

Central Asia
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Power play in Central Asia

By Tariq Fatemi

WHILE most of the world, and especially local analysts like us, have remained focused (for understandable reasons) on the "formalization" of the Indo-US strategic ties during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington, important developments have been taking place elsewhere, especially in Central Asia, which deserve our close attention as well.

The Chinese, in conformity with the wisdom and experience acquired over the ages, have maintained a mature and detached attitude to the games their neighbour has been playing, in league with the Americans, to enhance its influence in the region. The Chinese have been "cool", as the Americans would say. But this does not mean that they, or for that matter the Russians, have been oblivious to the momentous developments taking place in their neighbourhood.

It will be recalled that in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, its constituent provinces, known as republics, suddenly and unexpectedly found their umbilical cord to Moscow severed. Though there may have been no independence movement worth the name in any of these republics (except those in the Baltic, which had never accepted their forced incorporation into the Union in 1940), the local party chiefs lost no time in declaring their republics as independent states. But they continued to look towards Moscow for political guidance, as well as economic sustenance and military support. Caught in a struggle for its own bearings, Moscow presumed that these Central Asian republics — acquired through bloody military subjugation over the past centuries — would continue to rotate around the Russian "sun".

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the situation in Central Asia, as with any other place, underwent a dramatic change. With American fury having been ignited in the smouldering flames of the Pentagon, Bush was on the warpath. Both Russian and Chinese leaders may have calculated that helping the US in its invasion of Afghanistan would not only bring an end to the much feared Taliban regime (which both loathed as well), it would also earn them important "brownie points" with Bush, that they could cash in later. Neither Beijing nor Moscow had calculated on the neo-cons in DC having a blueprint for a long and rapidly expanding presence in Central Asia.

mentally new model of geopolitical integration. Embracing almost two-thirds of mainland Eurasia, uniting countries with different civilizations, cultures and economic systems, its magnitude and trans-regional status make it an unprecedented experiment.

But what accelerated the coming together of Moscow and Beijing so rapidly and so overtly, was the impression in both capitals that the Bush administration was not satisfied with merely obtaining base facilities in Central Asian states to prosecute the war on terror in Afghanistan, but that Washington was now engaged in a concerted effort to bring about "regime change" in all of them.

First, it was the Rose Revolution in Georgia that brought into power an avowedly pro-American government. Then it was Ukraine, where the Orange Revolution ended Moscow's influence in an area long considered

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part of the Russian heartland. When Moscow saw its ally being drummed out of the capital in Kyrgyzstan and an attempt being made to oust the Uzbek leader, Islam Karimov, both Russia and China realized the frightening scale and dimension of America's plans.

It was at this stage that Moscow stepped in. First, it managed to salvage the situation in Kyrgyzstan by engineering a compromise, which kept power in the hands of its friends. Then it came out strongly and publicly in support of the Uzbek leader, even though there were reports to the effect that hundreds of Uzbeks may have been killed in anti-government disturbances. It was at this stage that the July 2 Sino-Russian summit in Moscow became the setting for a major pronouncement by their leaders. In the declaration, significantly called the "World order in the 21st century", Presidents Hu and Putin rejected attempts to "ignore objective processes of social development of sovereign states and impose on them alien models of social and political systems".

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security". In other words, Russia and China are opposed to foreign inspired attempts to trigger changes in these countries, while espousing their belief that the "evolutionary path to development" was the only legitimate and acceptable available option to the region.

The SCO declaration was not mere rhetoric. It was followed by Uzbekistan's demand that the Americans vacate within six months the military base that they have been occupying since 9/11. Surprised and discomfited by this public demand, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had to engage in a quick damage-limitation exercise, while also refraining from criticizing Karimov. His trip was however, only partly successful, in that he got only Kyrgyzstan — where the US also maintains a base — to allow continued use of the Ganci base but after he had to cough up over \$ 200 million. Incidentally, the Chinese, too, are

keen to establish their military presence in Kyrgyzstan.

China has made it clear that it now recognizes that the US is engaged in a bitter struggle for influence in Central Asia. That Washington's plan is to spin a web of interlocking arrangements with the small but strategically important states of the region, so as to keep Beijing off balance and at the same time, deny China the hydrocarbon riches of the region, is no longer a secret. This is also what explains Washington's sudden interest in Mongolia, a truly lost continent, were I had the good fortune of spending

over a week in 1972. A huge country, with 20 times more sheep than humans, it may also have major oil deposits.

No less significantly, Mongolia is geographically sandwiched between Russia and China, which have always vied for influence in Ulaan Bator. But now it is the Americans who are talking in terms of "a new era of comprehensive partnership with Mongolia. Surely, China could not be unaware of the fact that virtually all of its neighbours, other than North Korea and Burma, and to some extent Pakistan, are now part of what Russell Mead of the Council on Foreign Relations of New York, calls "the strategic net" being woven by the US in Asia, to persuade China to keep its ambitions within reason.

What do all these developments mean? One, that though the Chinese and the Russians have been rivals for centuries for influence in Central Asia, both appear to have reached the conclusion that their differences are minor, compared to the common challenge they face from America's growing ambitions in the region. (This is also the view of a Chicago-based think tank). Two, America's aggressive support for democratic revolutions has unnerved Central Asian rulers.

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The first fallout was the inevitable coming together of Russia and China, on a wide-ranging agenda. They then took the initiative to bring the Central Asians back to their fold as well. The first step was to transform the old talking shop known as the Shanghai Five, into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Apart from its original five, Uzbekistan joined it in 2001, while Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Iran have been recently accepted as observers. Others, including Japan, Australia and even the US have expressed a wish to join this organization, which they all recognize is likely to play an important role in determining the course of events in Central Asia.

The SCO's primary aim is to preserve peace and stability in the region and this is to be achieved by promoting mutual trade and investment, the best possible use of regional resources and a gradual transition to free movement of goods, money, services and technology. Their most significant area of cooperation may, however, turn out to be energy. The leaders are already discussing implementation of major projects relating to pipelines from Central Asia to China's Xinjiang province and another from Russia to China, which has already aroused considerable interest in the US. There are also plans for auto trains and motorways linking Europe to China — and some time in the future coming all the way to the Gulf.

The SCO claims, with some justification, to be a unique political opportunity and a funda-

mental setting for a major pronouncement by their leaders. In the declaration, significantly called the "World order in the 21st century", Presidents Hu and Putin rejected attempts to "ignore objective processes of social development of sovereign states and impose on them alien models of social and political systems".

This was a clear and categorical rejection of all that the Bush administration has been proclaiming as its goal in the coming years. The stage having been set for a clear delineation of competing philosophies, the SCO summit a couple of days later came out with a statement that was even tougher than what had emerged from Moscow.

In a ringing declaration, the summit rejected "attempts at monopoly and domination in international affairs" and warned that "concrete models of social development cannot be exported". Even more significantly, the Shanghai Group called upon the US to set a deadline for the withdrawal of its bases from the region now that the anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan was coming to an end. More significantly, the signatories, while affirming their opposition to extremism and terrorism, declared their resolve to fight these evils "by their own forces".

The SCO declaration was surely the product of the close coordination between the Chinese and Russian leaderships. It was reflective of their conviction that now was the time to remind the Americans that Central Asia was in *their* backyard (not in America's), and that these two would henceforth be taking the initiative to ensure peace and security in this region.

More importantly, Beijing and Moscow wanted to give a clear signal to the world that they had a better and more equitable alternative to the unilateralism of the Bush Administration. The "new security architecture" that they proposed would promote "a just and rational world order based on the respect of the right of all countries to equal

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Three, Russia is therefore being welcomed back and has accordingly decided to come out more forcefully in defence of its interests in the region. Four, China will continue to expand its influence in the region, especially in the less developed states, but do so with greater subtlety and sensitivity to local views. Five, China's energy requirement is so great and growing so rapidly that it has no option but to enter into long-term arrangements with Russia and the Central Asian republics, to secure guaranteed oil and gas supplies for the region. Six, Iran must have been greatly relieved to see the US being challenged, even if gingerly, by a powerful regional coalition.

Seven, India's role will be critical in the success of this arrangement. While it has joined the SCO, it is too big and too clever to be tied down to any one option, especially at a time when it is being courted assiduously by both the US, China and Russia. It will want to keep its options open, to draw maximum advantage from all.

Can Pakistan play a similar game? It can, if it is able to resolve its internal contradictions and learns to maximize its human, economic and geographical advantages in a manner that they acquire a strategic dimension, that can then be brought into play with skill and acumen. The coming years are one of great challenges, but equally great opportunities, for Pakistan and the region.

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