

Russia and China call for closure of US bases in Central Asia

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a grouping of China, Russia and four Central Asian republics, issued an unprecedented statement at a summit meeting on July 5 in Kazakhstan calling on the United States to set a deadline for the removal of its military bases in Central Asia.

While supporting the Bush administration's general rhetoric that a "war on terror" is being fought, the SCO declaration stated: "Considering that the active phase of the military anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan has finished, member states ... consider it essential that the relevant participants in the anti-terrorist coalition set deadlines for the temporary use" of military bases in the region.

Sergei Prikhodko, an aide to Russian President Vladimir Putin, told the media that it was not a demand for the US to withdraw immediately, but it was "important for the SCO members to know when [US] troops will go home". The SCO used Washington's own propaganda that the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan have brought peace and democracy to the war-devastated country to argue that the American military no longer needed its bases in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Three days later, the lower house of the Russian parliament ratified a 15-year bilateral agreement between Russia and Kyrgyzstan to double the number of Russian troops at its airbase at Kant, east of Bishkek. Earlier this year, Russia announced plans to deploy more combat aircraft to Kant.

Washington established airbases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to support the US invasion of Afghanistan in November 2001. Three-and-a-half years later, the bases are still operational and garrisoned by hundreds of American troops. In Kyrgyzstan, American and Russian aircraft are located within two minutes flying time from one another.

The SCO declaration demonstrates that Russia and China are taking tentative steps to challenge the US military presence in Central Asia.

Formerly known as the "Shanghai Five", the SCO was established in 1996 by China, Russia, and the former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan joined in June 2001, when the body was restructured with a permanent secretariat headquartered in Beijing. The perspective underlying its formation was to create a "strategic partnership" between China and Russia, with the aim of developing economic cooperation in the exploitation of Central Asia's rich oil and gas reserves.

All the member-states of the SCO initially endorsed the US invasion of Afghanistan, both to avoid any conflict with Washington and to exploit the "war on terror" for their own agendas. Moscow used it to legitimise its war of repression against Muslim separatism in Chechnya, while Beijing justified a crackdown against separatists in its Central Asian, Muslim-populated province of Xinjiang. The regimes in the poverty-stricken Central Asian republics seized upon "terrorism" to justify suppressing social unrest and political opposition.

Over the past several years, however, Washington's presence in Central Asia has provoked growing nervousness. While the invasion of Afghanistan was camouflaged as a war to eradicate terrorism, the true aim

was to realise long-held US strategic ambitions to deploy military forces for the first time into the Central Asian territories of the former Soviet Union and attempt to assert dominance over the resource-rich area. From the bases it now controls, the US is able to exert a continuous threat against countries in the region, including Russia, China and Iran.

US policies in Central Asia since 2001 have challenged Russian influence in particular. The Bush administration backed the so-called "colour revolutions" in the former Soviet republics of Georgia and the Ukraine. In both cases, pro-US political forces brought down governments that were aligned with Moscow. In March this year, another "revolution" in Kyrgyzstan culminated in the installation of a new regime that is attempting to balance between the US and Russia. In May, both Washington and Moscow tacitly supported the Uzbek government—which has collaborated closely with the US—when it brutally suppressed a rebellion in the city of Andijan.

As the geo-political struggle develops, the SCO has increasingly come to be viewed in Russia as a means of shoring up its influence over the Central Asian republics and forging a closer relationship with China, as a counterweight to the US.

Andrei Grozin, director of the Central Asia section of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] Institute, told the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on July 4 that the SCO might "create a working, functioning structure to support stability and to preserve those political systems that have taken shape in the post-Soviet Asiatic states".

Sergei Markedonov, a researcher at Russia's Institute of Political and Military Analysis, told the Moscow-based *RIA Novosti* newspaper on July 13 that the recent political unrest in Central Asia showed that Russia, in cooperation with China, needed to function as "a regional policeman".

China also has definite strategic interests in Central Asia. Beijing has financed a network of pipelines in Central Asia to Xinjiang province as an alternative source of oil supplies from the Middle East. US predominance in the region, or US-inspired political instability, could disrupt China's plans, as well as potentially encourage ethnic unrest in Xinjiang.

The call to end US military bases in Central Asia was most likely decided during meetings between Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao, who visited Russia from June 30 to July 3, just before the SCO summit.

In a bilateral statement, "World Order in 21st Century," issued on July 2, China and Russia warned of the danger of "unilateralism" in international relations, called for a greater role for the United Nations, and stability in the Korean Peninsula. Hu told reporters after his talks with Putin: "We reinforced our mutual support on key issues like Taiwan and Chechnya, which concern our vital interests."

At the SCO summit, the Central Asian regimes lined up with Moscow's and Beijing's rhetoric against "unilateralism"—a codeword for US global hegemony. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev declared: "There should be no place for interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states".

Uzbek president Islam Karimov said pro-Western forces "hijack

stability and impose their model of development” on the region. To show its commitment to the SCO line, the Uzbek government issued a statement on July 7 insisting that flights from the US air base in Karshi-Khanabad be confined to operations over northern Afghanistan. “Any other prospects for a US military presence in Uzbekistan were not considered by the Uzbek side”, the statement declared.

In Kyrgyzstan, the newly elected president, Kurman Bakiyev, told reporters on July 11 that the US presence in the country should be reconsidered. “This issue was raised at the SCO summit, since the situation in Afghanistan has changed. The situation in Afghanistan will soon stabilise. The country has had presidential elections and is getting ready to elect a parliament, so the question about the coalition base’s presence in Kyrgyzstan arises.”

The US immediately rejected these statements. During a visit to China on July 10, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice maintained that the US would not withdraw from Afghanistan. “It is our understanding that the people of Afghanistan want and need the help of the US armed forces,” she declared at a Beijing press conference. Having established a footprint in Central Asia for the first time in history, US imperialism does not intend to leave.

On July 14, the chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Richard Myers openly accused China and Russia of “trying to bully” the Central Asian states into calling for the closure of the American bases. Just who is bullying whom, however, was demonstrated this week, when US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld flew into Kyrgyzstan and rapidly extracted agreements for the continuation of the airbase in the country.

The Kyrgyz defence minister told journalists on July 26 that “now, I agree with Mr Secretary” and that the US base would stay “as long as the situation in Afghanistan requires”. The government of Tajikistan also fell into line under American pressure, guaranteeing the US military ongoing use of Tajik airspace and territory.

The Uzbekistan government, which has not given a guarantee to Washington that the US base can remain and did not give Rumsfeld one this week, is facing Bush administration threats of an international inquiry into the May 13 repression at Andijian. On July 12, State Department spokesman Tom Casey declared: “Certainly, the Uzbekistan government owes its citizens and owes the international community a serious, credible and independent investigation.”

The geopolitical conflict for influence in Central Asia and access to resources can only intensify as the regional powers seek to assert their interests and the US attempts to establish dominance.

A significant aspect of the SCO summit was the granting of observer status to Iran, India and Pakistan. The Bush administration has consistently threatened Iran since it was named alongside Iraq and North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” at the beginning of 2001. All the SCO states have mutual interests in forestalling any US moves to overthrow the Tehran regime. The Central Asian republics are deeply concerned by the implications for domestic stability if US bases on their territories were used for aggression against Iran. For their part, Russia and China do not want to see another of the world’s major oil producers being transformed into a US client state.

China has growing energy interests in Iran. Last October, China signed a long-term \$70 billion agreement with Tehran for a 51 percent stake in Iran’s largest onshore oilfield. At the SCO summit, Iranian vice president, Mohammad Reza Aref, declared his country could become the “bridge” that connected the SCO states to the resources of the Persian Gulf.

Russia and China’s invitation to India and Pakistan to attend the SCO likewise involves long-term questions of access to oil and gas. While currently stalled due to US opposition, both New Delhi and Islamabad are interested in the construction of a gas pipeline from Iran, through Pakistan to India. China and India signed protocols earlier this year to lay the basis for closer political and economic relations.

All indications point to increasing efforts by China over the coming years to develop the SCO, as the framework for closer relations with Russia in particular and access to energy resources. The Chinese media even labeled Hu’s recent visit to Russia a “trip of oil”.

Since the establishment of their “strategic partnership”, bilateral trade between Russia and China has risen dramatically—and is expected to grow 20 percent this year, from \$21.2 billion in 2004. By 2010, the trade could reach \$60-\$80 billion. China is planning to increase its oil imports from Russia by 50 percent this year, to 70 million barrels. Chinese oil companies are investigating major investments in Russian energy companies. Over \$6 billion in Chinese loans have already been provided to Rosneft, the main state-owned oil exporter to China.

A central focus of China’s interest is Siberia. Nearly half of all the proven oil reserves of the former USSR are in the region, as are 70 percent of all Russia’s coal reserves. It is Russia’s largest producer of oil, the second largest for coal and a major centre of metal industries. Some 140 out of some 200 largest enterprises in Siberia are weapon manufacturers, whose main customer is China. The area is also home to numerous former USSR research centres in fields such as physics, aerospace and nuclear power.

Russian rail authorities confirmed that in the first five months of this year, 3.6 million tons of crude oil had been freighted to China from eastern Siberia, an increase of 37 percent from last year. To facilitate oil exports, Beijing has been pushing Russia to build a pipeline from Siberia to China’s northeastern provinces.

Alongside the economic linkage, China and Russia are strengthening their military ties. The two countries are preparing their first joint military exercise, to be conducted in China, involving 8,000 troops. Russia intends to send warships, ground forces and long-range bombers. Although both sides have denied that the exercise is aimed at any country, there is little doubt that it is a response to the eruption of US aggression since 2001 and the growing uncertainties in world politics.



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