

Central Asian military exercises highlight rising great-power tensions

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which consists of Russia, China and four Central Asian republics, held its “Peace Mission 2007” joint war games from August 9 to 17, starting in the Chinese western province of Xinjiang and continuing in Russia’s Ural region of Chelyabinsk. The military exercise, followed by the SCO’s annual summit in Kyrgyzstan on August 16, is one more indication of rising great-power tensions over the energy-rich Central Asian region.

Russian president Vladimir Putin took the opportunity to formally announce that Russia was restoring the Cold War practice of long-range patrolling by nuclear-capable strategic bombers around the world. “We hope our partners will treat this with understanding,” he said. In fact, the announcement, coinciding with the SCO war games, was calculated to send a message, particularly to Washington, that Moscow intends to reassert its strategic interests and forcefully respond to US encroachments on its borders.

“Peace Mission 2007” followed a joint military exercise by Russia and China in 2005, involving large-scale amphibious operations in the Yellow Sea in eastern China. Its purpose was to send a warning to Taiwan against any moves toward declaring independence. The political message from the latest war games, which involved all SCO members, including Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, was no less pointed.

More than 6,000 troops, including 2,000 from Russia and 1,600 from China, supported by 100 warplanes and 500 armoured vehicles, simulated a military exercise to crush an imaginary uprising by “terrorist” and “religious extremist” forces. The defeat of 1,000 insurgents was planned as part of a series of diplomatic, political and economic interventions into “state A” which was hypothetically endangered by a group of separatists or other political opposition.

Moscow and Beijing denied the war games were aimed at any “third party”. But the real purpose was obvious: to send a warning that Russia and China would not tolerate the emergence of opposition movements in Central Asia, nor their exploitation by the US and other rivals. The scenario made clear that the SCO would not accept a repetition in Central Asia of the US-backed “colour revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia. Significantly, a request from Washington to send observers to

“Peace Missions 2007” was rejected.

Russian chief of general staff, General Yuri Baluyevsky, bluntly declared before the SCO war games: “These [Western] states continue to make attempts to convince our nations of the necessity to form so-called ‘true democratic’ institutions of state and public management using the Western model, which destabilises the situation in the states of the region.”

Russia reportedly proposed to hold “Peace Mission 2007” within the framework of the Collective Security Defence Treaty Organisation (CSTO)—Moscow’s defence pact signed with the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 1992. Beijing, however, rejected the idea out of concern that CSTO’s involvement could create the impression that China was forming a military bloc with Russia, thus aggravating its relations with the US.

The *Wall Street Journal* commented on August 15 that while the prospect of the SCO becoming a military alliance was still uncertain, the war games demonstrated “worrying” cooperation between Beijing and Moscow. “It highlights the direct military interests Russia and China are taking in Central Asia, an area of which the US and Europe know very little. Even more worrying, the Chinese role in the exercise provides yet more evidence of the dimensions of Chinese military ambitions and capabilities, the potential targets of which are by no means limited to Central Asian Muslims,” it stated.

What is concerning Washington is that Russian-Chinese cooperation is cutting across American efforts to exert its own domination in Central Asia. In the wake of the September 11 attacks in the US, the Bush administration established a series of military bases and other concessions in Central Asia republics for the first time. As Beijing and Moscow recognised, Washington’s “war on terror” was a convenient means not only for occupying Afghanistan, but for bringing the key strategic region within the US orbit.

The “Shanghai Five” was initially formed 11 years ago to resolve the border disputes between Russia and China. But the growing US threat, especially after Bush came to power, compelled China and Russia to form a closer “strategic partnership”. The SCO was formed in June 2001 with the aim of suppressing “terrorism”, “separatism” and “extremism” in

Central Asia. Following the US invasion of Iraq and threats against Iran, Moscow and Beijing increasingly turned to military as well as political cooperation.

In early 2005, former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev was toppled by protests in the so-called “Tulip Revolution” and replaced by opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Under pressure from Moscow, however, Bakiyev quickly made clear he intended to maintain close ties with Russia. Shortly afterward, Uzbek President Islam Karimov ruthlessly suppressed opposition protests in Andijan. In defiance of criticism from the US and its allies, the SCO strongly backed Uzbekistan.

Moreover, the SCO summit in 2005 issued a demand for the US to set a deadline to remove its military bases in Central Asia. Uzbekistan shut down the US air base and Kyrgyzstan increased rent one hundred-fold for the continued US use of its Manas base. At the same time, Russia continued to use a Kyrgyz air base free of charge. US assistant secretary of state Richard Boucher complained during a visit to Kyrgyzstan this June that the fate of the Manas base should be decided bilaterally and not by discussion between SCO members.

Russia and China, however, continue to oppose US military presence in the region. This month’s SCO summit declared: “Stability and security in Central Asia are best ensured primarily through efforts taken by the nations of the region on the basis of the existing regional associations.” The SCO has also been the means for making overtures to other countries in the region. Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia have observer status, while Afghan president Hamid Karzai has attended SCO summits since 2004 as an invited guest.

Ivan Safranchuk, the director of the Moscow branch of the World Security Institute, pointedly told the *Christian Science Monitor* on August 17: “That’s one reason why the SCO is holding military exercises, to demonstrate its capability to take responsibility for stability in Central Asia after the US leaves.”

In the face of Washington’s aggressive stance, Russia and China have increasingly found common ground. Both want the US out of Central Asia and are threatened by the Bush administration’s policies on a number of fronts. For its part, Beijing is seeking to counter US efforts to encircle China through a series of strategic alliances, including with Japan, Australia and India.

At the SCO summit, Putin declared: “Year by year, the SCO is becoming a more substantial factor in ensuring security in the region.” Without naming the US, he nevertheless criticised its policies. “Any attempts to solve global and regional problems unilaterally are hopeless,” he said. Chinese president Hu Jintao warned against outside interference, saying: “Security for Central Asia was best left to the nations themselves”.

At the same time, Russia and China are wary about openly antagonising the US or establishing a formal military alliance. At the summit, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denounced US plans to establish a ballistic missile defence in

Eastern Europe, saying it was “of concern for much of the continent, Asia and SCO members”. Beijing and Moscow, while no doubt agreeing with the sentiment, were more measured in their comments. Moreover, at this stage, they have yet to accept Iran’s application to join SCO.

At the same time, SCO members share complimentary economic interests. China’s huge appetite for oil and gas provides a new market for Russian energy monopolies, while Moscow’s arms industries are vital to Beijing’s drive to modernise its military. Commenting on SCO’s economic potential, the *Financial Times* wrote on August 14: “Covering a vast area from the Russian Arctic to the central Asian deserts bordering Afghanistan and Iran, SCO countries house more than a quarter of the world’s population and at least a fifth of global oil and gas reserves, plus huge uranium resources.”

The SCO summit discussed Putin’s proposal last year to create an “energy club”. Kazak president Nursultan Nazarbaev called for the building of “a system of pipelines” connecting all SCO states and for a unified energy regulator. In a separate visit to Kazakhstan, Hu Jintao secured an agreement to extend an oil pipeline already linking the two countries on to the Caspian Sea. The pipeline could deliver up to one million barrels of oil per day to China. A newly proposed \$4 billion gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China, due to be completed by 2009, would also pass through Kazakhstan.

Turkmen president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov attended the summit as an invited guest. He stressed that Turkmenistan, which has huge reserves of natural gas, adopted a “neutral” position and favoured “multi-optionality of routes” to export its energy resources. Berdimuhamedov’s comments were clearly aimed at maintaining a certain independence, particularly of Russia. But his very presence at the summit will not have pleased the Bush administration, which has sought to tie Turkmenistan to a US pipeline plan to bypass Russian territory.

Far from creating stability and prosperity in Central Asia, the SCO summit simply underscores the substantial economic and strategic interests at stake for all the major powers. Having established its economic and military footholds in the region over the past decade, the US is not about to give them up without a struggle.



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