

Shanghai Co. Org. SCO — cracks behind the facade

By Stephen Blank

Behind the shared anti-American feelings, China, Russia and the other SCO members and observers harbour serious differences of opinion

TO the chagrin of American diplomats, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has quickly emerged as a force to be reckoned with in Central Asia.

At the fifth annual SCO summit, held in mid June in Shanghai, participants castigated the United States in a not-so-subtle fashion. An SCO declaration insisted that determining Central Asia's future was up to the states in the region, and not outside powers. "Models of social development should not be 'exported,'" the declaration stressed.

Anti-Americanism is the glue that binds the six SCO member states - China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - together. Washington's perceived role in stoking the Orange Revolution phenomenon - which peaked in March 2005 with the overthrow of Kyrgyzstan's government - unsettled Central Asian leaders, sending them running to Beijing and Moscow for political succor. As a result, the SCO, which as recently as 2004 was receiving scant attention from the State Department, rapidly developed into a geopolitical threat to US interests.

While surprised by the speed of the SCO's emergence, US diplomats and experts are now finding flaws in the organisation that can potentially be exploited down the road.

One of the SCO's chief weaknesses is connected with the expansion dilemma that the organisation is currently facing. The SCO's rapid emergence has made it attractive to other states in the region: both Iran and Pakistan, for instance, are openly eager to join. But many existing members are reluctant to accept these two controversial states, both currently observer members, believing that they could be a source of future geopolitical headaches.

Concerning Iran, both Russia and China withheld support for Tehran's full membership out of a desire not to enrage Washington at a particularly delicate time in the effort to resolve the Iranian nuclear programme crisis. Beyond that, however, it is clear several other SCO members, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, strongly oppose membership for Iran. Both believe that Iran, given its confrontation with the United States on the nuclear issue, could drag the SCO into a global crisis in which the organisation is not directly interested. Astana and Bishkek aren't losing sight of the fact that under the SCO charter, members can potentially be asked to come to the defence of another member in case of an attack.

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Outside of the expansion matter, Beijing and Moscow have differing visions for the SCO, but these differences are being papered over at present by both countries' shared desire to drastically reduce, or eliminate altogether US influence in Central Asia. Russia wants to transform the SCO into a club of energy producers, of which it would be the dominant partner. This notion, of course, not only goes against the interests of Central Asian producers, it also poses a threat to China and India, both of which are major consumers of Russian and Central Asian energy.

In sharp contrast to the Russians view, China wants to use the SCO as a facilitator of regional trade and investment, something that would enable Beijing to play the leading role. In political terms, China sees the SCO as a catalyst for the establishment of a new pan-Asian order, in which American military power and calls for democratisation are either excluded, or are negligible.

Prior to 2005, Russia did not take the SCO so seriously, tending to see it as Beijing's creature. But with the sudden turn of events in 2005, which saw the United States lose its military base in Uzbekistan, while China pursued bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Russian interest in the SCO rapidly increased. Moscow found itself determined to breathe new life into the SCO and advance its own agenda for the organisation. Russia favours a US withdrawal only from

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Central Asia, not the entire Asian continent. Keeping a US presence on the Korean Peninsula, for example, would serve as a check on China's growing power-projection capabilities. Russian officials worry that without a US presence in East Asia, China would establish itself as the dominant partner in the SCO and other multilateral groupings - an unsavoury prospect for Russian elites.

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that under the SCO charter, members can potentially be asked to come to the defence of another member in case of an attack.

Meanwhile, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf attended to Shanghai summit, where he lobbied for Islamabad's membership, emphasising Pakistan's location as the bridge to the Indian Ocean. SCO members remain wary of Pakistan, due to the country's ongoing association with the Taliban and other Islamic radical groups. Even if the SCO didn't have such concerns, the organisation would probably be reluctant to accept Pakistan as a full member without doing the same for India.

Thus the fact that India doesn't seem interested in full membership at this time constitutes a substantial obstacle for Pakistan. India's stance toward the SCO was underscored by Prime Minister's Manmohan Singh absence from the Shanghai summit. New Dehli has been improving its relationship with Washington, and believes Russia and China want to use the SCO mainly as a platform from which to launch diplomatic attacks against the United States. At the same time, India wants to maintain touch with the organisation out of a desire to cooperate with Beijing and Moscow on energy issues and direct security threats affecting the three states.

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Thus, behind the shared anti-American feelings, China, Russia and the other SCO members and observers harbour serious differences of opinion. Given these, it is unlikely that the SCO can develop anytime soon into an anti-NATO-like grouping along the lines of the Warsaw Pact. The SCO's consensus is a negative one, in which the parties agree only on what they don't like.

Since China and Russia show signs of wanting to use the SCO to pursue their own interests at the expense of smaller members and external powers, it is quite possible that differences will grow behind the facade of unity. Washington must be alert to exploit any openings to gain geopolitical advantage. While the political, ideological, and military dimensions of the New Great Game in Central Asia continue to heat up, it should be clear to all players that plenty of time remains in the contest. The SCO now appears to have momentum on its side, but such an advantage can dissipate quickly. COURTESY EURASIANET

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