

Meeting of the "Shanghai Group" in Bishkek: China moves toward Moscow to strengthen its influence in Central Asia

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A summit of the heads of state of the "Shanghai Group" took place recently in the Kyrgyzstan capital of Bishkek. Members of the group, which met on August 24-25, included Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The meeting was an attempt to develop co-operation between Russia and China in Central Asia, and to create a counterweight to the influence of the West in this region.

The crucial role was played by China, which, in contrast to an economically and politically weakened Russia, wants to act in world politics as an independent superpower. In Asia, it wants to construct an alternative centre of power that could challenge both the US and Japan.

The "Shanghai Group" was formed in 1996 to regulate border disputes between China and the Confederation of Independent States (CIS). At that time, the five countries represented in Shanghai signed a declaration of mutual support. One year later, this was extended by an arms limitation agreement in the border regions that declared these to be a "minimum militarised" zone, in which only border troops were to be stationed.

A special feature of this co-operation was that the four CIS participants (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) acted together, although considerable differences already existed between them. Each of these countries was trying to develop independent relations with China even then. Bilateral meetings took place, at which questions of economic co-operation were discussed, in addition to the border problems.

At that point, Moscow did not insist on playing the leading role in the negotiations of the CIS with China. Its weakened influence and the absence at the previous year's meeting of Boris Yeltsin—who was represented by the then-Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov—were seen in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as an indication that Moscow was leaving the negotiations with Beijing to them. In their search for a stronger and more stable partner, they increasingly acted without taking the interests of Russia into consideration.

The changed situation has caused Moscow to seek to win back its abandoned positions in Central Asia and to establish co-operation with China.

The motivation for the recent meeting was formulated in quite a rough and direct form by Yeltsin. On his arrival in Bishkek, still standing on the plane's gangway, he said he was "fighting fit" and

was ready "to take up the battle with everyone ... particularly with the West".

This utterance provoked a flood of comments from those directly around the president. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov "elucidated" that one had to understand Yeltsin's assertion in context; it was aimed against attempts to establish a uni-polar world.

"In the world at present, an active fight for the future world order is taking place, for the construction of a multi-polar world in the interest of all countries", Ivanov said. "There are attempts to establish a uni-polar world, however, and Russia has always opposed this and will continue to do so in the future", he emphasised.

The "multi-polar world" formed the quintessence of the joint declaration adopted in Bishkek. In this document, multi-polarity is defined as the tendency of general development in the modern world, which should provide long-term stability internationally.

Yeltsin's thoughtless anti-Western utterances were taken up immediately by the Russian liberal press. The newspaper *Izvestia* accused the president of speaking "inappropriately" and reminded him of the fact that Russia "like never before, if not dependent on very close relations with the West, must nevertheless rely on its loyalty, at least".

"In a uni-polar world", the newspaper continued in the Russian mass media's unique brand of cynicism, "one can effectively (and, what is important, harmlessly) fight in the election campaign at meetings of dissatisfied pensioners. This is what the communist opposition has already successfully done for many years. But the president ... does not live in an illusory world of ideological myths. He concerns himself (or in any case he should) with real politics. But in real politics, each word must be weighed carefully and the possible consequences measured."

For Russia, the significance of the meeting in Bishkek rests, above all, on the fact that Russia is regarded less and less as a serious "player" in this region and beyond. America, the most important political partner of Russia, is obviously losing interest in the country's domestic problems. In addition, the obvious weakness of Russia revealed during the Kosovo War, which can lead to new debacles in innumerable conflicts, as in the north Caucasus, forces the Kremlin to seek alternative geopolitical alliances.

Another important element that forced Yeltsin to undertake the

journey is a fundamental transformation in Russia's domestic equilibrium. The opposition movement "Fatherland—All Russia" survived a period of persecution by the Kremlin and is now gaining support. This united electoral bloc was formed at the beginning of August. In the last two weeks it has conducted successful congresses in Moscow and the Bashkortostan capital of Ufa. The political weight of the bloc increased further with the entry of former Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov. As a result, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov explained he would be ready to support Primakov's candidacy in the Russian presidential elections next year.

All attempts to forge a serious counterweight to this alliance from the different pro-Kremlin organisations have failed. Furthermore, it has not been possible to undermine the financial base of the Luzhkov alliance, or prevent its participation in the coming parliamentary elections.

Under these conditions, Yeltsin's only option is to make contact with the Primakov-Luzhkov group. If they were to guarantee his personal security—and there is no reason why they should not do so, as they have done so in the past—and Yeltsin could detach himself from the shady figures who have repeatedly brought him into conflict with the *nomenklatura* oligarchs, he might be able to fashion a compromise with the Primakov-Luzhkov bloc.

If Yeltsin were to solidarise himself with the moderate anti-Western policy of Primakov, an "honorary role" (as with former CP general secretaries) could probably be found for him. He could figure as a representative of Russia abroad, or as "peacemaker". It is from this perspective that Yeltsin's main initiative in Bishkek must also be seen—the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia.

Moreover, one must bear in mind the fact that China has caused great envy among broad sections of the new dominant class in Russia. In the example of China they see opportunities for Russia that were missed from the very outset. There were lost opportunities for Russia to maintain a more independent road in relation to the West, and to preserve the "traditional" forms of political suppression, i.e., elements of the totalitarian Stalinist regime.

For their part, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are also interested in the development of relations with China. They are all confronted with serious domestic problems and are situated directly in the unstable Central Asiatic belt. With their participation in the "Shanghai Group" they are seeking to be pulled along by the Chinese economic locomotive, and, at the same time, to increasingly free themselves from Russian dependency.

As for China, its principal aim lies in the revival of the transcontinental corridor along the path of the former "Silk Route". China is looking for a direct way into Europe and is seeking access to the oil resources that the Caspian Sea could provide.

A whole series of projects moving in this direction have already been implemented. In addition, tensions with America have continued to rise following the bombardment of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. This not only caused sharp reactions from within official circles in Beijing, but gave rise to spontaneous mass protests in many cities.

As with all the other participants, the Chinese side appeared content with the results of the summit. Besides purely economic arrangements, the recent agreements have increased security along the Chinese border. Apart from its proximity to Afghanistan, China is confronted with a separatist movement in the Xinjiang region, situated in the northwest of the country. The path of the Silk Route runs precisely through this region. Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who participated in the summit, explained that the experiences of the "Shanghai Group" might also be used to resolve border conflicts in other regions of the country.

A typical example of the constant border conflicts within the region was the attack on the southern region of Kyrgyzstan by Islamic fighters, who penetrated the country from Tajikistan, occupying several areas and taking almost 100 hostages. As the guerrilla leaders explained, their principal aim is to entangle Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in a conflict.

The commander of Russia's federal border troops, Konstantin Totzki, who accompanied Yeltsin to Bishkek, said Moscow was ready to lend Kyrgyzstan military support.

The participants at the Bishkek conference repeatedly said that the results of the meeting should not be interpreted as signalling a confrontation with the rest of the world, and stressed the open character of their co-operation. On the eve of the meeting, Boris Yeltsin told the *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* newspaper that neither Russia nor China regarded "its strategic partnership as an alliance that is directed against other states". Kyrgyzstan Foreign Minister Muratbek Imanaliyev explained at the end of the conference that "the 'Shanghai Group' does not want to create a bloc, forum or alliance".

The objective significance of the Bishkek summit lies in the search for alternatives to Western influence in Central Asia. *Izvestia* gave the meeting "top marks" and wrote: "This time, Moscow and Beijing have practically declared an end to the strategic tripartite alliance, under which the USA stood closer to Moscow and Beijing than these two countries did to each other".



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