

Power Politics in Central Asia

By Sean Yom

Oil rich, politically turbulent Central Asia finds itself at the center of a new great game of power politics. Both China and Russia, the two dominant powers of mainland Asia, regard this sub-region of transitional states as part of their “near abroad.” Since September 11 and the ensuing war on terrorism, Central Asia’s geopolitics have been further complicated by the new military presence of the United States, whose troops are now stationed in China’s and Russia’s backyard.

Prior to the U.S.-led military campaign, Russia and China were attempting to seal their strategic dominance over the region, courting the Central Asian governments into closer military, economic, and political relations. Sino-Russian interests and their vision of the region’s political future have been severely shaken by the new U.S. military and diplomatic initiatives in Central Asia. The entrance of another great power in the game of regional geopolitics almost certainly will affect the viability of a recently established entity called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) comprising Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Established one year ago, the SCO emerged as the institutional representation of the Shanghai Five, an informal, little-known security alliance that since 1996 included all the SCO members, except for Uzbekistan. In its first year of existence, the nascent SCO concerned itself primarily with security issues; at its founding, the six countries pledged to combat the “three evil forces” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism—a thinly disguised reference to Islamism. Russia and China, who spearheaded the group’s formation, intended to make the SCO a military-political alliance, one that would fashion a new regional security architecture. From its founding, however, there has been hope that the SCO would eventually forge mutually beneficial economic and political ties

among its members. Members discussed the possibility that the SCO could also encompass trade, investment, cultural, and technological components in the future. The organization has applied for UN recognition and has approached Mongolia, Pakistan, and India for prospective membership.

Yet with respect to the U.S.-led “war on terrorism,” the SCO has been conspicuously silent—a silence that many observers interpret as a sign of the organization’s state of turmoil and indecision. When the group signed its official 26-point legal charter in St. Petersburg on June 7 this year, Western diplomats largely regarded the SCO a stillborn organization—an ineffective young alliance made yet more irrelevant by the recent injection of U.S. troops into the heart of Central Asia. The SCO could not, for example, marshal any military response to the terrorist presence in Afghanistan. Moreover, much to the alarm of Moscow and Beijing, its Central Asian members, particularly Uzbekistan, wholeheartedly welcomed U.S. troops onto their soil. In short, the SCO’s inability to mount a cohesive strategy toward Afghanistan reflected its dismal failure as a security mechanism.

Clearly, the SCO enters its second year with a poor showing. However, it is too early to dismiss it as a regional player. And as some observers note, the very eagerness of the U.S. to dismiss the SCO betrays America’s own wide-ranging and newly ambitious interests in Central Asia. The evolution of the SCO will reflect the political realities of Central Asia, which in turn are torn by three different vectors: Sino-Russian relations, U.S. interests in the region, and the ongoing violence of Islamist militants.

Russia and China were the engines driving the SCO’s creation, and therefore have the most at

stake in its survival. Over the past six years they have engaged in increasingly tight relations, cooperating on issues like border demilitarization and trade; the June 2001 “Good-Neighborly Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation” was the first formal treaty of friendship between the two in decades. The SCO fused Moscow’s long-standing quest to control the near abroad with Beijing’s ambition to slowly build a multipolar world in which it is an influential player. Both of these powers envisaged the organization as an instrument to carve a safe rear from foreign encroachment in their geopolitical backyard, a way to exert dual hegemony over Central Asia.

However, the war on terrorism brought an American rapprochement with Russia that has troubled Chinese leadership. The May Treaty of Moscow, followed by the creation of the NATO-Russian Council, raised considerable disquiet in Beijing, which worried that Russia would be pulled into the orbit of the West and hence would no longer invest in the SCO. President Jiang feared that this would marginalize China and weaken its relative position vis-à-vis the Beijing-Moscow-Washington strategic triangle. However, Moscow still maintains strong ties with its eastern neighbor, with which it shares a border of 4,600 miles. Bilateral trade is greater with China than with the U.S.; the Chinese military also buys more than \$1 billion in Russian arms annually. Diplomatically, both countries stand together on such issues as their opposition to U.S. National Missile Defense and to their zero-tolerance approach to Islamist and separatist movements. Thus, despite Putin’s newly accommodating relations with the Bush White House, it is unlikely that Russia will drop its interest in building the SCO as a way

to exert influence on its southwestern border.

A powerful American presence in Central Asia will, however, necessarily compromise the SCO and reconstitute the region’s political future. The U.S. holds two primary interests: first, it has long eyed the area’s rich oil and gas reserves, and American companies are eager to develop this wealth; and second, it desires tactical ground to observe on-the-ground political developments nearby, especially in South Asia. A strong presence in Central Asia could leverage its political influence in shaping Indian-Pakistani relations, for instance, particularly at a time when the U.S. is building stronger military ties with both countries.

Not surprisingly, the U.S. has laid the foundation for a long-term presence by nurturing close partnerships with the Central Asian states. Economic assistance to these states has drastically risen (aid to Uzbekistan nearly tripled this year alone), and the State Department has toned down its usually stringent criticisms of their poor treatment of human rights. However, it is not clear what lasting imprint any American presence will leave beyond closer diplomatic and economic relations with the Central Asian states. Although its military bases in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan may eventually be closed as this theatre of the war on terrorism winds down, plans have been drawn for future military cooperation and training exercises with these countries. The continuing U.S. presence will likely serve to lure the Central Asian states away from Moscow and Beijing. Additionally, having American forces stationed within the Central Asian states themselves and so close to Russia and China—U.S. troops in

Bishkek, Tajikistan are only 200 miles from the Chinese border—effectively nullifies any regional security framework the SCO had in mind.

The third and final factor that will shape the SCO’s future is the ongoing struggle with political Islam. Although the war in Afghanistan retrenched Islamist radicalism, it did not eliminate it, and in fact it may have multiplied the threat by dispersing Islamist groups into hiding across Central and South Asia. Indeed, the precise danger of Islamism is what binds the regional security policies of the SCO countries together. All its members share growing unease with Islamist-styled militancy or separatist movements: China faces its perennial Uighur problem in Xinjiang; Russia uneasily conducts its war in Chechnya while also tightly clutching the restless Muslim provinces of its underbelly; and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan struggle with violent groups fermenting in the volatile Ferghana Valley, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Islamic Freedom Party). While some of these groups have been decimated by the U.S. campaign—for instance, IMU’s leader Juma Namangani was reportedly killed in Afghanistan earlier this year, and many of its fighters were captured—the threat of militant Islamist movements has been projected far beyond any real capacity they possess to genuinely challenge the Central Asian states’ integrity.

The SCO governments will continue to engage in hard-line tactics to squelch any rumblings of Islamic radicalism. For the Central Asian states, this means harassing or imprisoning even moderate Muslim leaders, monitoring all religious groups, and sustaining a regime of secularization within civil society. As should now be

self-evident, such a response sustains an ebb-and-flow cycle of Islamist violence. Brutal repression alienates unemployed youths who are already dislocated by the lack of economic opportunities and disillusioned with the persistent institutional failures of their governments to provide even the barest semblance of a just, efficient state. Consequently, Islamist militant networks easily recruit more fighters; in turn, the appearance of more fighters spurs governments to maintain the repression. In Chechnya and Xinjiang, for instance, persistent low-level violence by Islamic sepa-

ratist groups spurs Moscow and Beijing to harshly suppress the ethnic Muslim population, enabling militant groups to add to their militant ranks without difficulty.

The future of the SCO will reflect three different dynamics—Sino-Russian relations, U.S. presence in Central Asia, and the response to Islamist movements. The emergence of a new multilateral organization to address transnational issues should be regarded as a positive step forward in the pursuit of regional peace, stability, and progress. In the end, its contribution to these goals will essen-

tially depend on the degree to which the individual interests of the two great powers who are founding members of the SCO contradict or complement the somewhat different set of interests that the U.S. brings to Central Asia.

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