrangements?

Why quantify conflict in security arrangements? The main reason is due to the amount of qualitative information that this paper covers. The paper analyzes dozens of security arrangements and thousands of dyads. In this light, quantification is useful because it provides an overview (the downside of quantification is that it offers less case-by-case detail than qualitative studies).

It is worthwhile to explain the respective methodological benefits and shortcomings of dyadic data analysis, in contrast to other kinds of data analysis. Dyadic data analysis is prominent in the disciplines of psychology and sociology, where dyadic data often takes the form of the study of pairs of individuals in some type of relationship, such as a marital relationship. Dyadic data analysis is also used widely in International Relations (IR) scholarship. Of note, it is central to democratic peace theory (Kinsella 2005, 453). In the 2010s, dyadic data analysis received heightened scrutiny by IR scholars. Some pointed out the complications of using dyadic datasets in regression analysis (Spiro 1994; Erikson et al. 2014; Carlson et al. 2024).⁴ Erikson et al. (2014, 457) and Carlson et al. (2024) have warned that scholars can use dyadic data to create large data sets where datapoints have dependent rather than independent relationships, which can lead to misrepresentative coefficients. However, the issues highlighted by these authors – while certainly important – are more pertinent to regression analysis than the relatively basic dyadic data analysis conducted in this paper.

For better or worse, researchers are drawn to dyadic data because it produces a large population of data:

Typically, dyads are incorporated into panel data, with K dyads over T years, making an expanded $K \times T$ data set. This results in very large data sets, since N [states]...form $N(N-1)/2$

⁴ Erikson et al. (2014, 457) and Carlson et al. (2024) have respectively warned that many scholars can use dyadic data to create large data sets where datapoints have dependent rather than independent relationships. However, the issues highlighted by these authors are pertinent to regression analysis more so than the relatively basic dyadic data analysis of this paper.

undirected dyads, that is, number of pairs of [states] where the ordering of the pair does not matter. For instance, one hundred [states] generate 4950 undirected dyads. One hundred [states] over twenty years generate 99,000 undirected dyad-years, and so on (Erikson et al. 2014, 457).

My paper is not a longitudinal study, but the use of dyadic data still produced a large population. The simple equation for calculating the number of dyads, where M =total members and td =total number of dyads, is: $M(M-1)/2=td$. In one organization of ten members, such as the SCO, the equation $10(10-1)/2=M$ generates 45 dyads. While large datasets are generally preferred to small datasets, it is important that the data are meaningful. To illustrate, in their regression models on the relationship between regime type and alliance preferences, Lai and Reiter noted that the many dyads created from NATO and the Rio Pact “heavily affected” what coefficients were rendered statistically significant (2000, 220–21). Poast (2010) argued that alliance formation is a multilateral event, not a bilateral event, so it is problematic to use dyadic data to study something that is not dyadic. I reject the proposition that using dyadic data to study multilateral events is fallacious. I argue that dyadic analysis is meaningful data even for multilateral events and situations. In the context of security arrangements, two states that are in conflict with each other can seriously affect the functionality of a multilateral security arrangement, such as its ability to organize joint exercises. For example, Indian and Pakistani contentiousness made the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation dysfunctional. Contentiousness can, most obviously, limit functional cooperation, which is especially true if the arrangement has a veto mechanism. A single contentious dyad can even cause the arrangement to disband altogether. My above assertions are rather basic outside the context of IR scholarship. To illustrate: When two business partners do not get along, most would understand that this can compromise the business itself, and perhaps cause issues that hinder the business’s profitability. Sports coaches know that when two players on a team do not get along it will be detrimental to the team as a whole. I contend that it is meaningful to know how much conflict one arrangement has compared to another, whether it be businesses, sports teams, or international security arrangements.

Clarifying inclusions and exclusions

Table 2-2 is the product of applying the conflict value to real-world security arrangements. It includes organizations with a loosely defined regional scope, so it does not include organizations such as the United Nations. Table 2-2 includes multilateral alliances (e.g., NATO) but excludes bilateral alliances (e.g., the U.S.-Japan alliance). This table only codifies Track 1 and Track 1.5 arrangements, so it omits Track 2 institutions such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific. It includes arrangements with a clearly defined in-group of members; therefore, it does not include arrangements such as the Shangri-La Dialogue and the Beijing Xiangshan Forum. Table 2-2 includes organizations that explicitly declare a mandate on interstate peace and security issues. It also includes organizations that have functioned as a channel for coordinating defence policy and forums used to diplomatically manage international security issues (e.g., ASEAN+3). Many of the listed organizations are primarily security arrangements, but some are organizations that have comprehensive mandates that include facilitating security arrangements (e.g., the Gulf Cooperation Council). Overall, the table below provides a dataset ($n=31$) on security arrangements. The dataset is organized according to four regions: Central Asia and the Caucasus, Europe, MENA, and Southeast Asia. Thus, the dataset is not truly global. Contentiousness is calculated based on the period of 2010–2024. The reader should take note that relationships between states can quickly change year over year. There is a certain margin of error involved in most quantitative analysis, including with codification; with that said, overall, the table below provides an accurate snapshot of the degree of conflict in many of the world's security arrangements.

Arrangement (# Members) [total dyads]	Region	Type	C dyads (2014–2024)	C value ⁵	Year formed/ inaugurated
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (10) 10(10–1)/2 = 45 total dyads	Central Asia/Caucasus	2	India-China; India-Pakistan; Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan; ⁶ Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan	4/45 x 100 = 8.89	2001
Collective Security Treaty Organization (6) [15]	Central Asia/Caucasus	1	Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan	6.67	1992 (signing of Collective Security Treaty); 2002 (establishment of the organization)
Commonwealth of Independent States⁷ (9) [36]	Central Asia/Caucasus	2	Armenia-Azerbaijan; Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan; Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan; Moldova-Russia	11.11	1991
GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (4) [6]	Central Asia/Caucasus; Europe	2	None	0	2001 (signing of GUAM charter)
Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia⁸ (28 - 1) [351]	Central Asia/Caucasus; Middle East	3	Bahrain-Qatar; Cambodia-Thailand; China-India; China-ROK; China-Vietnam; India-Pakistan; Israel-Palestine; Israel-Iran; Iran-UAE; Iran-Bahrain; Iran-Jordan; Iran-ROK; ⁹ Iran-Türkiye; Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan; Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan; Türkiye-UAE; Türkiye-Russia; Russia-ROK	5.13	1999
EU-Central Asia High-Level Political and Security Dialogue (6) [15]	Central Asia; Europe	4	Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan; Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan	13.33	2013
ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (10) [45]	Southeast Asia	3	Myanmar (junta)-Indonesia; Myanmar (junta)-Malaysia; Myanmar (junta)-Philippines; Myanmar (junta)-Singapore; ¹⁰ Thailand-Cambodia	11.11	2006

⁵ Values are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

⁶ Here is an explanation of the calculation. The SCO has 10 members. There are four contentious dyads amongst full SCO Members: China-India, India-Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan; Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan. Since the maximum number of dyadic contestations in the SCO is 45 and 4 of those 45 are in contestation, the SCO's *cv* is 8.89.

⁷ Moldova has withdrawn from CIS military-security mechanisms and will withdraw from the CIS completely. But as of winter 2025, Moldova technically remains an official member.

⁸ Afghanistan is not included, hence the subtraction.

⁹ Although historically Iran and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have maintained semi-normal bilateral relations, in 2019 Seoul froze Iranian financial assets held in two South Korean banks. This led to Tehran warning Seoul that it will take South Korea to the International Court of Justice. South Korea had frozen these funds as part of broader U.S. sanctions on Iran's nuclear program (in 2023, Seoul provided these funds back to Iran as part of a diplomatic deal). Moreover, Seoul has mounting concerns over Iran–North Korea military cooperation. Given these facts, the Iran-ROK is codified as a contentious dyad (Ryall 2020).

¹⁰ A senior junta official attended a 2024 ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) retreat in Laos. Although junta officials attend internal ASEAN meetings, at the time of writing, junta officials are seemingly not in attendance at East Asia Summit (EAS) meetings. This is why junta-dyads are included in the ADMM but excluded from the EAS count of contentious-dyads.

Arrangement (# Members) [total dyads]	Region	Type	C dyads (2014–2024)	C value ⁵	Year formed/ inaugurated
ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (18) [153]	Southeast Asia	3	Cambodia-Thailand; China-Australia; China-India; China-Japan; China-New Zealand; China-Philippines; China-ROK; China-U.S.; China-Vietnam; Russia-Australia; Russia-Japan; Russia-New Zealand; Russia-ROK; Russia-Singapore; Russia-U.S.; Myanmar (junta)-Australia; Myanmar (junta)-Indonesia; Myanmar (junta)-Japan; Myanmar (junta)-Malaysia; Myanmar (junta)-New Zealand; Myanmar (junta)-Philippines; Myanmar (junta)-Singapore; Myanmar (junta)-ROK; Myanmar (junta)-U.S.	15.69	2010
ASEAN+3 (13) [78]	Southeast Asia	3	Cambodia-Thailand; Thailand-Myanmar; ¹¹ China-Japan; China-Philippines; China-ROK; China-Vietnam	7.69	1997
ASEAN Regional Forum (27) [351]	Southeast Asia	3	Cambodia-Thailand; Thailand-Myanmar; China-Australia; China-Canada; China-EU; ¹² China-India; China-Japan; China-New Zealand; China-Philippines; China-ROK; China-U.S.; China-Vietnam; DPRK-Australia; DPRK-Canada; DPRK-EU; DPRK-Japan; DPRK-New Zealand; DPRK-ROK; DPRK-U.S.; India-Pakistan; Myanmar (junta)-Australia; Myanmar (junta)-Canada; Myanmar (junta)-Indonesia; Myanmar (junta)-Japan; Myanmar (junta)-Malaysia; Myanmar (junta)-New Zealand; Myanmar (junta)-Philippines; Myanmar (junta)-Singapore; Myanmar (junta)-U.S.; Myanmar (junta)-EU; Myanmar (junta)-ROK; Russia-Australia; Russia-Canada; Russia-EU; Russia-Japan; Russia-New Zealand; Russia-ROK; Russia-Singapore; Russia-U.S.	11.11	1994
East Asia Summit (18) [153]	Southeast Asia	4	Cambodia-Thailand; Thailand-Myanmar; China-India; China-Australia; China-Japan; China-New Zealand; China-ROK; China-U.S.; China-Vietnam; China-Philippines; Russia-Australia; Russia-Japan; Russia-New Zealand; Russia-ROK; Russia-U.S.; Russia-Singapore	10.46	2004; inaugural summit 2005

¹¹ Bangkok has had relatively close relations with the junta since 2021, but prior to 2021 Thai relations with the National League for Democracy (NLD) government were strained. Therefore, although a dyad with the junta is codified as not in conflict, a dyad with the NLD is codified as in conflict.

¹² The EU's European External Action Service is the participating body for the ASEAN Regional Forum, rather than the diplomatic services of particular European countries. Therefore, singular European states are not counted as separate dyads.

Arrangement (# Members) [total dyads]	Region	Type	C dyads (2014–2024)	C value ⁵	Year formed/ inaugurated
China-ASEAN Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting (11) [55]	Southeast Asia	4	Cambodia-Thailand; China-Philippines; China-Vietnam; Myanmar (junta)-Indonesia; Myanmar (junta)-Malaysia; Myanmar (junta)-Philippines; Myanmar (junta)-Singapore	12.73	2015
Western Pacific Naval Symposium (23) [253]	Southeast Asia	3	Cambodia-Thailand; Thailand-Myanmar; China-Australia; China-Canada; China-Japan; China-New Zealand; China-Philippines; China-U.S.; China-Vietnam; Australia-Russia; Canada-Russia; New Zealand-Russia; France-Russia; Japan-Russia; ROK-Russia; Singapore-Russia	6.32	1987; inaugural symposium in 1988
Five Powers Defence Arrangements (5) [10]	Southeast Asia	2	None	0	1971
San Francisco System¹³ (7) [21]	Southeast Asia	1	None	0	1951
Baltic Assembly (3) [3]	Europe	2	None	0	1990
EU Common Security and Defence Policy (26) [325]	Europe	2	None	0	1999 (European Security and Defence Policy); 2009 (Lisbon Treaty)
NATO (32) [496]	Europe	1	Greece-Türkiye	0.20	1949
OSCE (57) [1596]	Europe	3	Armenia-Azerbaijan; Armenia-Türkiye; Albania-Serbia; Belarus (x44 contentious dyads); Russia (x44 dyads); Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia; Croatia-Serbia; Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan; Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan; Türkiye-Cyprus; Türkiye-Greece; Türkiye-Russia	6.14	Conference on Security and Co- operation in Europe (1973); OSCE (1995)
Visegrád Group (4) [6]	Europe	2	None	0	1991
European-Political Community (47) [1081]	Europe	4	Armenia-Azerbaijan; Armenia-Türkiye; Albania-Serbia; Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia; Croatia-Serbia; Cyprus-Türkiye; Greece-Türkiye; Kosovo-Serbia	0.74	2022
Bucharest Nine (9) [36]	Europe	2	None	0	2015

¹³ I include the hub-and-spoke system because of its major significance to the Southeast Asian security architecture, most notably when it comes to the U.S.-Philippines alliance. Thailand is one of the United States' oldest allies. Singapore, while not technically a U.S. ally, is a reliable U.S. security partner and a key component of the broader hub-and-spoke network in the Indo-Pacific. And, although Vietnam is not a U.S. ally, U.S. security relations with Vietnam have developed considerably since the Obama administration.

Arrangement (# Members) [total dyads]	Region	Type	C dyads (2014–2024)	C value ⁵	Year formed/ inaugurated
Nordic Defence Cooperation 5 [10]	Europe	2	None	0	2009
Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (6) [15]	Europe	2	None	0	1996
Council of the Baltic Sea States (10) [45]	Europe	3	None	0	1992
South-East European Cooperation Process (13) [78]	Europe	4	Greece-Türkiye; Serbia-Bosnia and Herzegovina; Croatia-Serbia; Kosovo-Serbia	5.13	1996
Union for the Mediterranean (43) [903]	Europe; MENA	3	Algeria-Morocco; Algeria-Israel; Israel-Palestine; Israel-Lebanon; Israel-Mauritania; Israel-Tunisia; Greece-Türkiye; Türkiye-Cyprus ¹⁴	0.89	2008
5+5 Defence Initiative (10) [45]	Europe; MENA	3	Algeria-Morocco	2.22	1990; restarted in 2001
Arab League (22) [231]	MENA	1	Bahrain-Qatar; Algeria-Morocco; Syria-Lebanon; Syria-Iraq; Syria- Qatar; Syria-Kuwait; Syria-Morocco ¹⁵	3.03	1945
Arab Maghreb Union (5) [10]	MENA	3	Algeria-Morocco	10.00	1989
Gulf Cooperation Council (6) [15]	MENA	1	Bahrain-Qatar	6.67	1981

Table 2-2. Codifying arrangements by type and measuring the degrees of conflict (2024). ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; DPRK = Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Guam = Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova; MENA = Middle East and North Africa; NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization; OSCE = Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; ROK = Republic of Korea; UAE = United Arab Emirates.

Arrangement type and conflict: Identifying anomalies

The next step is to visualize the data. Figure 2-1 is a visualization of the data on conflict and security arrangement types. The plot shows that, across regions, alliances are more cohesive than security dialogues. What this means is good indicator validity and validity for the conflict value.

¹⁴ Syria has been suspended from the Union for the Mediterranean since 2011, so dyads including Syria are not included in the table. Dyads are calculated based on the rule of the Bashar al-Assad regime over Syria.

¹⁵ In 2023, the Arab League initiated a normalization of ties with the Bashar al-Assad Syrian regime, which was largely a by-product of Saudi Arabia changing its position; but Morocco, Kuwait, and Qatar had maintained that the Arab League should not normalize ties with the Al-Assad regime (Cafiero and Milliken 2023).

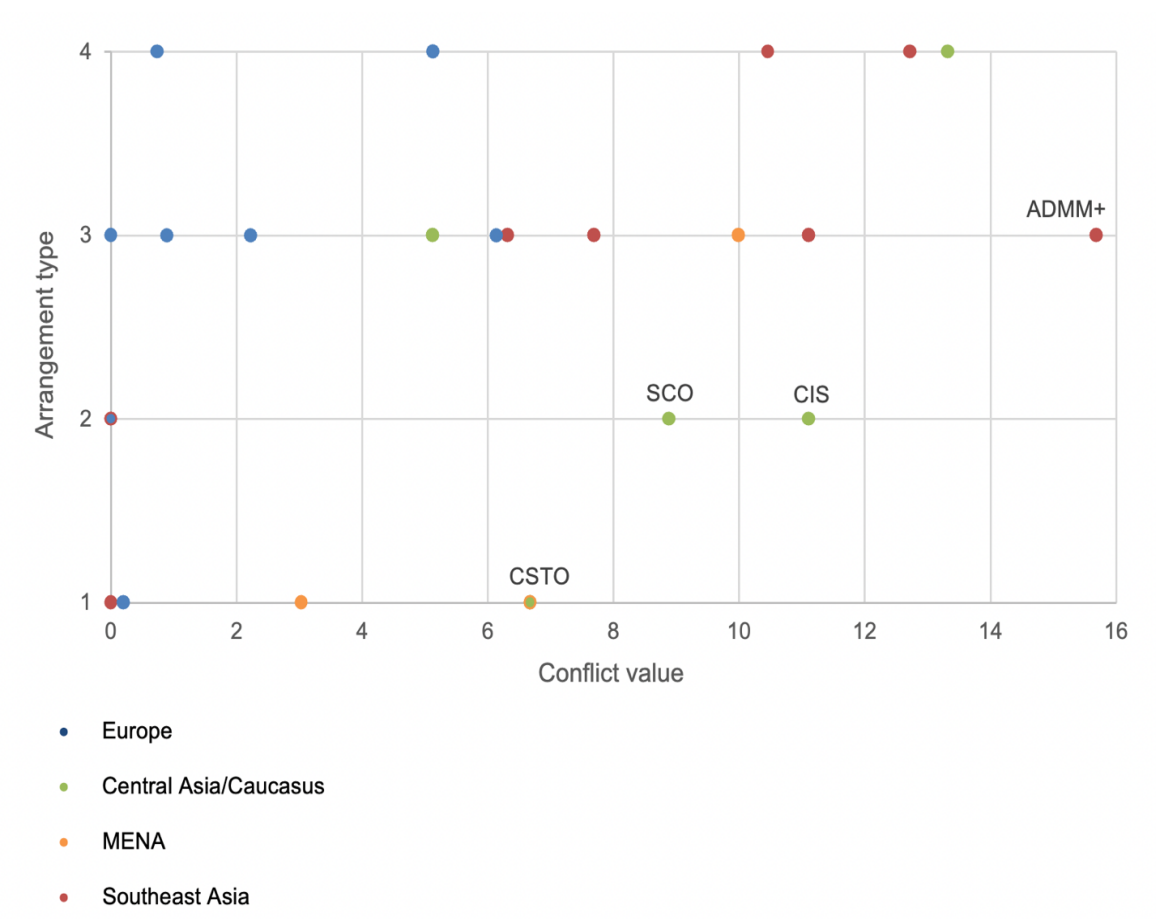


Figure 2-1. A scatterplot visualizing the *cv* data.

An analytical value of the scatterplot is that it accentuates anomalies. Anomalies are the alliances (type 1) and military partnerships (type 2) that have high degrees of bilateral conflict on security issues. These anomalies are datapoints that near the bottom right of the plot.

Figure 2-1 provides insights into regional security architectures and the differences amongst them. Beginning the data analysis with Europe, the scatterplot accurately reflects that all of Europe's alliances and military partnerships are unified arrangements; therefore, there is not much deviation from the logical expectation. For illustration, none of the 27 member states of the EU's CSDP are in conflict, which I codify as a type 2 arrangement (European Union 2007).¹⁶ In the NATO context, the Greece-

¹⁶ The EU CSDP is codified as a military partnership, but it is important to highlight that it contains many features of a regular alliance. Section 2 (c) of the Treaty of Lisbon contains an explicit statement affirming "binding

Türkiye dyad, and their ongoing Aegean disputes, is an outlier in an otherwise highly unified alliance. Overall, the data show that Hungary and Türkiye's diverging preferences from most members on NATO policy do not mean that the alliance is disunited. In fact, the European security architecture is highly unified when put in a global perspective. This insight contrasts with international media headlines, which tend to cover smaller policy disagreements as if they are larger issues than they actually are (Turak 2022). In a global context, these disagreements are not objectively very contentious, considering that many other alliances and partners are more internally contested.

Southeast Asia has no true anomalies because it is a security architecture based on type 3 and 4 arrangements, in addition to the U.S. hub-and-spoke system. There are still important takeaways regarding the region. The first regards the high *cv* of ASEAN CBMs and security dialogues. ASEAN's security architecture is made up primarily of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) (*cv*=11.11), the ADMM+ (*cv*=15.69), the ASEAN+3 (*cv*=7.69), the ASEAN Regional Forum (*cv*=11.11), and the East Asia Summit (*cv*=10.46). Notably, the ADMM+ holds the highest *cv* of any arrangement observed in any region, meaning, the ADMM+ comprises friends and rivals alike. Perhaps what is most salient about Southeast Asia is ASEAN's lack of security arrangements that would facilitate mutual defence, joint military drills, interoperability, and other features of type 1 and 2 arrangements. In this light, the U.S. hub-and-spoke system remains an essential regional security provider. For U.S.- allied and partnered countries, such as the Philippines and Singapore, the hub-and-spoke system can provide deterrence and military support that ASEAN arrangements cannot provide, because they are only CBMs and dialogues, and they contain significantly high degrees of international conflict and contestations. These issues place a ceiling on security cooperation.

commitments" in reference to states with higher military capabilities relative to other states. The treaty also declares the commitment to joint defence: "If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter" (European Union 2007, Section 2 [c]).

As for MENA, there are a few notable points. The first regards the Arab League, which has a *cv* of 3.03. Article 2 of the 1950 Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Between the States of the Arab League says: “The Contracting States consider any [act of] armed aggression made against any one or more of them or their armed forces, to be directed against them all” (Arab League 1950, art. 2). Although the League is considered a “loose alliance” (Masters and Sergie 2023), conflict within it has been a recurring theme in the seventy-five-year history of the organization. In the case of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Bahrain-Qatar dispute and the Gulf states’ diplomatic fallout with Qatar over Doha’s political links with Iran are not helpful to the development of the GCC’s Peninsula Shield Force (for more on this arrangement, see Guzansky 2014).

The point of quantifying regional security architectures is not to overcomplicate – it is to elicit useful knowledge about regional security architectures (Tow and Taylor 2010). I define security architectures simply: Security architectures are the sum of a configuration of security arrangements, and they have no normative quality. To offer an empirical contribution to the study of regional security architectures, Table 2-3 summarizes the attributes of different security architectures. The descriptions are based on the scatterplot in Figure 2-1.

Analyzing anomalies: Bilateral conflict and the weakness of the CIS and CSTO

Figure 2-1 accentuates anomalies. A key insight from the scatterplot is that the most salient anomalies are China- and Russia-led security arrangements with Central Asian and the Caucasus states. The CSTO definitively stands out because it is a formal alliance with a high level of bilateral conflict (*cv* = 6.67). The CSTO has a higher *cv* than most CBMs and security dialogues. The CIS has a *cv* of 11.11, which is the highest for any type 2 arrangement. The SCO also has a high *cv* of 8.89. Overall, the plot shows that Central Asian and Caucasus security arrangements are anomalous because they have a very high degree of internal conflict. This observation is reflected in the green datapoints leaning to the right of the plot, even when $y=1$ (alliances) or $y=2$ (partnerships).

Region	Qualities of regional security architectures
Europe	Cohesive. The small number of states in conflict allows for an architecture of strong alliances and military partnerships. With that said, the Greece-Türkiye dyad, and their Aegean disputes, is a notable aberration. The European architecture is layered – meaning, it has overarching regional institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), supported by cohesive sub-regional arrangements such as the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation and the Nordic Defence Cooperation. The architecture contains several multilateral security alliances and sub-regional military partnerships. These close partnerships are possible because European states, for the most part, are aligned in their foreign policies. But the states also tend to share a regime-type commonality: democracy. The architecture is a balanced mix of early–Cold War–era (NATO), late–Cold War–era (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), post–Cold War–era (CSDP), and more recent (Bucharest Nine) security arrangements.
Southeast Asia	Incohesive. Conflicting dyads are often involved in multi-state security arrangements. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a central node in a wide network of confidence-building measures and dialogues. ASEAN arrangements have some of the highest conflict values of any arrangements observed, i.e., these arrangements contain a lot of rivals. Notably, the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus holds the highest cv of any arrangement observed in any region. This indicates ASEAN’s diplomatic convening power, but also the policy constraints of ASEAN’s architecture. The U.S. hub-and-spokes system remains an essential security-provider in a region with few regional security-providing arrangements (i.e., alliances and multilateral military partnerships). For U.S.-allied countries, the hub-and-spoke system can provide deterrents and capabilities enhancements that ASEAN arrangements cannot provide. ASEAN is not equipped with robust policy measures that could directly respond to regional security problems, such as the civil war in Myanmar (2021–) and the South China Sea disputes. The European architecture can implement sanctions and joint military responses on states violating rules and norms, whereas ASEAN cannot. ASEAN tends to proliferate arrangements at a faster rate than other architectures. An example of a new arrangement is the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers’ Informal Meeting (2015).
Central Asia and the Caucasus	Contested. The architecture contains a high degree of internal contestation even within alliances and military partnership arrangements. These arrangements are an anomaly because alliances and partnerships are meant to be highly cohesive. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which are type 1 and 2 arrangements respectively, are especially anomalous because their membership consists of a range of adversaries in violent conflict. The Central Asian architecture is China-led (SCO) or Russia-led (CSTO; Commonwealth of Independent States) rather than led by post-Soviet Central Asian states. China and Russia built key arrangements of the Central Asian security architecture to advance their regime security and legitimacy. With that said, the Kazakh-led regional dialogue, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, engages various countries and therefore boosts Kazakhstan’s diplomatic influence. Interregional dialogues between Central Asian countries and regional organizations such as the EU have also budded. The architecture has faced a system-shock due to conflicts in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Conflicts include the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border conflict, and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The architecture is mainly a post-Soviet (1991–) construct.

Region	Qualities of regional security architectures
Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	Mixed cohesiveness. Two formalized regional military partnerships: The Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force and the Arab League's Joint Arab Force. Emergent conflicts constrain military cooperation in regional organizations. Examples of tensions include the Algeria-Morocco dyad in Arab Maghreb Union, the Arab League's differing approaches to the al-Assad regime in Syria during the Syrian civil war (2011–2024), and diplomatic strife between Arabian Gulf states and Qatar. The architecture is limited to sub-regional arrangements, generally divided between Arabian Gulf countries and the Maghreb. Mediterranean interregional engagement is an important feature of the architecture (e.g., Union for the Mediterranean; 5+5 Defence Initiative). There are no formalized multilateral arrangements for Israel-Arab security dialogue other than the Union for the Mediterranean (Israeli-Arab dialogue channels tend to be <i>ad hoc</i>). MENA has the oldest architecture of the four surveyed in this paper. Europe, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia's security architectures all underwent significant shifts after the Cold War.

Table 2-3. Describing regional security architectures.

The CIS is a typical case of a security arrangement becoming dysfunctional due to internal conflict. The CIS was formed in 1991, with Russia intending it to function as a successor to the dissolved federation of the Soviet Union. For Moscow, the purpose of the CIS was to maintain close policy coordination and cooperation amongst Soviet successor states as well as to perpetuate Russia's regional hegemonic power (Kubicek 2009). Specifically, Russia hoped that the CIS would help retain Russian influence in the military apparatuses of post-Soviet states. To that effect, the CIS established the Council of Ministers of Defense for military policy coordination and the Joint CIS Air Defense System for joint defence. The CIS also facilitates its membership-wide "Combat Commonwealth" military exercises to show force and enhance interoperability. Despite Russia's aspirations, policy coordination in the CIS withered shortly after its formation. Of the ten original signatories to the Joint CIS Air Defense System, only half remain active participants, with four countries fully withdrawing and Armenia broadly pulling back its engagement from the CIS. Of the remaining participants in the Joint CIS Air Defense System, Kyrgyzstan is probably the most involved – although Kyrgyzstan is one of the least militarily developed participants, with limited equipment to contribute (Jacob 2017; Putz 2023). The dysfunctionality of the CIS's military coordination is a result of Russia's own foreign policy vis-à-vis CIS participants. Russia

has invaded two CIS participants, Georgia (in 2008) and Ukraine (in 2014 and 2022).¹⁷ Moscow has violated the sovereignty of Moldova by pushing Transnistria's secession while maintaining a contingent of Russian forces in this region, which the Moldovan government strongly protests. Georgia expressed its intention to withdraw from the CIS in 2006; when Russian invaded South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008, Georgia then withdrew completely. Ukraine comprehensively withdrew its participation from CIS frameworks around 2018, although Kyiv's pullback from the CIS had been set in motion years earlier due to Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and the war in the Donbas. Moldova was already trending toward withdrawal from the CIS prior to Russia's full-scale 2022 invasion of Ukraine, but as this was the "final straw," Moldova completely suspended its CIS involvement afterwards (Popusoi 2023).

Apart from the Russia-Moldova dyad, the two dyads that contribute to the CIS's *cv* of 11.11 are Armenia-Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan. Both dyads have fought wars and skirmishes with each other. Armenia and Azerbaijan are historical rivals, having fought conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union, including the First Karabakh war (1992–1994), which cost the lives of as many as 30,000 Azeris and Armenians according to high estimates (BBC 2024). In more recent years, the states fought each other in the Four-Day War (1–5 April 2016) over Nagorno-Karabakh, inflicting several hundred total fatalities. Armenia and Azerbaijan then had sporadic low-intensity clashes in 2017, 2018, and 2019 around the "line of contact" in Nagorno-Karabakh. Clashes intensified in July 2020, and then two months later, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (27 September–10 November 2020) erupted, causing almost 10,000 combatant and civilian fatalities between these two CIS members. During this war, Azerbaijani forces also accidentally killed two Russian servicemen, leading to some strain in the Baku-Moscow bilateral relationship. Combatant and non-combatant casualties have persisted since the end of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, with an outbreak of hostilities causing hundreds of deaths in September 2022

¹⁷ Ukraine was formally party to CIS treaties and bodies, but Ukraine was not officially a formal member.

(International Crisis Group 2023).¹⁸ Under these circumstances, the CIS partnership became fragmented, weakening its ability to coordinate joint defence. At the time of writing, particular CIS states, such as Armenia, have pulled some of their military and political engagement in CIS frameworks, evoking Russian criticism (Ozat 2023). Central Asian CIS members are trending toward more bilateral cooperation on military drills, sidestepping the CIS. As evidence, five CIS members excluding Russia conducted joint military exercises in July 2024 called Birlestik-2024 (Agence France Presse 2024).

The Armenia-Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan dyads constrain not only the CIS but also, even more so, the CSTO (Azerbaijan is a former member of the CSTO). The CSTO was formed in 1992 and is considered “Russia’s answer to NATO.” The CSTO alliance has historically facilitated multi-level security and defence cooperation, ranging from technical cooperation on cyber threats, defence industrial cooperation, high-intensity military drills, to a treaty-based commitment to the joint defence of allies. However, the CSTO has, like the CIS, become a dysfunctional security arrangement due to internal conflict.

The CSTO is a Russia-centric alliance of Central Asian and Caucasus countries that for the most part do not trust Russian intentions. While several post-Soviet countries were eager to work in alliances and military partnerships with Russia at the outset of the CSTO, this engagement faded over the years. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a concern to several CSTO states, albeit not a deal-breaker for many in the military alliance. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, changed the dynamic with the Kremlin and several CSTO members. This was particularly true of Armenia and Kazakhstan, which were at one time considered reliable Russian allies since they station Russian military forces and equipment on their respective territories (Lanoszka 2022, 73-74). Astana rejected Moscow’s request for Kazakh forces to participate in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Armenia curtailed its security engagement with Russia after the 2022 invasion, and the Armenian prime minister strongly condemned the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Armenia’s CSTO participation is further complicated by Russia’s

¹⁸ The International Crisis Group (2023) has a granular dataset showing these casualties.

strong ties to Azerbaijan. When fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan restarted in 2022 after a short lull following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (27 September–10 November 2020), Armenia asked the CSTO Secretariat for assistance against a former CSTO member (Baku had withdrawn in 1999), and a fellow CIS member (both Armenia and Azerbaijan are CIS members). By way of Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty, Armenia had expected Russian military support during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (Collective Security Treaty Organisation 1992, art. 4; MacHaffie 2024, 327), despite the Armenian concern toward the high levels of Russian military assistance to Azerbaijan. Moscow directed the CSTO Secretariat not to support Armenia, because the Kremlin was unwilling to compromise its ties with Azerbaijan. This led to Armenian frustration when the Russian “peacekeepers” that Moscow sent to Nagorno-Karabakh did not provide the level of support Yerevan expected, specifically when it came to keeping the Lachin Corridor open (Gavin 2023). Yerevan’s disappointment strongly factored into the decision to cancel CSTO military exercises that were to be held in Armenia in 2023. Shortly thereafter, Armenian officials including the prime minister unequivocally declared that Yerevan would leave the CSTO (MacHaffie 2024, 328). Weitz (2018) sums up the strategic paradox of Armenia’s participation in the CSTO:

Some CSTO governments have closer ties with non-members than with their fellow allies. This complication has been most evident in how the CSTO governments have declined to side with their nominal ally, Armenia, against non-member Azerbaijan...Azerbaijan has better economic and diplomatic ties with several other CSTO members than Armenia (67).

Bilateral conflict between allied CSTO members weakens an already weak organization. Kyrgyz and Tajik officials have both requested the CSTO to intervene on their behalf against the other member during their border conflict (MacHaffie 2024, 329). Kyrgyzstan cancelled a planned CSTO joint exercise in October 2023 amidst heightened clashes with Tajikistani forces.

In summary, CSTO members suspect that Russia has irredentist ambitions in the post-Soviet space and do not trust Russia's "security guarantees." With several CSTO members also being mutual adversaries in violent conflict, Russia's "answer to NATO" is faltering. As previously noted, the CSTO's *cv* of 6.67 is the highest of any alliance.

Finally, the SCO is another obvious anomaly. The SCO's *cv* of 8.89 is significantly higher than most of the average conflict values for military partnerships (type 2). When $y=2$, the average value for $x=2$, meaning the SCO's *cv* is significantly higher than the average for its arrangement type. In fact, it has a higher *cv* than the average of any arrangement type, as the *cv* average for type 4 arrangements 8.48, and the average for all arrangements is 5.01.¹⁹ If the SCO was only a security dialogue, then it would be less puzzling that tension is endemic within the organization. However, the SCO is much more, as it involves conventional-style military exercises (i.e., "Peace Missions"), military interoperability, and declarations of foreign policy alignment amongst its members.

The SCO is a security partnership of several dyadic adversaries. The forces of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, founding full SCO members, were firing at each other *during* the SCO Samarkand summit on 15 September 2022, causing over a hundred fatalities in total in the two countries between 14 and 16 September. In the context of the Kashmir conflict, Indian and Pakistani security forces have fired at and inflicted casualties on each other every year since their simultaneous accession in 2017. A four-day war erupted between India and Pakistan in May 2025. Less than two weeks after India acceded to the SCO, a standoff between Chinese and Indian soldiers occurred at the border between the Tibet Autonomous Region and Ladakh territory; two years later, deadly clashes broke out that resulted in approximately twenty Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese soldiers killed.²⁰ As the data suggest, with a *cv* of 8.89, the SCO is an anomaly in the global data on security arrangements and conflict.

¹⁹ Rounded to the nearest hundredth. The averages for different arrangement type are as follows: type 4 has an average *cv* of 8.48; type 3=6.94; type 2=2; type 1=3.31. The total *cv* average for all security arrangements is 5.01.

²⁰ For granular casualty statistics, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), "Explorer," <https://acleddata.com/explorer/>.

The above passages provide preliminary analysis of how conflict affects the CSTO, CIS, and SCO. Beyond preliminary analysis, for further research, qualitative analyses should focus on how conflict practically affects these arrangements. Sometimes, analyses of these organizations deal with internal conflict only in passing, rather than worthy of deeper analysis. Ultimately, the fact that China- and Russia-led arrangements hold so much internal conflict is a significant finding. Their security arrangements are weak, often driven by their own decisions to fight their security partners.

Conclusion and contribution to the IR literature

This paper has sought to shed light on bilateral conflict in security arrangements. First, I created a typology of security arrangements. This typology accurately reflects the real world of security cooperation. I then developed a measure of the degree of conflict in security arrangements. The *cv* is valuable because it provides a tool for comparative analysis and helps researchers acquire deeper knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of different arrangements. At a higher level, the *cv* helps scholars gain knowledge about regional security architectures, and the ways that they differ. Crucially, the *cv* enables the identification of anomalous security arrangements, which are the alliances and military partnerships with high levels of conflict. These arrangements include the CIS, the CSTO, and the SCO. Overall, this paper is a contribution to the methodological study of international security and international organizations; it is also a starting point for deeper analysis on particular security arrangements.

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3. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation paradox: An arrangement of military partners and adversaries

Overview

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a puzzle for the field of international security and the study of international organizations. The SCO is a multilateral security partnership of states that engage in violent conflict with each other while developing interoperability. Five of the ten SCO members have engaged in kinetic conflict with another SCO member between 2020 and 2025. Why do states, some of which are violent rivals, cooperate in a security arrangement that facilitates interoperability and foreign policy alignment? I find that the answer pertains to the type of security the SCO aims to govern. To explain the SCO puzzle, I demonstrate that the SCO is held together by two mutual ends for its members: First, it is a regime-security partnership for the mainly authoritarian heads of state; and second, it is an anti-Western organization that contests a liberal rules-based international order. My thesis contrasts previous literature on the SCO that was agnostic about whether the organization is primarily anti-Western.

Introduction

The SCO is a puzzle for the field of international security and the study of international organizations. Five of the 10 SCO members have skirmished with or waged kinetic conflicts against another SCO member between 2020 and 2025, which is puzzling because the SCO is a security partnership organization that facilitates head-of-state level foreign policy alignment, joint military exercises that enhance interoperability, and information sharing. Conflicts that occurred in this relatively short time frame include the China-India Ladakh-Tibet skirmishes (2020), the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border war (2022), and the India-Pakistan Kashmir conflict and the four-day war (2025).

Under these conditions, one would expect the SCO to become completely irrelevant, if not disband. But the SCO expanded in the late 2010s and early 2020s, attracting further interest from existing as well as potential members. It has become the largest security organization in terms of aggregate state gross domestic product (GDP) and population; it also includes four nuclear powers. The SCO has gained international media traction, correlating with summits that have become more grandiose, which was on display in China's 2025 Tianjin SCO summit. The growing relevance of the SCO is puzzling especially because, logically, internal conflict should render an arrangement less relevant and functional; for example, internal conflicts in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have diminished the relevance and functionality of these organizations (MacHaffie 2024a, 329). To explain the "SCO puzzle," I conduct a qualitative analysis to understand why the SCO is attracting so much interest. Methodologically, I use many SCO primary source documents that hitherto have not received much academic scrutiny; most of these were accessed through the online SCO document database.

SCO members have generally shared two foreign policy motivations. The first motivation is personalistic authoritarian politics: the bind keeping the SCO together is a "marriage of convenience" between the heads of state of the SCO's participating authoritarian regimes. Thus, while the members wage conflict over territorial and irredentist issues, their fundamental interest in regime security operates as the glue for the organization. Second, the SCO is appealing to many of the regimes in the bloc – especially those in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Minsk – because it helps them advance their concerted agenda against liberal internationalism. This proposition contrasts some earlier analyses on the SCO that downplayed the organization's "anti-Western" agenda (Aris 2009b).¹ In the mid-2000s, there was reason to be skeptical that the SCO was committed to an anti-Western agenda, but in the time that has since

¹ Based on his extensive field research within the SCO region, Aris concludes that: "Although the SCO expresses common positions on international affairs often in opposition to the West, it is not an organisation orientated against the West or any other external nation state" (2009b, 478).

passed, the SCO's anti-Westernism has become apparent. The accessions of Iran (2023) and Belarus (2024) as full members add an undeniable anti-Western aspect to the organization.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I explain what the SCO is. Second, I explicate the various interstate conflicts within the SCO. Third, I argue that the bind holding the SCO together is the authoritarianism and anti-Western agendas held by most of its powerful members. I conclude the paper by discussing the implications of this research; for instance, I discuss whether the SCO is an effective tool for China and Russia to advance their political and security interests. Due to the degree of internal conflict, the findings of this paper indicate that internal conflict in the SCO will render the military-security aspects of the SCO less functional. The SCO is nothing like a Chinese-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – not necessarily because China purports to reject a “Cold War mentality” (Xi 2023; 2025), but because the internal conflicts within the organization preclude deeper military-security cooperation. This paper also has implications for democratic peace theory (Doyle 1986; Rousseau et al. 1996; Chan 1997). However, it specifically offers evidence for the monadic version of democratic peace theory (Kant 1795; Rummel 1995), because it finds that, beyond being aggressive toward democracies, authoritarian states can be aggressive toward their fellow security partners that share the same regime type.

What is the SCO?

To understand the SCO, one must start with China. Fundamentally, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) initiative to create a security organization stemmed from Beijing's “core interests”: Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. For Beijing, the SCO is a means to safeguard these core interests, specifically with regard to Xinjiang (Yuan 2022, 427–28; MacHaffie 2024b, 5). Beyond those interests – which the CCP views as strictly domestic issues – the SCO is significant in the international sphere as a mark of Beijing's pursuit to acquire “institutional leadership” (Tang 2019). The SCO was established in 2001, at a moment in Chinese foreign policy when, under Jiang Zemin, China was beginning to reassert

politically itself on the international stage, building on the political momentum and economic dynamism that Deng Xiaoping's reforms had initially generated. Arguably, the establishment of the SCO marked a juncture in China's approach to multilateralism. The organization's establishment showed that Beijing aspired not only to be a major player in international governance, but also to be a catalyst and shaper of it. At the 2025 SCO summit in Tianjin, when Xi's keynote presented the Global Governance Initiative, it reflected a culmination of two decades of China's aims to lead multilateralism in virtually all domains, ranging from security, economy, governance, and beyond.

China leads the SCO under the banner of the "Shanghai Spirit," which is a collection of norms that Beijing attributes as (ostensibly) important to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its diplomacy. Until it conspicuously removed the text from its website, the official SCO information webpage listed the norms of the Shanghai Spirit as:

mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diversity of civilizations and pursuit of common development; and externally, it upholds non-alignment, non-targeting at other countries or regions and the principle of openness (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2017).

The SCO emerged out of the "Shanghai Five" confidence building arrangement, which included China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. The Shanghai Five set the precedent for the SCO's formal establishment with the signing of earlier confidence-building initiatives on border security between the relevant parties. These initiatives include the April 1996 Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Field in the Border Area and the subsequent Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in the Border Area, which was signed the following year (Yuan 2010, 860). The first of these agreements committed the parties to be transparent (i.e., disclose information) with counterpart signatories on their military activities on the borders with other parties. The second agreement essentially called for force reductions. Graduating from an informal confidence-building measure to a formal

arrangement, the Shanghai Five formally institutionalized the SCO as a security organization on 15 June 2001.

The founding members of the SCO were the Shanghai Five plus Uzbekistan (initially, the three Central Asian participants had reservations about granting Tashkent full partnership status since Uzbekistan was not a Shanghai Five state, but they were eventually convinced to allow Tashkent to join [Song 2014, 98]).² The SCO has three different categories of members: Members, Dialogue Partners, and Observers. Unlike most other organizations, Dialogue Partners can and do function as chairs of organizational forums and summits. To illustrate, in 2017 Türkiye chaired the SCO Energy Club, which is one of the SCO's several consultative bodies. The rights of Dialogue Partners are defined in the Regulations on the Status of Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2008).

The primary domain of cooperation for the SCO is security. The organization has three permanent bodies: the Secretariat in Beijing; the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent; and the SCO Business Council Secretariat in Moscow (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2024). Of the three, RATS is the most developed as it facilitates actual coordination between SCO members; analysts state that RATS helps to neutralize threats by way of information sharing and data collection on suspected or known terrorists (Aris 2009b, 469–71; Seiwert 2025, 40).³ Selection of the Secretary General is rotational based on country, but its actions are largely swayed by Beijing's influence (rather than Moscow's influence). The highest organ of the SCO is the Council of Heads of State – the “supreme SCO body,” according to the organization's Charter (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2002). The Council of Heads of State “shall determine priorities and define major areas of activities of the Organization.” Beneath the supreme body is the Council of Heads of Government (usually prime ministerial level, and it holds the purse strings of the organization, governing the budget); beneath that is the Council of Foreign

² Turkmenistan's political insularity has kept it away from the SCO.

³ It will be explained later in this paper that the SCO Business Council is mostly a talk shop and lacks substance.

Ministers; and beneath that are meetings of Heads of Ministries and Agencies (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2022b). The Council of National Coordinators, as its name suggests, plays a bureaucratic role in coordinating the functions of the SCO's permanent bodies as well as the various layers of meetings. The SCO's budget is calculated based on a country's individual wealth; therefore, China and Russia provide most of the financing, and Kazakhstan provides more funding than its less-developed Central Asian counterparts.

SCO members signed the organization's Charter on 7 June 2002 (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2002). The Charter asserts that the principal focus of the organization will be security cooperation, although it declares that the relevant parties will strive "for further enhancement of comprehensive cooperation." The Charter focuses security cooperation on countering and combatting religious extremism, separatism, and terrorism, which together are referred to by the SCO and its members as the "three evils." The Charter further commits to "the strengthening of peace and ensuring of security and stability in the region," and the first area of cooperation under Article 3 is the "maintenance of peace and enhancing security and confidence in the region; [and the] search of common positions on foreign policy issues of mutual interest." Article 3 defines various areas of cooperation for the signatories including countering the "three evils," disarmament and arms control, developing energy infrastructure, cultural engagement, and more (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2002).

Evidently, at its founding in 2001, SCO members intended for the main domain of cooperation to be technical cooperation on growing non-traditional security challenges in Central Asia, including terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. However, by the late 2000s, the SCO's security cooperation had developed into a conventional military partnership that involved large-scale joint conventional land, sea, and air military exercises, with SCO participants using capabilities such as tanks, air power, and heavy artillery to drill. These conventional-style military drills transpired under the SCO's framework of the "Peace Missions." As de Haas (2016) outlines, SCO Peace Missions can include as many as 10,000 troops from participating SCO militaries (381–88). The Peace Missions are distinct from other kinds of SCO interoperability exercises and security cooperation that are lower in scale (de Haas

2016, 388). In SCO joint military exercises, participant militaries gain experience for conventional warfare and logistical knowledge for military campaigns, for instance:

Prior to the PLA [People's Liberation Army] deployment to Tajikistan for a multilateral SCO exercise in 2012, China and Kyrgyzstan consulted on arrangements allowing the PLA to transit to the exercise through Kyrgyzstan by road – the first time the PLA had travelled to an exercise abroad by this mode of transport at such a distance, and the first time it had transited a third country while en route to an exercise (Southerland et al. 2020, 6).

Although some analysts assert that “the SCO has refrained from defense activities” (Blank 2013, 40), this is not the case, as the SCO indeed facilitates conventional military cooperation. A likely Chinese and Russian intent of these military exercises is to deter U.S. security cooperation with Central Asian partners (Hussain 2011, 263).

Membership in the SCO has nearly doubled since its formation in 2001. At the time of writing, the most recent accessions to full membership include Belarus (2024), Iran (2023), India (2017), and Pakistan (2017). The change of complexion in the SCO's membership since 2017 has effectively diluted the influence of Central Asian states as well as the SCO's focus on governing pressing non-traditional security challenges that face the region. These developments raise questions about China's strategic calculus with regard to the organization. They also raise an interesting question about how China's calculus has varied between the eras of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping.

The extant literature on the SCO

The scholarly discourse surrounding the SCO generally focuses on the intent of the states leading the organization, especially China. Some analysts argue that the organization is intended as an instrument to contest the West (Soong 2025), in addition to being an authoritarian club that seeks to reinforce anti-

liberal norms of governance (Ambrosio 2008; Costa Buranelli 2020). Others downplayed the anti-Western orientation of the SCO (Aris 2009b): they emphasize that the organization is a comprehensive regionalist organization like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), since members are intent on solving problems internally within their bloc (Aris 2009a; Blank 2013). The varying foreign policy intentions that drive the decision to participate in the SCO is an ongoing theme of research and analysis (Facon 2013; de Haas 2017), and this subject has arguably become more interesting with the expansion of the SCO's membership, although most would agree with Song that there is no one unified interest within the SCO because its various members have divergent interests (2014, 86–87). Many researchers study the SCO in the context of it being China's attempt to re-establish its place in world politics and international governance (Jia 2007; Song 2014; Seiwert 2024, 2025); in that light, scholars study the SCO to better understand how China seeks to play a leadership role via the organization (Tang 2019). Since its conception, there have been widely varying assessments about the effectiveness of the organization in terms of functionality: Does the organization provide actual value? Is it a talk shop? Or something in between?

New developments in the SCO warrant new scholarship. Much of the extant scholarship on the SCO was conducted during the Jiang and Hu eras of China, meaning the changes to the SCO's institutional direction have not been adequately analyzed. In other words, many assumptions about the SCO are formulated on old empirics. To illustrate: A well-cited 2009 article explicitly states that accepting India, Pakistan, and Iran would “undermine the development of low-level collaboration between its existing members and affect the current balance within the organisation,” and notes that it is most likely that the SCO's new full members will be Turkmenistan and Mongolia (Aris 2009b, 479). Of course, the former three are now full members and the latter remain sideline participants, suggesting that old assumptions about the SCO as primarily about Central Asian regionalism are obsolete.⁴ In a 2014

⁴ Aris concludes his paper by postulating: “Alternatively, the inclusion of other large powers would suggest that the SCO will limit its spheres of operation to political, sub-state security and large-scale economic programmes. This will not foster the deep cooperation that a narrower membership may entail, and the shape of the organisation would

article, Song wrote that “the notion that, in time, Russia will become China’s ‘junior partner’ seems far-fetched at the moment” (2014, 90); however, Russia became China’s “junior partner” after the former’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Shifting internal power dynamics in the SCO between China and Russia are now a pertinent research focus. These dated articles were insightful in the context in which they were written, but new variables call for re-examinations of the SCO.

The effort to scrutinize the internal rivalries within the SCO is nascent. The extant literature too often only mentions these rivalries in passing. Where scrutiny exists, it usually regards incongruent Sino-Russian interests (Blank 2013, 44–47). With that said, MacHaffie’s (2024b) monograph is dedicated to how the SCO mitigates conflict escalation and builds trust among rivals. MacHaffie’s premise is that, counterfactually, without the SCO more conflict would occur amongst the relevant states. Through summitry and regular interactions, MacHaffie argues, the SCO has positively facilitated the “institutionalization of trust” among the parties (2024b, 63), thereby cooling tensions and capping the extent of conflict among the organization’s members. A couple of Seiwert’s (2025) interviewees who are experts from the SCO’s region likewise claimed that without the SCO, conflict would erupt between Central Asian states (42). But Seiwert (2025) finds that that there is no evidence “that suggests that the organization intends to become a – let alone the primary – platform for resolving” regional security crises in the organization’s region. Moreover, MacHaffie’s (2024b) premise that “rivalries have not escalated to outright conflict” among SCO members is wrong (42). Although MacHaffie likely means outright wars, it ought to be underscored that numerous conflicts have broken out between SCO members, including limited wars, border wars, border clashes, and irredentist conflicts.⁵ For an organization that was born out of the efforts to peacefully resolve border disputes, border conflict is endemic. Bilateral conflicts amongst SCO members are the topic of the next section.

take on a more diplomatic appearance. As a result of the high degree of political dynamics that this would involve, finding a balance for practical cooperation would be challenging and might lead to the SCO becoming more like a regular summit meeting than a genuine regional organisation” (2009b, 480).

⁵ In fairness to MacHaffie (2024b) and those that wrote before me, I am writing with the benefit of hindsight.

Bilateral conflict in the SCO: What does it mean for the organization?

As highlighted at the outset of this paper, the SCO is a security organization of adversaries. The degree of contentiousness in the organization renders it an anomaly among its counterpart security organizations. By the count below, five of the SCO's ten members engaged in conflict with another SCO participant from 2020 to 2025. In that time frame, Indian forces have skirmished with two different SCO members concurrently, i.e., China and Pakistan. The deadly clash in Ladakh/Tibet over the Line of Actual Control between Chinese and Indian forces occurred a mere three years after New Delhi's accession, and tensions had been building considerably in the year leading up to the clash. There is no example more reflective of the internal conflict in the SCO than the fact that the forces of founding full SCO members Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan engaged in kinetic military conflict while the SCO summit was being held on 15 September 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Between 14 and 16 September, the conflict amassed over 100 fatalities between the two countries. The images of the Kyrgyz president Sadyr Japarov and Tajik president Emomali Rahmon standing on a political stage as security partners while their militaries were clashing was a salient juxtaposition.

Table 4-1 lists only kinetic conflicts, so it underrepresents the actual degree of tensions within the organization. Sino-Russian competition, Kazakh-Uzbek rivalry, and Tajik-Uzbek ethnic tensions all elevate an already contentious organization. Notably, the time frame of 2020–2025 does not include the deadly violence that occurred between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the early 2010s. Although most of the violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks involved the general populace – most viciously in 2010 in the contested Fergana Valley city of Osh and its surrounding region – according to Russian media, in July 2013 at least one Uzbek border guard was killed in a confrontation with Kyrgyzstan border security personnel (*Moscow Times* 2013). In 2016, Kyrgyz and Uzbek forces had a military standoff again in the Fergana Valley, and although it de-escalated without conflict, the tensions led Kyrgyz president Almazbek Atambayev to say that he may not attend the SCO summit (he ended up going [Putz 2016]). The severe ethnic tensions that underlay the Kyrgyz-Uzbek rivalry compound other internal conflict in the

Participant	Participant status	Year gained status	Conflict with other SCO participants
Belarus	Member	2024	
China	Founder	2001	<i>India</i> : Ladakh/Tibet border skirmishes (2017, 2020, 2021)
India	Member	2017	<i>China</i> : Ladakh/Tibet border skirmishes (2017, 2020, 2021) <i>Pakistan</i> : Four-day conflict (2025); Kashmir conflict (constant)
Iran	Member	2023	
Kazakhstan	Member	2001	
Kyrgyzstan	Member	2001	<i>Tajikistan</i> : border clashes (2021); border war (2022)
Pakistan	Member	2017	<i>India</i> : Four-day conflict in 2025; Kashmir conflict (constant)
Russia	Member	2001	
Tajikistan	Member	2001	<i>Kyrgyzstan</i> : border clashes (2021); border war (2022)
Uzbekistan	Member	2001	

Table 4-1. Conflicts between SCO members.

SCO, even if longtime Uzbek leader Islam Karimov was considered by some to have managed these tensions with a rather measured and de-escalatory political temperament (MacHaffie 2024b, 114).⁶

Although it is normal for a security partnership's members to have diverging interests, it is anomalous for half of a partnership's members to have waged conflict with one another in a five-year span. In that context, there is no other security partnership like the SCO. In September 2021, an SCO-facilitated military exercise in Russia consisted of Chinese and Indian forces drilling with each other one year after different elements of their armies clashed in the Himalayas; Indian and Pakistani forces drilling with each other while other elements of their security forces fought in Kashmir; and Kyrgyz and Tajik forces drilling beside each other days after fighting a kinetic border war. SCO drills – including the aforementioned 2021 drill – are not limited to search and rescue exercises, nor are they about confidence building. If they were, then this situation would be less of a puzzle. Rather, they are about developing interoperability for joint combat (see the PRC's National Defense readout of this drill [China Military Online 2021]).

⁶ Of note, through the initiative of Central Asians, the SCO hosted the First Meeting of the Fergana Peace Forum to address some of the conditions that have exacerbated Kyrgyz-Uzbek violence (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2025). This perhaps reflects the Central Asian view of the SCO as a suitable mechanism for confidence building.

The addition of new members to the SCO in the past decade have raised questions about what exactly Beijing is trying to achieve with the organization. Because of India's and Pakistan's rivalry, their accession in 2017 has attracted scrutiny. India and Pakistan are ongoing combatants over irredentist territorial disputes, so it is salient that these countries simultaneously joined a regional security partnership that is specifically aimed at countering separatism. India and Pakistan each accuse each other of separatism and terrorism in Kashmir; at a 2023 SCO foreign ministers' meeting in Goa, India, the Pakistani foreign minister directed this insinuation at India and its foreign minister in attendance (the Indian foreign minister reportedly called the Pakistani foreign minister the "spokesperson of a terrorism industry" [Adil 2023]). At the 2025 SCO defence ministers' meeting in Qingdao, China, India did not sign the joint statement because, in the words of the Indian defence minister, "some countries use cross-border terrorism as an instrument of policy and provide shelter to terrorists. There should be no place for such double standards. SCO should not hesitate to criticize such nations" (Mollan 2025; Jamal 2025). Overall, the SCO has not functioned as a confidence builder for the dyad.

Pakistani participation in the SCO has put a ceiling on India's involvement, and vice versa. It is telling that the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation has become functionally compromised by the India-Pakistan dyad (Jacob 2024), leading one to wonder how this pair will constrain the SCO. Of note, ASEAN faced the same dilemma vis-à-vis India and Pakistan when it came to deliberations over admitting the pair simultaneously as ASEAN Dialogue Partners:

Singapore has tried previously at the SOM [ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting] level to get India admitted [as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner] but without success. Out of a sense of Islamic solidarity, Indonesia and Malaysia felt that Pakistan should also be admitted as a full dialogue partner. The other ASEAN countries balked at the idea of admitting India and Pakistan at the same time, fearing that their deep rivalry would be carried into ASEAN meetings and disrupt them (Mahbubani and Sng 2017, 121).

According to Mahbubani and Sng's account (2017), following intra-ASEAN negotiations led by Singapore, ASEAN decided it would admit only India as a Dialogue Partner and leave Pakistan out (121); thus, in 1995, India became a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. The inclusion of India and Pakistan to the SCO – and their simultaneous accessions – is therefore an aberration. Because of India's rivalry with Pakistan (and China), some analysts have questioned New Delhi's future commitment to the SCO, even if India is unlikely to withdraw completely (Sajjanhar 2022, 190; Chellaney 2024). When it was India's turn to host the SCO summit in July 2023, New Delhi decided to organize a single-day virtual meeting rather than the usual two-day in-person meeting. The "theatre" of Heads of State SCO gatherings is arguably the salient aspect of these summits (more so than any substantial cooperation initiatives), so the decision to hold the meeting virtually makes for an underwhelming summit. Moreover, Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to skip the 2024 summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. In 2025, Modi attended the summit in Tainjin, China, much to the interest of international media.

In short, new additions to the SCO, which require the sponsorship of China and Russia, raise questions about the SCO's fundamental purpose. The second most recent full-member accession to the SCO, Iran, has an atrocious record of state-sponsored terrorism (Byman 2008; Donovan et al., 2023; Nakhoul and Hafezi 2024). What do the members want from the SCO? And what does China, which leads the organization, hope to gain from the organization?

What rationale do states have for committing to the SCO?

Since the SCO has so much internal conflict, why are an increasing number of states interested in joining? Unlike other internally contested security organizations such as the CIS and the CSTO – wherein Russia has invaded its so-called allies and security partners, causing them to withdraw – the SCO is attracting new international partners rather than losing members. In addition to the full new memberships of Belarus and Iran, between 2022 and 2025 the SCO gained a roster of nine new dialogue partners.

The SCO as a comprehensive, economic partnership

How can the “membership puzzle” be explained? One hypothesis is that the SCO is as much of a socio-economic partnership as it is a security partnership. One could argue that the organization is concentrated on economic development, financial integration, and business and educational exchanges, which are often the focuses of Chinese state media and Xi’s (2025) speeches at the SCO. This hypothesis is ostensibly a good explanation because even if two states conflict with each other, this does not mean that they do not want to trade. Underdeveloped Central Asian states certainly have an interest in attracting foreign direct investment for infrastructure projects and building new and deepened energy partnerships. The SCO’s Energy Club is relevant for this line of effort (Bailes et al. 2007, 16–17). Access to Central Asian oil and gas markets is strategically crucial for China, partly because China can import this oil and gas via land routes in Central Asia, thereby diversifying from the waterways of East and Southeast Asia. New Delhi certainly seeks to maintain economic and cultural influence in Central Asia and does not want to cede influence in this region to China and Pakistan. Although economic cooperation can partly explain contradictions in the SCO’s membership, a closer look at the SCO reveals that this explanation still does not explain the willingness of rivals to participate in the SCO. The SCO is in fact highly constrained on economic cooperation, offering little added value.

One notable SCO added economic value for the organization’s members is the promotion of mining projects across member countries. Unsurprisingly, Chinese mining corporations are usually the primary beneficiaries. For illustration, the China-SCO Geosciences Cooperation Research Center, founded in 2014, enables powerful Chinese mining enterprises to identify and develop mining projects in SCO countries. According to a report authored by the China Geological Survey, a Chinese state-owned research organization, the China-SCO Geosciences Cooperation Research Center has had a tangible effect on producing joint-development mining projects in SCO countries (Tang et al. 2024, 55). Tellingly, this primary source is one of the few SCO-affiliated organizations that publishes data and details related to activities of internal SCO institutions. Most SCO documents are light on detail and the documents tend to

be generic descriptions of consultative meetings between various officials from SCO countries. This vagueness reflects a lack of substantive cooperation facilitated by the organization's permanent bodies.

The SCO's Business Council has convened the business communities of member states. But, again, it is difficult to identify tangible economic outputs that it has produced. Likewise, the SCO Energy Club is only an advisory body. Tellingly, the 2022 Energy Security statement by the Council of Heads of State of the SCO is also light on substance when it comes to specific measures undertaken by the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2022a), which is likely due to diverging interests in energy cooperation amongst the SCO's members. Energy trade within SCO member states has increased in the aggregate over the past decade, but more research is needed to identify the extent to which the SCO Energy Club is a catalyst for, or incidental to, this cooperation. Evidence strongly points to the latter.

Problematically, analysts writing on the SCO often commit an inferential error by in that they point to aggregate statistics showing increased trade among SCO members and take this to mean that the SCO is significantly influencing or causing this trade. Chinese government sources tend to accentuate the growing economic trade between SCO members.⁷ Whether the SCO has much to do with these trade augmentations is highly suspect. In fact, the SCO is very low on the list of factors that catalyze this cooperation. One analyst points out that the SCO Interbank Consortium includes inter-bank cooperation among SCO members, such as Russia's VEB.RF and India's Infrastructure Finance Company, but the analyst rightly qualifies this by noting that "it is the Chinese Development Bank (CDB) that dominates, offering a vast majority of its preferential loans. This is all done to service China's global ambitions, like the Belt and Road Initiative" (Piechowski 2024). Official Chinese sources claim that the CDB issued

⁷ For an example of a Chinese source highlighting aggregate trade: "China's trade with other Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states stood at around 512.4 billion U.S. dollars in 2024, up 2.7 percent year on year, a commerce official said Wednesday. Last year, China imported nearly 90 billion U.S. dollars worth of crude oil, natural gas and coal from other SCO members, along with 13.66 billion dollars worth of agricultural products, Ling Ji, vice minister of commerce, said at a press conference. Energy imports from other SCO members accounted for about one-fifth of China's total imports in 2024, according to Ling. 'The investment and industrial cooperation between China and other SCO member states has made steady progress in recent years,' Zhang Li, another official with the Ministry of Commerce, said. In recent years, Chinese enterprises have set up more than 3,000 companies in other member states, creating over 200,000 jobs on average each year, Zhang added" (Xinhua 2025).

US\$14.6 billion in loans to SCO-affiliated banks by the end of August 2022 – one of the largest available monetary figures when it comes to financing within the SCO (Xinhuanet 2022). Efforts to establish an SCO Development Bank and Development Fund, which has been a goal consistently expressed at SCO summits for many years, have not brought about results (Liu 2022). The SCO has been a stage for proposing ambitious de-dollarization plans, and the internationally sanctioned Iranian delegations are bullish on this specific goal. But tangible SCO mechanisms for de-dollarization have also not materialized (Bhaya 2022). Extant research suggests that an SCO monetary union is unfeasible due to drastic asymmetries in members states' responses to domestic and external financial shocks, such as interest rate changes (Khezri et al. 2019, 65–79). There is a limit to financial integration within the SCO, considering the stark macro-economic differences among SCO members. The SCO is composed of low-developed and high-developed countries as well as centralized and de-centralized economies. Logically, Beijing would not want its currency tied to lesser developed, more volatile economies that are vulnerable to international sanctions (namely, Iran).

In terms of economic cooperation, the SCO is limited to convening stakeholders across SCO countries, such as banks and industry leaders. One specific example is the Shanghe Business Connect, an e-commerce and fintech conference that gathers various stakeholders from SCO countries (Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat 2021). SCO bodies do not have policy mechanisms and the required financial resources to govern economic policy technocratically. For instance, SCO documents affirm an aspiration for financial integration but the organization itself does not have the capability to implement this integration. To date, the SCO has been primarily a diplomatic stage for announcing economic cooperation rather than a catalyst. China in particular employs the SCO to announce its large sums of loans to Central Asia (in 2019, Kyrgyzstan ranked fifth and Tajikistan twentieth globally in terms of external debt to China as a share of GDP [Horn et al. 2019, 14]). In 2009, as the world was recovering from the global financial crisis, China announced \$10 billion in concessional loans to Central Asian SCO member states (Wee 2012; Blank 2013, 42). China uses the SCO to amplify its economic aid to Central Asia, which occurred even before Xi branded the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For Xi-era China, the

SCO complements the BRI, but the SCO does not catalyze economic development efforts, apart from a few mining projects. Chinese loans announced at the SCO are primarily implemented through BRI projects financed by Chinese banks such as the CDB. In fact, a 2024 Chinese propaganda publication promoted by a Chinese Communist Party commission states that the SCO is “naturally connected” to the BRI; the publication implies the BRI as being the “key driver” for development cooperation, not the SCO (Xinhua 2024). Financial aid announced by China at SCO events should not be interpreted as SCO-specific financing; rather, this aid is a by-product of BRI initiatives.

Many SCO countries have strong interests in expanding economic ties with each other, but the relevant question is: What added value does the SCO specifically bring in facilitating economic cooperation (e.g., foreign direct investment) among participants? Does SCO participation significantly attract Chinese investment capital? Would this investment not transpire anyway, particularly under the BRI? If so, it is curious why SCO member states would want the organization to institutionally overlap already functioning multilateral economic cooperation arrangements (Hofmann 2011). Most SCO member states and dialogue partners are already participants of one or more of BRICS+, the Eurasian Economic Union (and the Eurasian Economic Community that preceded it), and BRI forums and projects. All these arrangements are directed toward economic purposes. Importantly, these institutions are less internally contentious.

A notable economic incentive for SCO members, Dialogue Partners, and prospective participants is that the SCO provides a forum for sanctions evasion. The United States imposes sanctions on state entities of four of the ten SCO full member states — five, if Tajikistan is included (U.S. Department of State 2023).⁸ The SCO’s emphasis on inter-bank associations and energy trade indicates the goal of evading sanctions. Joint declarations denounce sanctions; this was the case with the 2023 New Delhi summit, which stated: “unilateral application of economic sanctions other than those approved by the UN

⁸ Washington designated Tajikistan a “‘Country of Particular Concern’ under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom” (U.S. Department of State 2023).

Security Council are incompatible with the principles of international law and have a negative impact on the third countries and international economic relations” (Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2023a).

Overall, the SCO’s economic cooperation is highly limited, meaning that the SCO is not attracting new members that seek to extract economic value in SCO participation. The SCO has always been primarily a security organization.

The SCO as a political-security partnership

If the SCO is a partnership of adversaries, how can its relevance and expanding membership be explained? The record from 2017 (a significant year for SCO expansion) onwards shows that the most plausible hypothesis to explain the SCO’s “membership puzzle” is that the organization offers political security to the heads of states of SCO countries. Although some scholars argue that the “the SCO is not primarily a security organization” (Blank 2013, 40), this is inaccurate.⁹ The organization may not be about collective defence, but it certainly governs a kind of security – regime security. The SCO Council of Heads of State is the main organizational instrument toward that end. Although several of the SCO’s member states’ military apparatuses are adversaries, the heads of state often have a regime-type commonality (this is not true of all the SCO members, but most). The next sections in this paper analyze how the SCO has primarily become a political-security organization for its members. Since the early years of the organization’s establishment, analysts have floated the argument that the SCO is a political partnership based on regime security (Bailes et al. 2007, 9; Ambrosio 2008); it is time to re-examine this scholarly discourse.

⁹ Blank (2013) concurs that the SCO is not a “serious” economic organization. He argues that the SCO is mainly “a diplomatic forum where Russia and China can regulate their relations in Central Asia and where Central Asian leaders can individually and collectively make their voices heard or, if necessary, engage in mediation on current disputes” (2013, 41). With that said, Blank does state that “Russia and China provide both diplomatic support and ideological cover for local regimes, allowing them to uphold the status quo with some sense that key players will back them up” (2013, 41–42).

Russia's interest in developing the SCO at its early stages was largely driven by regime-security interests. In the early 2000s, Russia was not fully invested in developing the SCO, because Moscow favoured its own institutions, the CSTO and the CIS, which serve as vehicles for Russian influence. Russia did not want to cede influence in Central Asia to China by enabling the SCO's trajectory into a more powerful and robust institution. Russia's willingness to work with China to bolster the SCO elevated sharply as Moscow's fear grew of Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004–2005), Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution (2005), and the Andijan massacre (2005) (Yuan 2010, 863).¹⁰ There is a prevailing view among several SCO governments that the United States was behind or "intervened" in these events (Seiwert 2025, 101–02). The decisive support from China, Russia, and the SCO Secretary General for the regimes in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan amidst these controversies showed that the SCO bloc would offer insulation from international criticism (Ambrosio 2008, 1332). Russian president Vladimir Putin has stated his belief outright that the SCO's role in security cooperation is "to give moral and political support to its members, and facilitate exchange of information" (cited in Facon [2013, 474]).

SCO initiatives since 2017 demonstrate that the SCO has prioritized political-security cooperation. China organized the first SCO political parties' forum that was held in 2018 in Shenzhen (similarly, the SCO has facilitated a Meeting of the Chairs of Supreme Courts of the SCO Member States since the mid-2000s). Political party interaction became further institutionalized when, in 2020, the SCO implemented the SCO+ forum to facilitate party-party engagement, with Putin's United Russia as the first forum leader. It is telling that one of Xi Jinping's first stated Chinese proposals to the 2024 SCO summit in Kazakhstan included holding the SCO Political Parties Forum; in contrast, "security cooperation mechanisms" and "strengthen intelligence sharing and conduct joint operations" were subsumed under the second set of Xi's proposals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2024). Under the first set of proposals in his 2023 address, Xi highlighted rejecting "the instigation of 'color revolutions' by any country under whatever pretext"; his second set of proposals was subsumed under the

¹⁰ It is worth noting that after the Tulip Revolution, Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev fled to Russia.

framing of maintaining “regional peace and safeguard[ing] common security” (Xi 2023). These statements indicate to some degree Beijing’s priorities for the SCO.

The SCO is a quintessential case of “authoritarian regionalism” – a term coined by Libman and Obydenkova (2018). The authors explain that, in conventional understandings of regionalism, scholars have typically focused on democratic countries who have had success in “opening up borders for international trade and movement of capital” and have established “credible commitments to uphold cooperation” (Libman and Obydenkova 2018, 152). Authoritarian regionalism, however, is distinct from the regionalism associated with democratic countries:

When it comes to authoritarian regionalism, these arguments may be missing the point:

This phenomenon entails a different type of regional organization, with different implications for world politics. Regional organizations created by powerful authoritarian states frequently pursue different goals than do their democratic counterparts. To achieve those goals, they may use tools such as *redistributing resources* and *providing legitimacy* to smaller and economically weaker autocracies. By so doing, they help to insulate these weaker members from domestic turmoil or discontent, as well as from the potentially threatening influence of international democratic actors (Libman and Obydenkova 2018, 152).

If liberal internationalism makes the “world safe for democracy” (Ikenberry 2020) – to quote Woodrow Wilson (1917) – the SCO does the reverse by employing multilateralism to make the world safer for authoritarians.

Ambrosio’s 2008 article, which is one of the most-cited articles on the SCO, explains how China through the SCO aims to instill “a new set of values and norms governing the future development of Central Asia” (1322). He argues that “the SCO represents an additional strategy of authoritarian resistance to regional and global democratic trends” (1341). Likewise, Costa Buranelli (2020) has pointed

out how the SCO in effect legitimizes a regional norm of authoritarianism in Central Asia – for example, by way of the SCO’s “election monitoring” mechanisms (1005–16).¹¹ Since the SCO’s establishment in 2001, questions have been raised over the extent to which the organization functions as a regime-security bloc for authoritarians, or as an anti-Western instrument used by China (Bailes et al. 2007, 9; Aris 2009b, 458). With the advantage of over 20 years’ hindsight, it is clear that the SCO is at its core an authoritarian organization.

The proposition can be demonstrated empirically. When *The Economist*’s Democracy Index measure of freedom is employed as a lens of analysis, it indicates the SCO’s affinity to certain regime types. SCO member states score 2.27 points lower than the average freedom score globally. However, it must be highlighted that the scores of Central Asian states are lower than global averages, creating biases in assessments of the aggregate SCO scores. Because different regions have varying averages, it is necessary to control for regional variables. For instance, three Southeast Asian countries are participants in the SCO at the time of writing: Cambodia, added to Dialogue Partner in 2015; Myanmar, acceded in 2023; and Laos, acceded in 2025. The SCO added the junta’s State Administration Council (SAC) to its roster of Dialogue Partners, not a semi-civilian Burmese government (led by the National League for Democracy). It is telling that the SCO added the Myanmar junta to the SCO at a time when most international organizations were suspending it. Myanmar is the second most unfree country in the world, behind Afghanistan, with a score of 0.85/10 in 2023. According to *The Economist*’s Democracy Index 2023, the most unfree (Myanmar), second most unfree (Laos) and fourth most unfree (Cambodia) Southeast Asian countries are Dialogue Partners with the SCO, showing a clear correlation between

¹¹ For more on the SCO’s “election monitoring,” see Seiwert (2025, 110): “One way in which the SCO as an organization has become involved in Kyrgyzstan has been by sending election observation missions. According to former SCO Secretary-General Alimov, by 2018, around 50 election observation missions had been organized by the SCO to monitor referenda and parliamentary and presidential elections in the region. These missions allegedly work under the ‘SCO Regulations on the SCO Observer Mission at Presidential and/or Parliamentary Elections and Referendums’, which the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers signed in 2006” (TASS 2018). Seiwert (2025) notes that by deploying election monitoring personnel, “the SCO presents itself as a regional organization on equal footing with organizations of the liberal international society such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe...[The] standards applied by the SCO election observation missions to declare elections democratic and free are offered as legitimate alternatives to the Western interpretations of these events” (111).

Southeast Asia’s authoritarianism and SCO participation (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024). Figure 3-1 shows how SCO participants compare to the global scores of *The Economist’s* Democracy Index.¹²

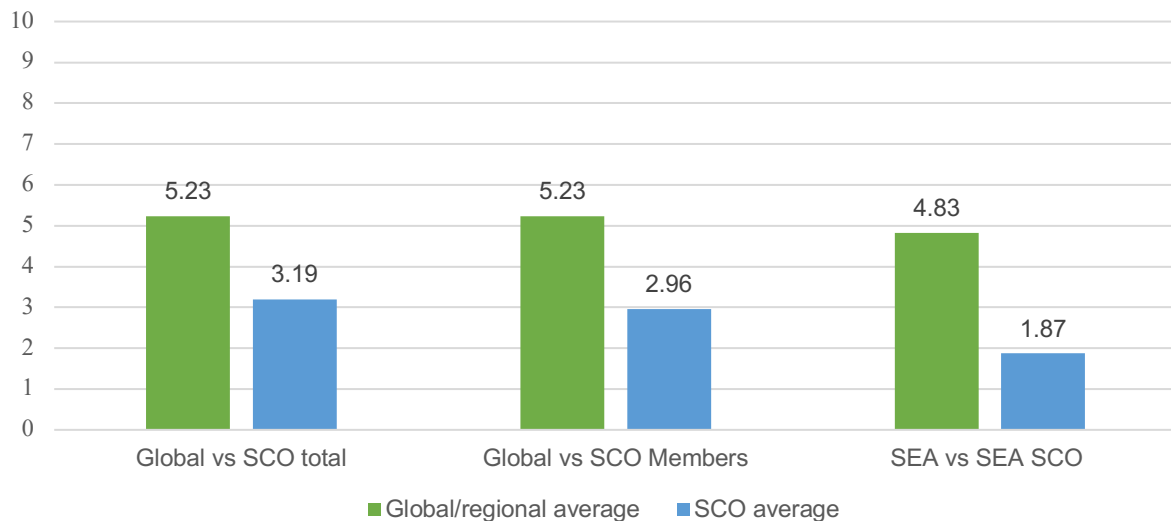


Figure 3-1. SCO participation and democracy scores. “SCO total” denotes SCO Members as well as Dialogue Partners and Observers; “SEA” denotes Southeast Asia.

Figure 3-1 demonstrates that, when regional averages are considered, SCO participants still score significantly lower than their regional counterparts in *The Economist’s* metric of freedom. The data bolster the claim that the SCO is of interest to specific regime types, even when controlling for regional differences. As with other Dialogue Partners, the SCO offered its election monitors to Cambodia (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2023b); SCO election monitors were a way for Phnom Penh to enhance the perceived legitimacy of its 2018 election – an election that Freedom House denounced for its lack of democratic integrity (Freedom House 2018).

Iran’s accession as a full member in 2023 leaves little doubt about the SCO’s direction. Undoubtedly, Tehran used its accession as a lever to try to push back against international isolation and sanctions imposed by affluent democratic states. China had previously denied Iranian accession because

¹² The minimum democracy score on the index is 0 and the maximum is 10. Brunei and the Maldives are omitted from these calculations, because *The Economist* does not have data on these two states (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024).

Beijing stood firm on the position that the SCO should not accede UN-sanctioned states (Lanteigne 2018, 125). The 2010 Regulations on the Procedures for Admitting New Members noted that states sanctioned from UN authorities will not be permitted to the SCO (Tang 2019, 208–09). Russia, however, supported Iranian accession – hardly surprising since the Kremlin was itself under international sanctions for its illegal 2014 annexation of Crimea (albeit these sanctions were non-UN sanctions, because Russia is a one of the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council). By 2017, the Chinese Foreign Ministry began affirming support for Tehran’s full membership (Lanteigne 2018, 125). The 2015 Iran nuclear deal that alleviated sanctions on Tehran was likely a factor in shifting Beijing’s stance on Iranian accession. The notion that the SCO is an anti-U.S. sanction bloc is not inference, but an explicit goal of the SCO and its members. This is especially true of Iran, as Iranian media and Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian explicitly assert that “Iran and Belarus can overcome sanctions” through cooperation with each other and through international forums such as the SCO (WANA 2025).

Apart from functional efforts to resist sanctions, much of the SCO’s value to the heads of state is simply optics. The photoshoots of SCO Council of Heads of State summits became one of the few international stages where Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could stand among a variety of political partners on a global stage. The SCO and its members explicitly direct media from member states to portray the SCO in a positive light, and hosts SCO “Media Forums” to engender more positivity toward the SCO and the heads of state (Seiwert 2025, 49-50; Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2015).¹³

Belarus’s President Alexandr Lukashenko is in a similar position to Ayatollah Khamenei: The autocrat wants to counter international isolation and broadcast that he is not internationally isolated despite the draconian character of his regime and the assistance Belarus provides to Russia in its full-scale war on Ukraine. SCO accession diversifies Belarus’s diplomatic relationships and enhances Minsk’s cooperation with Beijing, thereby offsetting Lukashenko’s historically one-dimensional reliance on the

¹³ The SCO’s Development Strategy states: “One of the most important SCO tasks in the field of information support to its activities will be a promotion of the SCO positive image among the member states’ citizens, and of the SCO adequate image throughout the world and in the region” (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2015, 10).

Kremlin. Bilateral cooperation between Belarus and Iran, especially military cooperation, has increased in correlation with their accessions to the SCO. The respective presidents have agreed to sign a strategic cooperation entente (TV BRICS 2025).

A particularly telling case of how the SCO is used to legitimize authoritarianism is the addition of Myanmar as a Dialogue Partner under the Tatmadaw junta that took power after a February 1, 2021, coup d'état.¹⁴ The junta has employed the SCO to fend off international isolation; significantly, the junta is more welcome at the SCO than it is at ASEAN. Although Myanmar is a Dialogue Partner, the fact that the SCO accepted the junta's application for partnership status in 2022, and Myanmar officially became a Dialogue Partner in 2023 – at a time when virtually no other organization would legitimate the junta – reflects the SCO's relevance to regime security. The ASEAN Secretariat has not reinstated the junta into regular ASEAN summits, and some ASEAN members such as the Philippines have been adamant to resist normalizing the junta's rule within ASEAN, at least until there is a resolution of the civil war in Myanmar. The respective regimes in Cambodia and Laos, which are SCO Dialogue Partners, have been among the ASEAN governments decidedly willing to engage with the junta. By admitting Myanmar under the SAC, the SCO tries to legitimate the junta's rule as opposed to the officials of the civilian government that the military regime exiled in 2021.

Overall, the SCO is a military-security partnership that is not held together by strategic military interests, which are often contradictory. It is held together by the commonality of regime type. Although the SCO is not an alliance, it is still noteworthy that the insights of this paper are consistent with the IR literature that finds that regime-type commonalities are important to understand why states tend to ally with other particular states. For example, Lai and Reiter (2000) find that, although democracies are more likely to ally with each other, autocracies are even more likely to form defence pacts (218). Boutton (2019) finds that formal alliances render authoritarian regimes more likely to carry out risky purges, with

¹⁴ The Tatmadaw is the armed forces of Myanmar.

the aim of making themselves more resistant to coups; in other words, formal alliances help authoritarians “coup proof” their regimes.

The conclusions of this paper break with the literature that understands military-security alliances as driven by structural pressures in the balance of power (Waltz 1979). In contrast, this paper finds that regime-type commonalities are driving this military-security partnership. And in contradiction to “hard” realists that fixate on relative power (Mearsheimer 2001), this paper considers regime type as a significant variable for understanding a state’s international behaviour (Moravcsik 1997).

Anti-Westernism as a primary goal of the SCO

Most scholars have acknowledged that the SCO is anti-Western, so the discourse is more about the extent of its anti-Westernism. Recent developments have provided a decisive answer: Anti-Westernism appears to be a core quality of the SCO. Saliently, the additions of Belarus and Iran add an undeniable anti-Western aspect to the organization. These additions are especially notable since many analysts of the SCO had expected Turkmenistan, Turkey, or Mongolia (an Observer) to join the organization before the internationally sanctioned and belligerent states of Belarus and Iran (Aris 2009a, 479). Had Turkey or Turkmenistan joined, the notion that the SCO is more about regionalism would be more tenable. The fact that China and Russia sponsored Minsk’s and Tehran’s membership is revealing.

To the SCO’s most powerful members – namely China and Russia – the SCO is an institutional instrument for challenging a rules-based international order that they perceive as too liberal. This strategic direction diverges from the interests of many of the Central Asian states, which, apart from seeking to deepen political-security cooperation with Beijing and Moscow, initially aimed to use the SCO as an internally focused mechanism to boost their state capacities to combat serious non-traditional security threats in the region, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Central Asian states also wanted the SCO to enhance regionalism at a time when other regions, such as Africa and Southeast Asia, were busy doing the same. Under Xi, China broadened the SCO’s mandate: The SCO became an organization less about Central Asian regionalism, technical security cooperation, and institutionalizing Chinese soft

power, and more about rendering the international order more amenable to the CCP's interests and developing security cooperation to insulate its authoritarian partners in Eurasia.

It is important to note that, since its early years (prior to the emergence of Xi), the SCO has confronted the United States in particular. Without naming the United States, the 2005 SCO joint statement asserted that it was “necessary” that U.S. forces exit Central Asia (U.S. forces were in Central Asia to uphold regional stability and support operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2005]).¹⁵ Emboldened by SCO support, weeks after the 2005 joint statement, Uzbekistan gave Washington six months for U.S. forces to leave the Karshi-Khanabad air base in the southern part of the country. Moreover, the immediate precursor to the SCO, the Shanghai Five, issued a joint statement in 2000 explicitly condemning U.S. deployments of theatre-level missile defence systems in the Asia-Pacific (People's Daily 2000). It is worth noting that in 2005 the SCO denied the U.S. application for Observer status to the SCO on grounds that the U.S. is not a Eurasian state. Even in a less confrontational period between China and the West, the SCO was not cooperative with Western countries.

The military component of the SCO has clear anti-Western direction. Russian troops and units that trained under the Peace Missions almost certainly participated in the war in the Donbas (2014–2022) and have participated in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022–). In July 2024, immediately after Minsk's SCO accession, China and Belarus held an eleven-day joint military drill entitled “Eagle Assault 2024” roughly five kilometres from the Polish border. From the standpoint of Poland and the European Union, this is a worrisome development considering the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine and Lukashenko's assistance in prosecuting this war. Russia has long supported Belarusian and Iranian accession to the SCO, but China's decision to allow their accession in the context of their military support for Russia's war on Ukraine leaves little doubt about whether the SCO is anti-Western. Notably, China had no issue with rejecting Iranian membership in the SCO in the past.

¹⁵ Instability in Afghanistan is a mutual threat to Central Asian countries – most acutely Tajikistan, which has a border with Afghanistan that is over 1300km.

Although some scholars use content analysis to understand China's intentions (Kang et al. 2025, 63), this is a problematic approach. In the context of the SCO, the organization's documents do not reflect intent. Even if SCO primary sources do not explicitly make anti-Western statements (although some do), it does not mean that this is not an intent behind the SCO. To illustrate, Article 1 of the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism of 2001 defines separatism as:

any act intended to violate territorial integrity of a State including by annexation of any part of its territory or disintegrate a State in a violent manner, as well as planning and preparing, aiding and abetting such act, and subject to criminal prosecuting in accordance with the national laws of the Parties (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2001).

The above description is a near-exact description of Russia's irredentist foreign policy strategy in the post-Soviet space, which is captured by the *Novorossiya* philosophy that Putin tends to invoke (Washington Post 2014).¹⁶ Moscow has wielded separatism against EU-leaning governments by backing separatists against Ukraine in Crimea and the Donbas, against Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and against Moldova in Transnistria. The 2024 Astana Declaration affirmed that it is unacceptable to support separatists for "self-serving purposes" (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2024), but this is precisely the strategy behind Russian foreign policy (Allison 2014; Lanoszka 2016). SCO member states violate principles of SCO conventions when they want to pose threats to Western countries, Western-leaning governments, or other perceived adversaries.

The SCO is not only about balancing Western power – even if it is not a new Warsaw Pact; it is about contesting the ideals that define what it means to be Western: democracy, independent judiciaries, political and human rights, and support for a liberal rules-based international order that benefits all law-abiding states (Ikenberry 2020).

¹⁶ *Novorossiya* means "New Russia" and is an irredentist concept that geographically refers to the lands around the Black Sea. Russians especially use it in reference to Crimea.

The SCO's charter asserts that one of the organization's goals is "to promote a new democratic, fair and rational international political and economic international order" (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2002, 2017). Although this paper has delved into significant detail about the SCO and its (purported) functions, it is important to grasp the big picture: The organization is about revising a liberal rules-based international order in favour of Beijing's and Moscow's notions of order, which are authoritarian in ethos.

Conclusion and implications

To explain the SCO's paradoxical membership of states that fight each other, I have demonstrated that the SCO is primarily a political-security partnership for the autocrats involved. Although it may seem that states gain interest in the SCO to extract economic benefits, a closer analysis of the SCO's economic mechanisms indicate that this is an implausible explanation. The SCO holds together as a political-security organization, as the organization's economic mechanisms have always been weak.

This research has key insights for the discipline of IR, and two are especially notable. First, that an authoritarian security organization contains so much internal conflict is consistent with democratic peace theory, specifically the monadic version that regards authoritarians as more likely to be aggressive and warlike than democracies due to their specific qualities (Kant 1795; Rummel 1995). Second, scholars should not study security arrangements as mere aggregations of power – rather, the qualities and preferences of the states involved are necessary to understand these institutions (Moravcsik 1997).

Before I conclude, it is important to discuss the practical implications of the above research. Is the SCO a major strategic concern to the West? China and Russia hold broader foreign policy objectives of revising the existing rules-based international order, and the SCO is a small instrument to achieve this broader goal. Despite the intents of China and Russia, in addition to those of Iran and Belarus, the ineffectiveness of the SCO means that the organization itself should not be perceived as a serious challenge. Whether the SCO is a "Chinese NATO" is a subject of discussion in political commentary

(Castillo 2024; Aydıntaşbaş et al. 2022; Freeman et al. 2024); yet, due to internal fissures, a lack of bureaucratic capacity, and numerous other shortcomings, the SCO is nothing like a new Warsaw Pact or a Chinese NATO. The SCO's lack of internal security commitments is largely constrained by the divergence of interests between SCO members states. The extent of the SCO's military cooperation has diminished in the 2020s relative to its heights in the 2010s, correlating with a rise in internal conflict among a growing membership. The inclusion of new rivals will further affect the SCO's already limited functions, including the facilitation of Peace Mission joint military exercises.

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4. Conflict and contestation within ASEAN: Re-examining ASEAN security cooperation

Overview

Internal conflict is a sufficient explanation for why the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has not developed deeper security cooperation. Throughout this paper, I argue that the ASEAN Way and security community theory are not very important for understanding ASEAN security cooperation. I analyze the member states and their varying interests and dissect the various security problems that exist among ASEAN member states. Saliently, the wide variations in regime types result in different threat perceptions and logics of security, which is not conducive to more committed institutional security cooperation.

Introduction

When states are in conflict, or they have many contestations on security issues, they have little reason to deepen security cooperation. This is especially true when they have regime-type variations among them. For these reasons, security cooperation within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is limited.¹ This explanation seems straightforward, yet, erroneously, it is not the dominant explanation in the contemporary scholarship on the association.

Two narratives prevail in well-cited literature as to why ASEAN security cooperation is limited. The first narrative emphasizes that, since ASEAN pursues a security community (Deutsch et al., 1957;

¹ ASEAN security cooperation is configured only on dialogues and confidence-building measures (CBMs), not interoperable security arrangements and formal alliances. ASEAN CBMs include the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

ASEAN, n.d.),² it is therefore not interested in collective defence, which is (ostensibly) a Western concept of security. Scholars have attributed the security community to the association since before ASEAN made the term official as part of its nomenclature (Acharya 1991, 1995, 1998, 2001). The second narrative holds that international norms labelled as “the ASEAN Way” socialize ASEAN members to reject formalized security cooperation (Acharya 2021, 8). I will argue in this paper that these explanations do not grasp the variables that limit ASEAN security cooperation: namely, bilateral conflict and contestation. Additionally, these variables are compounded by regime-type contrasts within the association. Internal ASEAN conflict is evidenced by the border wars between Cambodia and Thailand, and internal ASEAN contestation is evidenced by ASEAN’s disunity on the civil war in Myanmar and the South China Sea disputes.³

This paper is structured as follows. First, I outline the conventional wisdom on ASEAN security cooperation. Second, I scrutinize this wisdom and its veracity. Third, I present my main argument: that bilateral conflict and contestation are the main reasons that stymie ASEAN security cooperation – not the ASEAN Way or the aspiration to a security community. In conclusion, I make a recommendation: Scholars, analysts, and policymakers ought to eschew essentialist argumentation in their understandings of ASEAN, and instead research the region via an examination of the same variables that scholars would study other regions.⁴ These variables include, *inter alia*, conflict frequency and intensity, militarized interstate disputes, regime type, military power, and economic power.

² By security community, ASEAN asserts that this community shall have the following attributes: “political development; shaping and sharing of norms; conflict prevention; conflict resolution; post-conflict peace building; and implementing mechanisms” (ASEAN, n.d.).

³ Constructivist literature has taken a particular interest in the study of contestations (Wendt 1999, 188; Wiener 2014, 2017). The term is thus theory laden. This paper does not subscribe to or engage with all the dense theoretical literature attributed to the term contestation. It uses contestations simply to denote serious political disagreements that strain bilateral relationships, rather than viewing contestation as a more complex “social activity” and a “social practice” (Wiener 2014, 1; 2017, 109).

⁴ As defined by Barnett and Zarakol (2023): “essentialism is the claim that social forms have an immutable set of properties. It is the position that entities – personalities, genders, races, cultures, states, regions, and civilizations – have an innate, natural, fixed character” (430).

The conventional wisdom on ASEAN security cooperation

The ASEAN Way

Analytically, the ASEAN Way features widely in works that analyze ASEAN security cooperation (Haacke and Morada, 2010). The prevailing scholarship contends that ASEAN does not prefer collective defence because it holds regionally cherished norms, which scholars and ASEAN leaders have dubbed the ASEAN Way. These norms include consensus, non-alignment, neutrality, non-intervention, informal institutionalism, and foreign policy flexibility over commitments. Although the link between norms, mechanisms, and causation is complex (Lebow 2014), International Relations (IR) scholarship tends to argue that these norms motivate or even shape the foreign policy choices of Southeast Asian states, such as their approaches to conflict resolution (Goh 2003; Katsumata 2003, 107). Although they do not always refer explicitly to the ASEAN Way, analysts invoke norms to explain ASEAN's responses to wars (Kliem 2024, 229; Reeves 2023), strategies toward growing competition between the United States and China (Beeson 2022, 4), governance of regional disputes, especially in the South China Sea disputes (Heng 2014; Hu 2023), approach to global governance (Stubbs 2008), government receptiveness to international development assistance (Cuyvers 2019), human security (Howe and Park 2017), and human rights and civil freedoms (Arendshorst 2009; Davies 2014, 110). The ASEAN Way seems to be analytically versatile, because scholars use it to explain various Southeast Asian policy choices. The ASEAN Way, ostensibly, can offer deeper explanations for why ASEAN member states make the foreign policy choices that they do.

Typically, scholars refer to the norms attributed to the ASEAN Way to explain ASEAN's preference for confidence-building measures (CBMs) and dialogues (Narine 1997). Scholars also refer to the norms of the ASEAN Way, especially non-interference or non-interventionism, to explain why ASEAN does not have a joint peacekeeping force (Suzuki 2019). More specifically, a prevailing belief is that many Southeast Asian states are wary of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine largely due to their histories and national memories (Bellamy and Beeson 2010, 265-267). ASEAN's unassertive

management of the region's most salient flashpoint, the South China Sea, is explained by the association's consensus-based decision-making (Simões 2022, 27–29); in other words, ASEAN does not provide even rhetorical support for the littoral South China Sea claimant states that are most affected by the disputes because the importance it places on consensus means member states have veto power. For some scholars, the ASEAN Way provides the logical justification for ASEAN's insistence on CBMs and security dialogues. To illustrate, the norms of the ASEAN Way are saliently applicable to the ASEAN Regional Forum, which is guided by the tenets underscored in the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Article 2 of the 1976 Treaty declares:

- a.* Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality and territorial integrity of all nations;
- b.* The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion and coercion;
- c.* Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- d.* Settlement of differences and disputes by peaceful means;
- e.* Renunciation of the threat or use of force;
- f.* Effective cooperation among themselves (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 1976, 319–20).

In similar ways, these norms are inscribed in the Declaration on a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ASEAN 1971) as well as in the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (ASEAN 1995). Whether these norms have causal significance in shaping ASEAN security cooperation will be the subject of further investigation.

The ASEAN Security Community

In 2003, ASEAN declared its aspiration to realize a security community (ASEAN 2003, 3). In 2009, ASEAN outlined its plan to establish the Political-Security Community in the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint document (ASEAN 2009).⁵ The security community idea thus became a feature of ASEAN's nomenclature for regional security governance. Martel (2022) points out that ASEAN has given contradictory indications about whether it has accomplished a security community, sometimes saying it will soon, and sometimes saying it has already established the community (1). Since a security community is by definition a bloc where war between states is unthinkable (Deutsch et al. 1957), I will later argue that ASEAN does not meet the definition.

For scholars, ASEAN's aspiration to achieve a security community – in contrast to a defence community (Acharya 1991) – explains the differences between ASEAN's security architecture and the architectures of other regions, especially Europe. ASEAN has eschewed collective defence “from [its] very inception” in favour of other security frameworks (Acharya 2021, 8). ASEAN's explicit aspiration to achieve a security community distinguishes it from other organizations that strive for arrangements based on collective defence commitments calibrated to deterring or combatting mutual threats.

In the academic context, the security community concept is saliently attributed to the seminal work of Deutsch et al. in their co-edited volume entitled *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (1957); however, the concept's origins trace back to the early 1950s in work produced by Richard Van Wagenen (this is noted in Adler and Barnett [1998, 6]). Well-cited scholarly literature has been published on the topic of ASEAN and the security community, with Acharya's being pre-eminent (1991, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2021). Writing in 1995, at a time when the enlargement of ASEAN was dynamically

⁵ The 2003 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II states: “The ASEAN Security Community is envisaged to bring ASEAN's political and security cooperation to a higher plane to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment. The ASEAN Security Community members shall rely exclusively on peaceful processes in the settlement of intra-regional differences and regard their security as fundamentally linked to one another and bound by geographic location, common vision and objectives” (Association of Southeast Asian Nations 2003, 3).

underway, Acharya examined whether a security community was forming in the association. He concluded that bilateral contestation, regional arms proliferation, and “the conflict-creating potential of regional economic linkages” meant that Southeast Asia was not a security community (Acharya 1995, 191). In 1998, Acharya appraised ASEAN as a security community, albeit an under-developed one when compared to Europe and North America (219). Acharya’s 2001 book *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* further applied the concept to Southeast Asia, arguing that Southeast Asia is a “pluralistic security community,” a concept that was originally developed by Deutsch et al. (1957, 6). “Pluralistic” means that the states of the association are all fully sovereign.⁶ Deutsch et al. (1957) as well as Acharya describe a security community as having two key pillars: (1) absence of war, and (2) an “absence of significant organised preparations for war *vis-à-vis* other members” (Acharya 2001, 16). Although Acharya underscored that bilateral contestation was increasingly problematic for ASEAN, because it jeopardizes ASEAN’s progress toward deeper cooperation (2001, 208), his 2001 book concluded that ASEAN is a “nascent” security community; this is a concept sourced from Adler and Barnett’s 1998 volume, which especially examined the ideational qualities of security communities.

For IR, Acharya’s book is significant in part because it catalyzed more interest in the security community idea. Scholars responded to the thesis of Acharya’s book, with some in disagreement that ASEAN is a nascent security community (Collins 2007), or even close to a security community (Khoo 2004). In 2017, Mahbubani and Sng authored *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* to advance the thesis that ASEAN deserved a Nobel Peace Prize because of its pacifying effect on the region (2017, 7).⁷ Similarly, Kivimäki argued that, after a period of bellicosity in Southeast Asia, between 1968 and 1994

⁶ Deutsch et al. define a pluralistic security community as follows: “The PLURALISTIC security-community...retains the legal independence of separate governments. The combined territory of the United States and Canada is an example of the pluralistic type. Its two separate governmental units form a security-community without being merged. It has two supreme decision-making centers” (1957, 6).

⁷ Kishore Mahbubani is Singapore’s former permanent representative to the United Nations and president of the United Nations Security Council. Mahbubani’s prolific academic work is dually a primary and secondary source: These works reflect Singaporean viewpoints on international affairs and they offer retrospective IR analysis.

ASEAN enjoyed a “Long Peace” largely due to ASEAN’s intersubjective perception that it had formed a “normative community, similar to the one which is typical for liberal democracies” (2001, 7) – even if this perception is not an objective fact. Moreover, reflecting the logic of the security community, Pennisi di Floristella empirically tested whether ASEAN has pacified relations between member states, generally finding that ASEAN has indeed mitigated interstate disputes (2015, 79). A work of constructivism, Martel (2022) nuanced the common criticism that ASEAN facilitates “talk shops” to explore how discourse drives ASEAN’s “never ending” pursuit of the security community. Thus, for Martel, ASEAN’s security community is discursive. Martel also writes that there is a “contestation of security community-building” within ASEAN (2022, 49), and that contestation is not “a bug to be fixed” but a part of how ASEAN sustains the narratives it holds about itself (164).

To some extent ASEAN’s dedication to establishing a security community can logically explain why ASEAN’s security architecture consists of CBMs and security dialogues and not collective defence arrangements. I will argue that this logic is not sound. ASEAN dedicates itself to the security community because deeper security cooperation is simply not achievable under conditions of bilateral conflict and contestations. Neither the ASEAN Way nor the security community idea is very important for explaining the limited security cooperation facilitated by ASEAN.

Scrutinizing the scholarship on ASEAN security cooperation

In this section I will make the case that the norms of the ASEAN Way and the aspiration of a security community are not centrally why ASEAN security cooperation is the way that it is – built on CBMs and dialogue, and generally *laissez-faire* on the region’s most intense flashpoints and conflicts. This argument is quite contrarian, since much of the scholarship on Southeast Asia has relied on the ASEAN Way and the security community concept to offer a deeper understanding of the region (although Weatherbee put forth a version of this argument in a chapter of his 2019 book [119–210]).

Cambodia's 2012 and 2016 obstructions to the ASEAN joint statement are perhaps the most well-known example of ASEAN contestations that prevented greater institutional alignment on defence and security matters. In 2012, Cambodian officials took issue with an ASEAN joint communiqué for two related reasons: first, it referenced Scarborough Shoal; second, it referenced the rights that Vietnam is guaranteed under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to an exclusive economic zone (Bower 2012). Then, in 2016, Cambodia rejected a joint statement that referenced the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling constituted under UNCLOS that ruled in the Philippines' favour (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016). Cambodia's obstructionism is considered a result of Beijing's political influence in Phnom Penh. Many scholars, however, view the ASEAN Way as a defining approach to its handling of the South China Sea issue, sometimes arguing that it is more effective than it is given credit for (Weissman 2010; Caballero-Anthony 2022). As I contend, analytically, ASEAN's "preference" for informality is almost irrelevant to the story of ASEAN's (non-)positions in 2012 and 2016. Fundamentally, it is not consensus or a preference for informality that produces ASEAN's position on the South China Sea issue. Rather ASEAN is constrained by internal institutional contestation over how to handle the issue. Furthermore, ASEAN is said to cherish "informal" governance, but a better reason for why member states do not provide the association with legal authority is that some do not want constraints on their sovereign decision-making (Jones and Jenne 2016, 218).⁸

Problematically, the ASEAN Way does not generate novel insights about ASEAN and its approach to security. In the case of the South China Sea disputes, one need not understand the ASEAN Way to understand why the bloc does not have a strong unified policy on this issue. Consider the following thought experiment. Imagine a student who has never learned about the ASEAN Way but knows a lot about the tensions within ASEAN about the South China Sea issue. What would that student

⁸ As ASEAN membership expanded, particularly with the inclusion of Vietnam (1995), Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999), deep security cooperation became increasingly unrealizable for the association (Narine 1998, 211). Historical rivals were incorporated into the association and with those additions came exacerbated political contestations within institutional mechanisms, forums, and channels. The inclusion of former rivals incentivized ASEAN members to turn to extra-ASEAN partners for effective security and defence arrangements.

miss about ASEAN's approach to the South China Sea, if they only knew about the bilateral contestation on South China Sea issues and nothing about the ASEAN Way? That student would conclude that ASEAN has too many contestations within the bloc to come up with a strong multilateral response. And they would be right. The student thus grasps the sufficient condition explaining ASEAN's approach to the South China Sea disputes. The ASEAN Way offers neither sufficient nor necessary conditions to explain ASEAN's decision-making.

Moreover, we may re-examine whether the ASEAN Way provides much insight about ASEAN's approach to peacekeeping. Some scholars insist that ASEAN's conviction in non-interventionism – a core element of the ASEAN Way – means that member states do not support the formation of an ASEAN peacekeeping arrangement (Suzuki 2019). Following this, an analyst would be quite surprised to learn that several Southeast Asian states are some of the strongest UN peacekeeping contributors worldwide, in terms of basic quantitative metrics such as troop and police force contributions (Jones 2020, 99; Von Einsiedel and Yasaki 2016, 11). Malaysia and Indonesia are particularly distinguished in their commitment to UN peacekeeping; for example, Malaysia especially facilitates “peacekeeping-specific training for their troops with dispatch under the aegis of the UN in mind” (Dobson 1999, 159). As of 28 February 2025, Indonesia ranked fifth globally in terms of troop and security forces personnel it contributes to UN peacekeeping operations (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.). In principle, ASEAN is not against peacekeeping; if it was, Indonesia and Malaysia would not be some of the world's strongest contributors to UN peacekeeping. The norm of non-interventionism does not preclude support for peacekeeping even for “hard cases” in ASEAN, such as Vietnam: Vietnam is one of the strictest proponents of non-interventionism in ASEAN and yet it is proudly increasing its contributions to global peacekeeping (Viet Nam News 2024, 2025).⁹ What does the ASEAN Way tell us about ASEAN's

⁹ Vietnamese state-media projects the narrative that peacekeeping is “a global mission from the heart of Viet Nam” (Viet Nam News 2024, 2025). As Thayer (2014) points out, in 2013 the Communist Party of Vietnam amended Article 64 of its national constitution to establish the legal basis for foreign deployments of Vietnamese troops to peacekeeping missions. In 2025, Vietnam's National Assembly passed the Law on Participation in United Nations

approach to peacekeeping? Not a lot: Some ASEAN members strongly support UN peacekeeping (e.g., Malaysia) and others do not (e.g., Laos). The ASEAN Way does not explain this variation.

Another claim made by scholars is that ASEAN rejects alliances. Scholars have good reason to advance this claim since ASEAN's leaders have explicitly said on many occasions that they do not want the association to become a military alliance.¹⁰ The issue here is that just because leaders did not want ASEAN to become a military alliance does not mean that the ASEAN Way conditions a rejection of alliances for unitary Southeast Asian states. In fact, some ASEAN members prefer alliances for their security, whereas others strongly avoid formal alliances. In this manner, ASEAN members are like those in any other group of states around the world. For instance, in Europe, most European states consider alliances as key to their foreign policy posture, although Austria, Ireland, Switzerland, and some smaller states have not joined alliances. In Northeast Asia, Japan and South Korea consider their respective U.S. alliances as key aspects of their foreign and defence policies, whereas Mongolia has no military alliances. In Central Asia, Turkmenistan's foreign policy is non-aligned while Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a formal multilateral alliance. Thus, like any other region, Southeast Asian members vary: most ASEAN members tend to avoid alliances, but some do not.¹¹ The literature is generally unappreciative of the fact that two of the five

Peacekeeping Forces to further establish the domestic legal basis for UN peacekeeping deployments (Voice of Vietnam 2025).

¹⁰ Thanat Khoman wrote: "Another principle to which we anchored our faith was that our co-operation should deal with non-military matters. Attempts were made by some to launch us on the path of forming a military alliance. We resisted; wisely and correctly we stuck to our resolve to exclude military entanglement and remain safely on economic ground" (1992). Moreover, in 1997, Mahathir Mohamed stated in a keynote address to an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting that: "The countries of ASEAN, like all countries, need security and peace. We have decided that ASEAN will not become a military alliance in order to protect ourselves, although each one of us is free to have bilateral arrangements with other members for mutual security" (Mahathir 1997). On whether ASEAN would evolve into a "military bloc," Philippine foreign minister Carlos P Romulo responded that "We did not phase out Seato [the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization]...to set up another one" (Straits Times 1975).

¹¹ Cambodia, for example, inscribed the renunciation of alliances into its constitution, as stated in Article 53: "The Kingdom of Cambodia shall not joint [sic] in any military alliance or military pact which is incompatible with its policy of neutrality" (Kingdom of Cambodia 1993). Other ASEAN states eschew alliances doctrinally through government white papers. First explicated in a 1998 white paper, Vietnam's "Four Nos" declares no formal alliances, no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory, no using bilateral relations with one government as a means of playing balance of power politics, and no using force as a tool of international politics. Since 1998, the

founding ASEAN members, the Philippines and Thailand, are U.S. allies.¹² They were also members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, even if they ended up souring on its dysfunctionality.¹³ Again, the ASEAN Way does not explain enough variation to make it useful for understanding the foreign and security policies of Southeast Asian states vis-à-vis ASEAN.¹⁴ It therefore does not explain ASEAN multilateralism in the security domain.

A regionalist understanding of Southeast Asian state behaviour – i.e., studying ASEAN to understand how, say, Laos conducts its foreign policy – is problematic.¹⁵ Yet, this analytical approach is pervasive throughout the scholarship and political commentary on Southeast Asia. A Southeast Asian state's alliance preferences could not be defined through the preferences of its neighbours. Scholars focused on European international relations would not understand Austria's position on alliances by studying Portugal's; in the same way, scholars of the Southeast Asia should not accept the narrative that "ASEAN does not want to choose" when the Philippine approach to alliances does not reflect Indonesian viewpoints. ASEAN, a regional association of states, does not dictate members' preferences. ASEAN itself does not have a preference – states do. And the preferences of Indonesia's strict interpretation of neutrality do not reflect ASEAN norms any more than does the Philippine approach to foreign policy,

Four Nos has been a component of Vietnam's defence white papers (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam Ministry of National Defence 2019, 23).

¹² The Philippines is a proud ASEAN member and contributor to the organization's ethos, while being a U.S. treaty ally under the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty – these two facts are not contradictory. Similarly, Thailand is a longstanding formal security ally of the United States. Bangkok and Washington signed the 1954 Manila Pact but also upgraded their bilateral relations through the Thanat-Rusk Communiqué of 1962. When the organization that the Manila Pact created, SEATO, later dissolved in 1977, the governments of Thailand and the Philippines advocated to retain the Manila Pact as a security guarantee (Buszynski 1981, 295). In 2003, during the War on Terror, U.S. president George W Bush enhanced the U.S.-Thailand bilateral relationship with his designation of Thailand as a "major non-NATO ally" (U.S. Department of State 2025). Evidently, not all ASEAN states are averse to alliances despite the narrative that "ASEAN does not want to choose."

¹³ As a reflection of SEATO's shortcomings, Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev discussed the weakness of SEATO in a 1958 conversation with one another (Wilson Center Digital Archive 1958). SEATO was short-lived as it dissolved in 1977, and its list of deliverables was even shorter (Eckel 1971, 107).

¹⁴ There are also significant variations in terms of how Thailand and the Philippines have approached their respective bilateral alliances with the United States. Under the current Marcos Jr. administration, the Philippines has bolstered its bilateral relationship with the United States through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement that was signed in 2022. However, in the case of Thailand, some argue that since the 2014 coup it has found China more preferable as a strategic partner, including on military matters (Hewison 2018, 125).

¹⁵ For instance, ASEAN states have widely varying approaches regarding their foreign policy strategies vis-à-vis China (Benjamin 2021).

which values its alliance with the United States. There is a problematic degree of essentialism in inscribing certain norms in the study of Southeast Asian regionalism. This criticism applies to Mahbubani and Sng's *The ASEAN Miracle* (2017). The authors advocate for "changing the Western mindset of the Filipinos and the Filipino elites," which they believe "will not be easy" (2017, 164).¹⁶ Mahbubani and Sng write that there is a "cultural gap between the Philippines and the rest of ASEAN" (164); they believe that as "the Philippines remains torn between its Asian and Western identities, it risks remaining a cultural misfit within the ASEAN family" (163). In contrast, throughout their book, the authors commend the eclectic Southeast Asian identity of other ASEAN states. Mahbubani and Sng's work is an example of the "essentialist trap" at play (Barnett and Zarakol, 2023).¹⁷ In essentialism, the world is "constituted by pre-formed, fixed, internally coherent, and bounded social forms" (Barnett and Zarakol 2023, 429). Mahbubani and Sng define an intrinsic ASEAN culture, which they (wrongly) believe the Philippines does not wholly fit into.

Even if it is granted that the norms of the ASEAN Way are central to any good understanding of the region, some constructivists point out that these norms are not uniform but are contested and polysemic (Martel 2022, 16–17). The Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) describes neutrality as a guiding norm for Southeast Asian international relations, but ASEAN members did not have a uniform understanding of what neutrality meant when they signed the agreement (Emmers 2018, 350–51).¹⁸ Decades prior to the formation of ASEAN, the meaning of neutrality as a foreign policy

¹⁶ Emmerson (2013) has similar contentions with Mahbubani's perspectives and characterizations.

¹⁷ The essentialist trap discussed in Barnett and Zarakol (2023) is a critique of Acharya and Buzan's (2019) Global IR research program.

¹⁸ Emmers (2018) investigates the meaning behind ASEAN's concept of neutrality: "The ZOPFAN Declaration is a political document that captured contrasting views within ASEAN on the role of external powers in Southeast Asia at that time. While Indonesia has traditionally favoured a regional order determined primarily by the Southeast Asian states themselves, other members have been more willing to rely on the United States and other actors to enhance their security. Although no consensus has been reached on its specific application, ZOPFAN has continually been referred to by ASEAN and its members as an ambition to keep Southeast Asia neutral and free of external interference" (350). Based on his study, Emmers argues that ASEAN's understanding of neutrality is defined by "impartiality, to be understood as not taking sides in Great Power dynamics; and autonomy, which refers to an attempt to limit external interference in Southeast Asia's affairs" (351).

doctrine was contested among Southeast Asian leaders (Hatta 1952, 443).¹⁹ Even if one were to grant that the ASEAN Way's norms are important, it would raise the question: What do these norms actually mean, in theory and practice? It is difficult to say.

Intra-ASEAN conflict and contestation over security issues

The degree of conflict and contestation amongst an organization's members is the key factor that prevents more robust security cooperation.²⁰ ASEAN aspires to a security community wherein disputes are resolved peacefully, but even if it accomplishes the eradication of war in its region, this does not mean that deeper security cooperation is viable.²¹ In the twenty-first century, kinetic military conflicts, maritime boundary confrontations, non-demarcated border problems, cross-border insurgencies, and other stark disagreements over deadly security issues such as the Myanmar civil war persist in Southeast Asia. An alliance or interoperable military partnership is viable when the states involved have mutual threat perceptions, and this is certainly not the case in ASEAN.

The ASEAN Way and ASEAN's approach to security cooperation are considered the products of ASEAN's national historical memories (Kusuma-Atmadja, 1990), but societal memories of historical rivalries between Southeast Asian nations are also as important, perhaps even more important.²² Historical

¹⁹ As scrutinized by Indonesia's first vice president, who had held that position under Sukarno for over a decade (1945–1956).

²⁰ A caveat to this is that if these states have similar regime types, this commonality can function as an intervening variable that enables states to work in an arrangement even if they have security conflicts and contestations amongst each other. I have previously found this to be the case with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where authoritarians deepen security cooperation despite military conflicts and clashes between members. Because ASEAN is a mix of states that have outstanding security issues and differing regime types, it is more difficult for the association to deepen security cooperation.

²¹ In fact, security cooperation amongst ASEAN members is often challenging to facilitate. For example, the Indonesia House of Representatives did not ratify a defence agreement with the Singaporean government because Indonesian opposition parties argued that the arrangement would give the Singaporean military too much access to Indonesian archipelagic waters and "allow Singapore to set up a military base in the country" (Hamilton-Hart 2009, 257–58). In 1990, Singaporean and Malaysian bilateral exercises were cancelled due to bilateral tensions while exercises under the mini-lateral Five Powers Defence Arrangements between the parties continued (Bristow 2005, 12).

²² Kusuma-Atmadja, the former Indonesian foreign minister, wrote that: "The sentiment against military pacts or the forming of other kinds of security agreements is deeply ingrained in the minds of the Indonesia body politic, and goes back into the history of the struggle for independence" (1990, 162).

intra-regional rivalries challenge the viability of deeper ASEAN security cooperation.²³ Many states in Southeast Asia waged conflicts against other Southeast Asian states in periods that preceded their membership in ASEAN or ASEAN itself. The *Konfrontasi* (1963–1966) waged by Indonesia against the newly established Malaysian state is a salient example. Although the political elites of Hanoi and Phnom Penh have made meaningful progress toward a rapprochement, the rivalry between Cambodia and Vietnam remains ingrained within the militaries and populations of both countries, straining their bilateral relations (see Sokhean, 2020; Yaacob 2023; Punreay 2025).²⁴ Similarly, Malaysian mistrust toward the Philippines persists due to the North Borneo/Sabah dispute. Singapore’s experience with Indonesian imperialism and Malaysian irredentism still affects how the Lion City perceives its place in the regional and international order: as a small state that has viewed itself as prevailing in the face of being surrounded by possible foes (Leifer 2000).²⁵ In 1984, Thai and Lao forces engaged in intermittent skirmishes on their border; between December 1987 and February 1988, the skirmishes escalated to a kinetic border war, involving thousands of troops and heavy weaponry, and as many as a thousand combatant and civilian fatalities (United Press International 1988). In this case, Laos’s accession to ASEAN in 1997 perhaps encouraged a pacification of its border disputes with Thailand.

The partially un-demarcated border between Cambodia and Laos has been the subject of bilateral tensions. These heightened in 2017 when Phnom Penh accused Lao troops of trespassing into Cambodian territory and building structures there. On this occasion, Cambodian and Lao troops deployed along their

²³ For instance, in 2014, Indonesia angered Singapore by naming a warship after two marines who partook in the deadly 1965 MacDonald House bombing.

²⁴ This dynamic is similar in the Thai-Cambodian context as the respective Thai Thaksin dynasty and Cambodian Sen dynasty had historically enjoyed a cordial familial friendship. However, considerable portions of the respective Thai and Cambodian populations view each other as rivals, and the Preah Vihear temple dispute between 2008 and 2011 is perceived through highly nationalistic lenses.

²⁵ For example, in 2022 former long-time Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamed opined that Singapore should once again be governed under the Malaysian state of Johor (over the course of his long and successful political career, Mahathir earned a reputation for provocative statements). The Singaporean home affairs minister responded by stating that this is “serious business...If you get a leader in Malaysia like Dr. Mahathir, adventurous ideas may be attempted” (Hutt 2024). These kinds of statements from Malaysian leaders are viewed in Singapore as confirming the Lion City’s strategic anxieties as a small state; for more on Singapore’s strategic culture, see Leifer’s book *Singapore’s Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (2000).

respective borders, escalating the risk of hostilities. Hun Sen gave Vientiane an ultimatum: Withdraw Lao troops in six days or “we will start to take action” (Hutt 2017; *Laotian Times* 2017). Subsequently, Hun Sen flew to Vientiane and tensions eased. This case reflects “two sides of the same coin” regarding ASEAN disputes. On the one side, mutual ASEAN membership seems to have a positive effect on easing tensions between counterparts, which is plausibly why interstate ASEAN disputes are generally less violent than in other regions. On the other, the fact remains that Southeast Asia is riddled with unresolved security issues, and since ASEAN is famously informal, it lacks a robust mechanism to resolve these disputes. ASEAN dispute resolution mechanisms, such as the High Council, are seldom used and are generally underdeveloped. Therefore, interstate tensions are managed bilaterally or through more institutionalized mechanisms like the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Table 4-2 summarizes several conflicts and contentious disputes within ASEAN. It is not meant to comprehensively capture all the complexities of these issues, but it provides a decent overview. It leaves out the territorial disputes that are not significantly contentious in the twenty-first century. As a mark of success for ASEAN, several Southeast Asian disputes have been litigated through the ICJ, and these ICJ rulings have been subsequently accepted by each party to the dispute. One example is the 2003 *Malaysia v. Singapore* dispute over Pedra Branca (ICJ 2008). However, the disputes in Southeast Asia that are contentious compound ASEAN’s already difficult task of establishing deeper ASEAN security cooperation.

It is often pointed out that security problems in Southeast Asia tend to concern intra-state rather than interstate issues. With that said, many of the most severe intra-state security issues in the region are internationalized, which creates or exacerbates bilateral tensions.²⁶ “Hot pursuits” where state forces cross

²⁶ Acharya (2021) also points this out: “internal threats could have a spill-over effect, causing strife in inter-state relations, especially over provision of sanctuaries, real or perceived, by one state against rebels fleeing another. This was a persistent issue in Thai–Malaysia relations until the end of the Communist Party of Malaya in 1989” (41).

Conflict or contestation	ASEAN parties to the conflict/contestation	Description
Cambodia-Thailand border conflict (Preah Vihear Temple 2008–2011; 2025 border wars)	Cambodia, Thailand	Intermittently, the border between Cambodia and Thailand has been the site of warfare between two ASEAN members. Conflict broke out between 2008 and 2011, and again in two separate periods in July and December 2025. The border remains undemarcated fundamentally because of the incompleteness of the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1904 (Siam and France 1904); it aimed to clarify the border between Siam's kingdom and France's colonial Indochinese territory, yet it left swaths of the boundaries undefined (Strangio 2025). Roughly four years later, the French devised a map of the area in 1908. The map rendered Preah Vihear temple within Cambodian territory (Sanglee 2025). In 1962, the ICJ ruled that Preah Vihear Temple is situated within Cambodian territory; the ICJ (1962) ruled this way based on the 1904 treaty and the 1908 map, which the ICJ believed Thailand had tacitly accepted (Bangkok disagrees). Consequentially, the ruling did not litigate the contentious issue of “who owned what” in Preah Vihear's surrounding territory as well as the temples therein (over fifty years later, this territory would become zones of conflict). This historical context is important to understand the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand. Between 2008 and 2011, a limited kinetic conflict erupted between Cambodian and Thai forces over Preah Vihear temple, totalling dozens of fatalities. Although the conflict would subside in 2011, nationalist tensions would not. In May 2025, tensions reignited with nationalist demonstrations taking place in the disputed areas, the placement of landmines allegedly beyond the scope agreed lines of contact (leading to maimed soldiers), and a brief shooting skirmish that killed a Cambodian soldier. The personal overtures by the Thai political leadership to diffuse the crisis was botched as the Cambodians were alleged to have leaked a sensitive call between the leaders. This led to the resignation of Thai prime minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, as internal backlash in Thailand to statements she made during that call grew. Each side emboldened, kinetic military conflict erupted on 24 July 2025, which involved heavy weaponry, ranging from fighter jets, attack helicopters, tanks, and large artillery batteries. The border war caused hundreds of combatant and civilian casualties. Hostilities reignited in December 2025, once again involving heavy weaponry fighting between Cambodian and Thai forces. This time, the conflict horizontally escalated, as it spanned many different sectors of the Cambodian-Thai border; the conflict became unlocalized.
Myanmar-Thailand border and maritime boundary disputes	Myanmar, Thailand	The porous Burmese-Thai border, and the persistent conflict between the Burmese military and armed resistance groups has resulted in Thai and Burmese forces firing into each other's territory. It has also resulted in air incursions by the Myanmar Air Force across the Thai border. Moreover, maritime boundary disputes in the Andaman Sea have escalated to militarized interstate disputes and bilateral strain, such as when the Myanmar Navy fired at Thai fishers in 2024.
Spratly Islands disputes in the South China Sea	Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam	Although the most salient flashpoints in the South China Sea concern Chinese vessels unlawfully confronting ASEAN littoral states' vessels, the ASEAN states themselves have contradicting territorial and maritime boundary claims in the waterbody, particularly in the Spratly Islands.
North Borneo/Sabah dispute	The Philippines, Malaysia	A dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia over North Borneo was born out of the ambiguities in an 1878 agreement between the British North Borneo Company and the Sultanate of Sulu. In this agreement the Company gained control of North Borneo territory with the Sultanate's consent, who had controlled the region. The key question is whether the original agreement was technically a cessation or sale of territorial holdings, or a lease (Weatherbee 2019, 20). Kuala Lumpur's claim is based on the former description, Manila's on the latter (albeit it is worth noting that a dated work on the topic underscores the central issue is about sovereignty, not terminology

Conflict or contestation	ASEAN parties to the conflict/contestation	Description
		[Wright 1966, 484]]. ²⁷ Malaysia's claim, essentially, is that North Borneo joined the Federation of Malaysia on its own accord – just like the various other states that acceded to the Federation of Malaya. The Philippines argued that the Sultanate of Sulu did not permanently cede or sell this territory to the British company that was party to the 1878 agreement, and that, because the Philippines is the successor to the Sultanate of Sulu which had originally signed the lease, Manila therefore retains a claim to North Borneo/Sabah (Wright 1966, 482). Malay-Philippine contentiousness over the dispute reached a boiling point in the 1960s. The North Borneo dispute in 1961–1962 played a significant part in ASEAN's precursor association, the Association of Southeast Asia, becoming largely dysfunctional. History almost repeated itself when, one year after the founding of ASEAN, in 1968 Manila severed diplomatic relations with Kuala Lumpur over the dispute, jeopardizing ASEAN's very existence at the association's outset. Mistrust over North Borneo persists and is a factor in contemporary Philippine-Malaysian relations (Robles 2024). The Philippines has not officially relinquished its claim to Sabah (Samad and Bakar 1992; Fernandez 2007). ²⁸
Cambodia-Laos border dispute and standoffs	Cambodia, Laos	In 2017, tensions along the undemarcated Cambodia-Laos border simmered to the point of a full military standoff, with each side surging the number of troops on their borders. Hun Sen threatened to escalate the dispute, but it was deescalated through diplomacy, albeit temporarily. In 2019, another military standoff reportedly occurred. In the years since, both Phnom Penh and Vientiane have made diplomatic progress in de-escalating what could have been a flashpoint; they have progressed in joint efforts to demarcate their border.
South Thailand insurgency	Malaysia, Thailand	The conflict is an irritant that exacerbates distrust between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur (it is also a highly contentious issue within Thai politics). There exists a viewpoint in each country that the other is exacerbating the conflict; and some within each country believe, without evidence, that the counterpart state is exacerbating the conflict intentionally (the lack of evidence is noted by two regional experts, Zachary Abuza and Ian Storey, as cited in Bajoria and Zissis [2008]). This conflict is centrally about Muslim Malay separatism from the predominantly Buddhist Thai nation-state. Over the span of decades, various Malay terrorist groups have launched deadly attacks targeting both Thai military and police forces as well as civilians. Between 2004 and 2025, over 7700 have died in this protracted intra-state conflict, including over 2500 civilians (Deep South Watch 2025). Historically, across the Malaysian-Thai border, Malaysia and Thailand had cooperated in combatting the Communist Party of Malaysia insurgency until a 1989 peace agreement that ended the conflict; in juxtaposition, the South Thailand insurgency has generally been a repellant, not a

²⁷ Wright (1966) denies that the central issue is whether the agreement constituted a lease or a cessation (484), but other resources identify this the central contention (Meadows 1962, 327). This dispute is legally and historically intricate, and litigating its specifics is far beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, its contentiousness is relevant.

²⁸ The bilateral tension on this issue is summed up well in a 1992 article by Samad and Bakar (1992): “The level of irritation in the relationship between Malaysia and the Philippines is considered unnatural for two immediate neighbors who belong to a common regional grouping. In normal circumstances, their regional commonality would have served as a catalyst to cement and widen mutually beneficial ties of friendship and cooperation. Unfortunately, the relationship has been allowed to float and continues to be marked by mutual suspicion and distrust. The main contributing factor to this disturbing situation is the Philippines's claim on Sabah, one of Malaysia's 13 states. It is an issue that has remained unresolved for nearly 30 years” (554).

Conflict or contestation	ASEAN parties to the conflict/contestation	Description
Internal ASEAN contestation on Myanmar's junta post-February 2021 coup	Generally, the internal divide lies between the more democratic members of ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines) and the more authoritarian members (Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand).	magnet, for Malaysian-Thai security cooperation (Acharya 1990, 11–12; Rayar and Han 2023). ²⁹ On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw executed a coup d'état, ousting the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD). The coup perpetrators subsequently established the Tatmadaw-led State Administration Council (SAC). This coup catalyzed the eruption of the Myanmar Civil War (2021–), which has killed tens of thousands, created a severe refugee crisis, destabilized the already insecure Burmese-Thai and Burmese-Bangladeshi borders, and drastically worsened non-traditional security challenges in the region, especially transnational crime. In response to the coup, the official ASEAN approach has been based on the Five-Point Consensus (FPC [ASEAN 2021]). ³⁰ The FPC reflects the viewpoints of the members in ASEAN that are most unwilling to condemn the junta; thus, the word “consensus” is arguably inaccurate because it does not reflect the policy positions of at least half of ASEAN's member states. Several powerful Southeast Asian officials have publicly expressed their concerns over the FPC (Balakrishnan 2023; Reuters 2023). Politically, the 1 February 2021 coup strained ASEAN unity due to the contestation over: (1) Who represents the state of Myanmar; (2) whether it is appropriate to facilitate engagement with SAC officials in any ASEAN capacity; (3) whether ASEAN as an institution should outright condemn the coup according to democratic principles, and if so, how strongly should ASEAN condemn it; (4) the meaning, relevance, and application of the “non-interventionist” norm in this circumstance.

Table 4-2. Overview of conflicts and contestations in Southeast Asia precluding higher-commitment security cooperation in ASEAN. ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

national boundaries to pursue non-state adversaries (e.g., ethnic insurgency groups) is a point of bilateral contention for various ASEAN dyads, especially Malaysia-Thailand and Myanmar-Thailand (Acharya 1990, 11). The lines between intra-state and interstate security disputes are seldom distinctly defined in Southeast Asian international politics. As noted in Table 1, although during certain periods Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur have tried to work constructively together to stop the terrorism committed in the South

²⁹ Acharya (1990) refers to a historical case: “open and bitter complaints by the Thai fourth army commander, General Harn Lenanond, in 1982-83 regarding alleged Malaysian support for the Muslim separatists in southern Thailand, was much more damaging to Thai-Malaysian security relations. Outspoken General Harn gave open expression to Thailand's long-standing suspicions that Malaysia was secretly aiding and abetting its southern separatists” (11–12).

³⁰ The Five-Point Consensus states: “First, there shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint. Second, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people. Third, a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN. Fourth, ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the [ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management]. Fifth, the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned” (ASEAN 2021).

Thailand insurgency (2004–), the conflict has caused strain on Thai-Malaysian relations for two decades (Rayar and Han 2023). Martel (2017) argues that non-traditional security cooperation in Southeast Asia is difficult because the meaning of “non-traditional security” itself is contested. For Martel, while “[non-traditional security] is typically presented as an uncontroversial focus of security cooperation among regional states, there is an important lack of consensus over the main source of regional insecurity” (2017, 560).

Cambodia-Thailand border wars are arguably the most salient conflicts precluding deeper ASEAN security cooperation. The 24–28 July 2025 Cambodia-Thailand conflict involved conventional strike air power, heavy artillery, armoured vehicles, drone warfare, and offensive and defensive infantry battles. Hostilities broke out again between Cambodian and Thai forces in December of the same year, escalating again in the intensity of the conflict and in terms of expanding the conflict zone. The wars waged by these ASEAN members contradict the notion of association as a security community. Martel (2022) writes that some expect ASEAN to “exhibit heroic, almost supernatural qualities” in their expectations of what ASEAN can accomplish in the context of peace and security (12). Yet it should not be unreasonable to expect ASEAN to prevent conflict between Cambodia and Thailand if ASEAN were truly a security community.

If one is true to the definition of security community, then two states engaging in warfare with heavy weaponry is contradictory to the concept itself. In fact, warfare should be unthinkable. Deutsch et al. (1957) write that preparations for war negate a security community (30), not just full-scale war, which is at the extreme end of the war–peace continuum. A problem with the contemporary security community literature on ASEAN is that it has, throughout different iterations of scholarship, lowered the standard for what counts as a security community. Altering the definition of the security community has made it almost impossible to falsify its application to ASEAN – and falsifiability is, of course, fundamental to

science (Popper 1959).³¹ Deutsch et al. (1957) have a very specific definition of security community, and ASEAN does not meet this definition.

Data analysis is helpful for better understanding ASEAN. The Correlates of War (CoW) dataset on Militarized Interstate Disputes (v.5.0) provides insight into bilateral security issues in Southeast Asia (Palmer et al. 2020).³² While the dataset is imperfect, some takeaways can be elicited. From 1998 to 2014, there have been twenty-six militarized interstate disputes between ASEAN dyads.³³ This tally is high compared to, for instance, intra-Gulf Cooperation Council or European Union dyadic disputes. However, the CoW data reflect that the intra-ASEAN disputes of the last few decades have involved relatively few fatalities. With that said, considering the twenty-six intra-ASEAN disputes, the data indicate that the scholarly literature on security communities and ASEAN tends to downplay the frequency of interstate security disputes amongst Southeast Asian states. Another key takeaway from these data is that almost half of the militarized interstate disputes between 1998 and 2014 in ASEAN involved Myanmar. These data reflect that there is a “Tatmadaw factor” placing a ceiling on the possibilities for ASEAN security cooperation.

The Tatmadaw’s behaviour, and the contentiousness within ASEAN about how to handle the Tatmadaw’s behaviour, constrains ASEAN security cooperation. The Tatmadaw has been the subject of tension amongst ASEAN states since even before Myanmar joined ASEAN in 1997, and especially became a point of regional tension after Myanmar’s accession.³⁴ The internal contestation over Myanmar

³¹ Many security community theorists are non-positivist and acknowledge that their theories do not intend to be a theory of causation but one of mechanisms or epistemological pluralism (Acharya and Buzan 2019; Martel 2022). The discourse on social theorizing, positivism, and post-positivism is far more complex than can be duly examined in this paper, but it is worth noting that Wendt declared himself a positivist in his seminal 1999 book (39). Many constructivists are positivists. This is notable because perhaps constructivism could use more, not less, positivism, and this could certainly apply to research on ASEAN. The claim that ASEAN is a security community should be continually tested.

³² CoW datasets have their limitations, but they are a useful referent since these datasets are arguably the default datasets for quantitative IR research.

³³ 1998 is used as the starting observation date, taking into account that 1999 was the last time a state acceded to ASEAN (Cambodia).

³⁴ For instance, Myanmar’s response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 dismayed ASEAN members when the Tatmadaw refused international aid, resulting in more fatalities and suffering. The cyclone was one of the worst natural disasters in Southeast Asian history, as it ravaged the country and killed approximately 140,000 people (United

intensified in ASEAN, and ASEAN's acceptance of Myanmar became the subject of international scrutiny with the Tatmadaw's 1 February 2021 coup d'état; globally, pressure grew on ASEAN to implement an effective response that would impose consequences on the junta and pave a way for the return of Burmese democracy. ASEAN members are split on how to manage this crisis. Plunkett and Tansey (2024) summarize ASEAN disunity on Myanmar thus:

Since the late 1990s, several of ASEAN's more democratic member states such as Indonesia and the Philippines had been pushing the organisation to take a stronger role in promoting democratic norms, especially in Myanmar, yet its more authoritarian members were resistant to adopting new normative commitments. In 2021, member states again struggled to reach consensus on how to respond to a crisis in Myanmar. The most vocal advocates of suspending Myanmar from ASEAN summits included the bloc's most democratic states, including Indonesia and Malaysia, while Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos aligned themselves more closely with the junta in Myanmar (15–16).

After the Tatmadaw's 1 February 2021 coup, the ASEAN chairmanships held by Brunei (2021), Cambodia (2022), and Laos (2024) enabled the junta to have some access to ASEAN forums. These three states, particularly Cambodia and Laos, are the most willing to engage the Tatmadaw (along with Thailand). The positions of the least democratic ASEAN members counteract the interests of other members that seek to distance the Tatmadaw from official ASEAN forums (Plunkett and Tansey, 2024). The grouping of ASEAN democracies – Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines – condemn the

Nations 2009). Appalled by the Tatmadaw's handling of the situation, French officials advocated for implementing R2P to administer humanitarian aid, without the Burmese government's official permission (Bellamy and Beeson 2010, 272). While ASEAN rejected the French proposal, behind the scenes, certain ASEAN members that were likewise frustrated by the Myanmar regime's refusal to allow aid sought to convince the regime to allow the aid that the country desperately needed.

Tatmadaw.³⁵ Beyond that group, Singapore has imposed sanctions against the junta since February 2021. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the more democratic governments in ASEAN held the position that their officials must refrain from direct engagement with junta officials so as not to recognize the perpetrators of a coup. In juxtaposition to this position, as the leader of the 2022 ASEAN's chair Hun Sen directly engaged with Myanmar's junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing. During Cambodia's 2022 chairmanship, Phnom Penh reportedly enabled junta officials to gain access to other forums such as the ASEAN economic and defence ministers' meetings (Plunkett and Tansey 2024, 17). Similarly, as the 2024 ASEAN Chair, Laos reportedly invited junta officials to an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in January 2024 and an ASEAN defence ministers' meeting in March 2024, whereas most other members were steady in refusing to engage junta officials.³⁶

The least democratic members of ASEAN are at evident odds with the positions of the more democratic ASEAN members. ASEAN member states perceive security issues differently: Varying regime types produce varying logics and perceptions. Amongst regional organizations, ASEAN has a significantly wide variance in terms of regime type. In 2023, Myanmar had a 0.85 democracy rating – second lowest in the world – and Laos had a 1.71 rating for eighth lowest (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024). On the other end of the spectrum, Malaysia had a 7.11 rating (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024). Generally, security cooperation is difficult to accomplish in multilateral organizations that have a significant range in regime types. The variations in regime type should be a starting point for analysis on ASEAN, as it best explains the divergent state preferences (Moravcsik 1997). It is worth noting that many of the conditions that Deutsch et al. (1957) identify as good for establishing security communities are liberal conditions (Moravcsik 1997, 540). Even if most democracies worldwide are not liberal per se, that a significant portion of ASEAN is illiberal raises questions about how it can functionally establish the

³⁵ However, Indonesia and Malaysia received criticism for rejecting Rohingya refugees, in what critics believe could violate the international principle of *non-refoulement* under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Connelly and Loong 2023, 85; Plunkett and Tansey 2024, 13).

³⁶ Timor-Leste, which joined ASEAN during the writing of this dissertation, has condemned the junta. In turn, the junta expelled Timor-Leste's top-ranking diplomat (Strangio 2023).

political-security community, if one is to follow the points made by Deutsch et al. (1957).³⁷ Although some attribute the pacification of historical archrivals such as Indonesia and Malaysia to the ASEAN Way, this is actually a case for democratic peace theory (Doyle 1986): their democratization is a key reason for their strong relationship.

Although security communities are typically studied in the context of interstate relations, some scholars have pointed out the non- and intra-state dynamics of security governance (Martel 2022, 11–12). According to Deutsch et al., mutual responsiveness is one of two essential conditions for security communities (1957, 129).³⁸ If that is the case, then ASEAN has not met this expectation with regard to the civil war in Myanmar.³⁹ (On a related note, ASEAN has not met Deutsch et al.'s [1957] responsiveness condition on the South China Sea either, because non-littoral states do not support the interests of littoral states.)

In summary, ASEAN does not meet the definition of a security community, described in the concept's foundational literature. More to the point, the literature may overconcentrate on the security community idea in its study of ASEAN, drawing attention away from some of the more consequential conflicts and contestations that affect the association's policies and positions in the security domain. With regard to the ASEAN Way, although these norms are important to Southeast Asian international relations,

³⁷ Quoting Moravcsik: "Yet Deutsch himself viewed liberal factors – an autonomous civil society with individual mobility, the rule of law, and competitive politics – as preconditions for transformative effects of high levels of international transactions and communication. Is it just coincidence that of the...twelve successful post-1750 [pluralistic security communities] identified by Deutsch, ten or eleven were composed of liberal or nearly liberal states?" (1997, 540).

³⁸ This is true both for "pluralistic" and "amalgamated" security communities (Deutsch et al. 1957). Amalgamation essentially means a federation of states, whereas pluralistic communities are an integrated group of independent states that remain sovereign.

³⁹ Some ASEAN decision-makers are frank about the challenges that ASEAN has faced with regard to the war in Myanmar. At a 2023 U.S. State Department press conference, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan responded to a question about Thailand's willingness to engage the junta by saying: "We condemn the coup in Myanmar and the ongoing violence against civilians, the instability in the country, the setback to national reconciliation, and the enormous impact on the economy. Unfortunately, it's now more than two years. We haven't seen any signs of improvement. From an ASEAN perspective, we have the Five-Point Consensus, and we haven't seen any significant progress in fulfilling the Five-Point Consensus. So we believe it would be premature to re-engage with the junta at a summit level or even at a foreign minister level and, in fact, our leaders at the recent ASEAN summit reaffirmed this position" (Balakrishnan 2023). Philippine President Marcos Jr. stated that: "There is a great deal of impetus for ASEAN to solve this problem. But it is a very, very difficult problem" (Reuters 2023).

how much variation they can explain is often overestimated. The conflicts and contestations within ASEAN, however, have much greater explanatory capability.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that conflict and contestation stymie ASEAN's ability to develop more robust security arrangements. This contrasts with much of the conventional scholarship that relies on essentialist accounts to explain ASEAN's approach to security governance. It is important that I do not give the wrong impression: The scholarship almost always discusses conflict and contestation in some manner, but these variables are usually not rendered the most important factors in the study of ASEAN cooperation, with exceptions (Acharya 1991; Weatherbee 2019, 199–223).⁴⁰

Over-reliance on special and regional norms can lead scholars into an “essentialist trap”: Scholars come to view Southeast Asia intrinsically different from other regions on account of these norms. Much of the IR scholarship on Southeast Asia does not focus on variables such as regime type, domestic politics, military and economic power, trade dependencies and independencies, and institutional capacity. More analysis of these variables is needed. Much of the IR on ASEAN comes down to the idea that “ASEAN is essentially different” – a notion I reject. In fact, the ASEAN region is like any other. It is subject to interstate conflict, geopolitics, and variable economic systems and levels of development; most significantly, the ASEAN bloc has stark juxtapositions in regime type, which complicates security cooperation within it. In conclusion, I have argued that ASEAN security cooperation is limited to an aspiration toward a “security community” because ASEAN member states have too many conflicts and contestations amongst each other.

⁴⁰ I should also clarify that ideas matter greatly in the real world of international politics, and this paper does not make meta-arguments about IR and the causality or epiphenomenalism of norms. It only seeks to better understand how conflict and contestation affect ASEAN's security governance.

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5. Conclusion: Internal conflict within Asian security arrangements

This dissertation includes three separate but related papers, each of which complement the others. All discuss internal conflict within Asian security arrangements. The first paper is methodological and empirical, since it devises a novel methodology to measure bilateral conflict in security arrangements. The second paper examines the puzzling Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which is a puzzle because its member states fight each other while being official military-security partners that develop interoperability. The third paper is theoretical and argumentative: it re-examines the scholarship on security cooperation within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), proposing that bilateral conflict is a sufficient condition for why member states have not established deeper cooperation in the security domain. This dissertation has important findings and contributions for International Relations (IR), especially for the fields of international security and global governance. These findings and contributions are summarized below.

Key findings and contributions to the literature

First, the data analysis of the first paper demonstrates that internal conflict constrains the depth of cooperation that security arrangements can achieve. The finding that disunity hinders organizational effectiveness is unsurprising; what is noteworthy, however, is that even though it seems obvious that knowing the degree of cohesion within an organization is also important for knowing the organization's potential, hitherto, scholars have not had a measure for internal conflict. Thus, I created one – the “conflict value.” For further research, scholars can use the conflict value to measure the degree of conflict within different kinds of political organizations, that is, beyond security arrangements. This metric will render research on conflict and institutions more systematic and methodological.

Second, the existing typologies that IR scholars use to categorize security arrangements have become much less useful. Therefore, I created a new typology, one that is ordered according to the degree

of commitments a state makes to an arrangement. Security arrangements come in four general varieties: alliances, high-commitment security partnerships (which are about interoperability), confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs), and dialogues. Any of the world's actual security arrangements can be categorized according to the new typology that I developed.

Third, I found that regional security architectures vary significantly. Some architectures are built with strong and inclusive alliances while supported by a constellation of CBMs and dialogues with like-minded partners. This is the case with Europe. Other architectures are very dialogue oriented with an inclusive membership. This is the case of Southeast Asia, specifically regarding ASEAN arrangements. Architectures also vary according to whether they are constructed from older or new security arrangements. The architecture for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is quite old, for instance, whereas the Southeast Asian architecture consists of relatively newer arrangements. Especially significantly, I found that architectures vary with regard to how much internal conflict they have within them. Compared to others, the architecture of Central Asia and the Caucasus has a saliently high degree of internal conflict. As expected, the data show that high degrees of internal conflict correlate with architectures that are built with CBMs and dialogues. A limitation of this dissertation is that it only provided data analysis on four regional security architectures: Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, MENA, and Southeast Asia. For further research, scholars can apply the conflict value to other regions.

Fourth, Chinese and Russian security arrangements – including the SCO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – are anomalies, because they are alliances or high-commitment security partnerships that contain high degrees of internal conflict. Alliances and high-commitment security partnerships are, by definition, about cooperation, not internal conflict, so the CIS, CSTO, and the SCO are paradoxical: They build interoperability although several of their members fight each other. That Chinese- and Russian-led security arrangements hold so much internal conflict means that their arrangements are fundamentally constrained. The qualitative and quantitative data analysis of this dissertation shows that Chinese- and Russian-led arrangements are weak when compared to many other alliances and interoperability security partnerships. In other words, China

and Russia make for bad allies and security partners – they have on several occasions fought their own allies and partners (in addition to their adversaries). This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that, as allies, the Soviet Union and China engaged in a border conflict in the years 1968 and 1969, a conflict that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai thought had a real potential to escalate into nuclear war (Yang 2000, 35–37). In the twenty-first century, Russia has tended to enter into conflict against its security partners once they start democratizing, and, relatedly, edging closer to the European Union. This is evidenced by Russian conflicts in Georgia and Moldova. In other words, a state in a security partnership with Moscow ought not be assured that it will not itself be the subject to attack by Russian forces. In 1968, Czechoslovakia learned this to be true of the Russian Federation’s predecessor, the Soviet Union.

Fifth, regime-type commonality is arguably one of the most important factors for deepening security commitments in an organization. Regionalists as well as constructivists have a different thesis: they expect growing regional cooperation amongst states when they develop socio-political connections and “collective identities” (Katzenstein 2000, 354). ASEAN is a pertinent case study for testing competing theses. ASEAN is a grouping of states that have committed to constructing a Southeast Asian identity, but the conflicts and contestations amongst them preclude deeper security cooperation. Additionally, ASEAN member states vary significantly in terms of their democracy ratings (Economist Intelligence Unit 2024), which hinders deeper cooperation. The finding that regime-type differences strongly disincentivize security cooperation supports Moravcsik’s liberal theory of international politics that likewise explains variations in state behaviour as stemming from regime type (1997). It is also a sharp break from the neorealist viewpoints that security arrangements are about balancing power and strategic convenience in international anarchy (Mearsheimer 2001). Regime type is also a critical variable for determining whether an arrangement sticks together when there is internal conflict. When organizations have too much conflict, regime-type commonality can hold them together. This is the case with the SCO, an authoritarian organization where the militaries of these states combat each other. Ultimately, it is not the norms of the “Shanghai Spirit” that keep the SCO together, it is regime-type commonality.

Finally, regime-type divergence is a major factor increasing the likelihood of internal conflict in an organization. The SCO case does not fit this finding since it has a regime-type commonality, but the CIS and the CSTO are relevant. When states begin to democratize while being members of mainly authoritarian security arrangements, members are far more likely to clash. This is why the CIS is descending into dysfunctionality: Moscow designed the organization to project Russian-style authoritarianism, yet it also includes Armenia and Moldova, and formerly Georgia, which are three states that have been steadily democratizing post–Cold War. There is considerable historical evidence that supports the finding that regime-type divergences in a security arrangement leads to internal conflict. For instance, the 1974 Cypriot war fought between two allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Greece and Türkiye, particularly reflects the veracity of the finding that regime-type juxtapositions lead to intra-alliance clashes. This situation reflects the converse situation to the CIS: Greece’s descent toward authoritarianism within the democratic alliance produced the conditions that led the two states to go to war. Greece experienced a coup d’état in 1967, when far-right officers seized power, establishing the Regime of the Colonels. The onset of the Greek dictatorship was a divisive subject within the North Atlantic Council, and the junta became a sort of pariah within the Council that was populated by democratic governments (Pedaliu 2016, 1023).¹ Ultimately, it was a Greek dictatorship that staged the coup against the Cypriot government in 1974, which directly led to the 1974 Turkish invasion of the island. Ultimately, it is significant that the 1974 war fought by Greece and Türkiye was fought by the former’s *authoritarian* regime. That authoritarian regimes tend to create conflict with democracies supports the democratic peace thesis. Another historical case regards the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, two mutual Warsaw Pact members. Fundamentally, the Soviets chose to invade the latter because they had an allergic reaction to the de-Stalinizing reforms that the Czechoslovak communist

¹ The Johnson administration and U.S. State Department accommodated the Greek junta; but Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands filed a complaint against the Greek junta to the Council of Europe on the grounds that it had violated article 33 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In 1969 Greece had to withdraw from the arrangement (Pedaliu 2016, 1023). For further reading about NATO and the Greek-Turkish rivalry, see Hatzivassiliou (2012).

leader, Alexander Dubček, was implementing during the Prague Spring. Although it did not involve a stark contrast in regime type, the Soviet military action in 1968 was decided precisely on the grounds that Prague believed in a mode of governance that broke from Stalinist totalitarianism—a mode of governance that European communist leaders refused to accept.

To conclude, this dissertation attempted to understand the oddity that security governance is the study of cooperation, yet the states that form this cooperation are increasingly conflicting. This dissertation brought about novel insights on security arrangements, and the interstate conflicts and contestations that plague them. The new millennium has shown an increase in the numbers of interstate conflict, a rise of revisionist-authoritarian powers, and the re-emergence of great power competition. New paradoxes in international politics will arise because of this state of affairs. And if global democratic backsliding continues, this will correlate with internal contentiousness in alliances and partnerships that were once steadfastly unified.

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