

The battle for Central Asia

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The 6-member Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has issued a joint statement that the US military phase of the Afghan war was coming to an end and called on the US-led forces to agree to a deadline for ending the temporary use of bases and air space in the member countries. The SCO comprises of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the latter four are the former republics of the USSR.

The SCO in its meeting at Kazakh capital Astana, while expressing support to the Coalition's anti-terror war in Afghanistan, reiterated that as the active military phase in the anti-terror operations were nearing completion, it would like the US-led coalition to fix a deadline for the use of the temporary infrastructure and the presence of its military garrison in the SCO member countries.

The SCO forms a powerful axis with its twin pillars, China and Russia, as a counterweight to the US hegemonic designs in Central Asia. China, Russia and Iran share deep apprehensions over the benevolently heightening US advances to the former Soviet Central Asian Republics. In this Sino-Russian-Iranian triad, Iran is viewed as a sort of frontline state in the present global scenario against US expansionism in the region.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation might culminate in its expansion from the current group of 6 to more including Iran, an emergence of a unique multi-trend military and security polarisation negating the logic of Pax-Americana. Iran represents one of the poles of attraction to offset the debilitating consequences of unbounded US influence in the region. Beijing fully shares Iran's deep worries about the American unilateral militarism and political ramifications.

Against this background, China has been making earnest efforts to mend its fences with India, another emerging power in the region. As part of it the Chinese Prime Minister recently undertook a high profile visit to Delhi to totally erase the bitterness that was created in the wake of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war.

The economic and geo-strategic conflicts run deep between the two countries. But the growing rapprochement between the two Asian giants is a great setback to the US efforts to encircle China.

Ghulam Asghar Khan

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao discussed a wide range of issues including free trade agreement and broadening defence and anti-terrorism ties to restore trust between the Indo-Chinese armies. In the wake of US hegemonic policies in Central and South Asia, broadening and deepening of defence exchanges between the two countries was of vital importance in enhancing mutual trust and understanding.

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Both the prime ministers agreed to jointly fight the threats posed by terrorism to peace and security of China and India and the world at large. As against Pakistan, China cannot possibly ignore India that is emerging as a major industrial and military power in Asia.

During Jiabao's visit both sides signed as many as 12 accords; the most important being the accord to re-adjust disputed points along the 5,000 kilometre long border. It was a major breakthrough in Sino-Indian relations when the joint statement after Jiabao's visit spoke of two sides being convinced that an early settlement of border question would advance the basic interests of both the sides and should therefore be pursued as a strategy objective.

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In the days to come the real drama to watch will be the wooing of India by both Washington and Beijing with varied offers of all kinds of dowries. The Indian 'belle' is too clever a bride to be someone's pawn, without understanding what was happening on the world monitor.

The pressing need with

which China approached the resolution of Sino-Indian differences couldn't be without gripping reasons. The subtle move by Washington to contain China was to dissuade India by convincing New Delhi that its salvation lay in following the US containment policy.

In his recent state visit to Washington, Indian PM Manmohan Singh was given a singular red-carpet reception and India was recognised as a nuclear power with all the consequential benefits of a big power. But India is suspicious of Washington's aims to make it a frontline state in any future confrontation between China and the US. India has traditionally been averse to being enlisted as a US camp follower, or a crusader against any future Washington venture in Central Asia or China.

True to the traditions set forth by Pandit Nehru in the Indonesian city of Bandung, India would not take the risk of moving against a great neighbour at the behest of the White House. With its fastest growing economy in the region, it cannot be lured by a vague aura of greatness through US benevolence at the cost of its economic and industrial development.

In reaction to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's demand for a deadline, a US spokesman reportedly said that while the Central Asian bases were important for the global war on terror as well as operations in Afghanistan, these were not crucial.

If they were not crucial, there was no need for Donald Rumsfeld to fly to Bishkek for a 3-day sojourn where he prevailed upon the Kyrgyzstan government to pledge that the US could maintain its bases there as long as needed for its operations in Afghanistan.

Both China and Russia believe that establishing bases in the former Russian republics has little to do with ongoing operations in Afghanistan where the US already has mega-bases. The excuse is being used as a cover-up to the American policy of encirclement of China, which is emerging as a global superpower to challenge the US ascendancy in Central Asia.

With Russia, China, Iran and India sharing common apprehensions about the US expansionist designs in Central Asia, there is a bleak possibility that Washington would succeed in its mission to contain China, the emerging superpower in the new millennium.