

# Russia and China shifting the geo

By Sergei Blagov

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**T**URBULENT events in Central Asia this year — including Kyrgyzstan's revolution and the bloody suppression of protest in Uzbekistan — are helping to fuel a shift in the region's geopolitical balance. Russia appears to be the primary beneficiary of the realignment, while the United States now finds itself increasingly out of favour in the region.

Moscow has worked through regional multilateral organisations to enhance its strategic position in Central Asia. On July 5, one such group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, issued a request for the United States to set a deadline for the withdrawal of American military personnel from the region. US officials, citing bilateral agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, rejected the SCO's request. Nevertheless, the request seemed to confirm that Washington

is on the diplomatic defensive, as both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are SCO participants. The other SCO members are China, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Immediately after the September 11 terrorist tragedy, Central Asian leaders embraced strategic cooperation with the United States as a means to contain the growth of Islamic militancy in the region. Almost four years later, however, Islamic radicalism continues to pose a security threat, prompting enthusiasm among regional leaders for a strong US strategic presence in Central Asia to wane. In addition, many Central Asian officials believe that the Bush administration's aggressive democratisation policies have helped foment political upheaval in the former Soviet Union, leading to regime change in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Incumbents throughout Central Asia are now intent on preventing the revolutionary turmoil that engulfed Kyrgyzstan from spreading.

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In addition to the SCO, Russia is working through two other regional organisations — the Eurasian Economic Commonwealth (EEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) — to reassert Moscow's influence in Central Asia. The EEC, linking Russia,

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Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Belarus, focuses on multilateral economic integration, while the CSTO, including the same members plus Armenia, aims to tackle regional security concerns.

The groups are dominated by Russia. Both are headed by retired Russian generals — with

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# Geopolitical balance in Central Asia

Grogory Rapota leading the EEC and Nikolai Bordyuzha serving as secretary-general of the CSTO. The two organisations have so far functioned mostly on paper only. However, some observers believe growing security concerns are encouraging greater regional cooperation. At an

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EEC summit on June 22, for example, political leaders expressed newfound optimism about the establishment of a regional free-trade zone and customs alliance.

During the EEC summit, Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev noted that trade among bloc members in 2004 totalled

\$28 billion, up roughly 40 percent over the previous year. Russia has devoted particular attention to strengthening economic ties with Kazakhstan, which possesses Central Asia's most robust economy. Russia and Kazakhstan agreed to create a regional investment bank with initial capital of \$1.5 billion, the bulk of it to be supplied by Russia. The bank, expected to be operational by December 2005, is to be headquartered in Almaty, Kazakhstan. "This is not a closed bank, it will be open to shareholders from other CIS countries," Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

In conjunction with the EEC summit, Moscow played host to a June 22-23 gathering of CSTO states. Participants signed agreements providing for the deployment of a unified air defence system and the establishment of rapid reaction forces in Central Asia. These forces could be used in peacekeeping operations, Putin told journalists.

The CSTO summit resolved to create an inter-state commission on military-economic cooperation, aiming to promote closer ties among member states' defence industries. Russia, the leading power in the region, agreed to train military personnel for member states

and sell military equipment to them at a discount. Russian officials also expressed a desire to expand the CSTO's membership. "We plan to invite other countries to participate in CSTO activities as observers, and also foresee the admission of new members in the future," the RIA-Novosti news agency quoted an unidentified Kremlin source as saying.

Putin used the CSTO summit to criticise the US-led anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan, characterising it as "very ineffective". The Russian president pointed out that Taliban insurgents remain active in Afghanistan and the country has again developed into a drug-trafficking hub.

CSTO members also declined to support demands by the United States and other Western countries for an independent investigation into the Uzbek government's handling of the Andijan events in May. "Uzbekistan is not a CSTO member, and we do not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.

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