

Shanghai Cooperation Or

By Ariel Cohen

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MEMBERS of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) during a June 15 summit forcefully asserted their right to regulate affairs in Central Asia. A declaration signed by the heads of state of all six member states, including Russia and China, is widely viewed as placing the group in direct opposition to the United States in the regional geopolitical contest.

SCO leaders gathered in Shanghai, site of the group's founding five years ago. In the June 15 declaration, the SCO professed to be operating according to "principles of openness, non-alliance and not targeting at any third party". However, the text's language left little doubt that the group rejects the US democratisation agenda, and hinted that member states would consider acting in concert in an effort to reduce the United States' geopolitical presence in Central Asia.

"The SCO will make a constructive contribution to the establishment of a new global security architecture of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and mutual respect," the declaration asserted. "Threats and challenges can be

effectively met only when there is broad cooperation among all countries and international organisations concerned. What specific means and mechanisms should be adopted to safeguard security of the region is the right and responsibility of countries in the region."

The statement went on to indicate that Central Asian states would follow their own development paths. "Diversity of civilisation and the model of development must be respected and upheld. Differences in cultural traditions, political and social systems, values and model of development formed in the course of history should not be taken as pretexts to interfere in other countries' internal affairs."

Also at the summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed support for Iran's right to engage in peaceful nuclear research. Following a side meeting with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who attended the summit as an observer, Putin stated that "all countries in the world, including Iran, have the right to fulfil their plans in the use of high technologies for the benefit of their development", the Moscow News web site reported. The Russian leader, however, added a caveat that nuclear research should be conducted "in a way to fully eliminate" international concerns that Iran was striving to build a nuclear weapon. Putin also announced that Iran was ready to negotiate on an international package

designed to prompt Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment activities in return for economic benefits. He indicated that Iran would soon make its views clear on a possible timeline for talks, the official RIA Novosti news agency reported.

In a speech at the summit, Ahmadinejad called on regional states to tighten cooperation. "We need a strong powerful organisation [SCO] to protect us from unreasonable outside interference," the Iranian leader said, plainly referring to the United States.

The oil price issue represents a major challenge for Russia and China. With its at a high-cost oil producer, and its need to keep oil prices high and its energy demand has an almost insatiable demand for oil, keeping the price

Washington now confronts the likelihood the SCO states will try to put the squeeze on the US geopolitical position in Central Asia. American policymakers are currently working to develop a strategy to blunt the SCO's ability to influence regional developments.

Kazakhstan, an SCO member, figures prominently in the US strategic calculus. Energy-rich Kazakhstan is

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Central Asia's economic engine, and thus wields considerable influence in any regional grouping of which it is a member. Top Bush administration officials have courted the country's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. For example, during an early May visit to Kazakhstan, US Vice President Dick Cheney expressed admiration for the country's economic and political development.

The United States is also believed to be supportive of Kazakhstan's efforts to

Ahmadinejad calling attention to Kazakhstan's decision to voluntarily give up its nuclear stockpile after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a gesture appreciated by the Bush Administration. At the same time, Kazakhstani officials have expressed a desire to forge closer economic relations with Iran.

So, what else can the United States do to counter the rise of the SCO? For one, Washington should recognise that the SCO's leading powers — China and Russia — are extremely sensitive to the

contrary to China's long-term economic interests. In addition, US officials should remind Beijing that unless Tehran is restrained, Iran is likely to drive up world oil prices through pursuit of its aggressive policies, especially its nuclear research programme. China is experiencing a tremendous rise in energy consumption, driven by the country's rapid economic development. As a UN Security Council member, China could play a key role in the possible imposition of sanctions against Iran, if Tehran continues to defy the international community on the nuclear issue.

The oil price issue represents a wedge that the United States can use to divide Russia and China. With its abundant yet hard-to-extract energy reserves, Russia is a high-cost oil producer, and is thus interested in the Middle East instability to keep oil prices high and its budget revenues higher. A senior Putin foreign policy advisor told me that Russia will quietly cheer more Middle East instability as oil prices may climb to \$90 a barrel or higher. China, on the other hand, has an almost insatiable demand for energy so that it can maintain its present economic growth pace. Thus, Beijing is interested in keeping the price of Middle East oil as low as possible.

There are few levers available to Washington to influence Russian behaviour. Perhaps the best Washington can do is to remind the Kremlin of the

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join the World Trade Organisation. The hope in Washington is that stronger US-Kazakhstani ties will encourage Astana to act as a force for moderation within the SCO vis-à-vis the United States.

The United States, however, will have to show patience towards Astana. Understandably, Nazarbayev is engaged in a balancing act between the Bear, the Dragon, and the far-away American Eagle. He recently sent a letter to

US presence in what has traditionally been their sphere of influence. Washington should develop a nuanced policy, using both words and actions, designed to reassure Moscow and Beijing that the geopolitical competition in Central Asia is not a zero-sum game.

American diplomats should also strive to convince Chinese officials that Russia is trying to drag Beijing into the anti-American bloc, an action that runs

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likely geopolitical repercussions of an aggressive, nuclear-armed Iran. Russia's present support for Tehran could easily boomerang in the coming years, and Moscow could come to see Tehran posing a geopolitical threat to the Russian Federation's southern flank. Iranian influence is already making inroads into Azerbaijan, and Tehran is likely to intensify its competition with Moscow for influence throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia.

As US officials engage China and Russia, Washington should concurrently continue building relationships not only with Kazakhstan, but also with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Mongolia. Bush Administration strategists believe that wealth creation, robust education strategies, and ethnic and religious harmony will go a long way to stem the rise of radical Islam, and thus take much of the steam out of the SCO.

As America is pursuing its "long war" on jihadi terrorism and ideology, it can ill-afford a conflict with Russia and China in Eurasia. Thus, Washington must explore ways to establish a dialogue with SCO, or risk yet another humiliation in the hands of Moscow and Beijing. **COURTESY EURASIANET**

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