

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation cautiously endorses Russia over Georgia

Strategic rivalries

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Even before the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) annual summit began in Tajikistan on August 28, it was clear that the Russia-Georgian conflict was going to be high on the agenda. On the eve of the meeting, Moscow announced its full recognition of the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Amid threats from the US and European powers, Russia was looking to its SCO allies, particularly China, for support.

The SCO was formed by China, Russia and four Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—in 2001. Officially its aim was to fight “terrorism” and separatism, but its real purpose was to counter the US presence in Central Asia by cementing a closer Russian-Chinese partnership. In the past few years, many Western observers have expressed concerns that the SCO would evolve into a political-military bloc that may even rival NATO. With Russia’s military might and oil, China’s growing economic clout and the substantial energy resources in Central Asia, the SCO has attracted interest from Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia, which have attended as observers.

Not surprisingly, the SCO’s joint statement focussed on Georgia. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev seized on the communiqué to declare that the summit had adopted a “united position” of all its member states in supporting Moscow’s action against Georgia. “I hope it will serve as a serious signal to those who try to turn black into white and justify this aggression [against Russia],” Medvedev said.

In reality, the joint statement indicated that the SCO was far from united. Russia did not get any backing from China over its recognition of the two breakaway Georgian provinces. What emerged was largely a compromise between Russia and China. On the one hand, the SCO statement supported “the active role of Russia in assisting peace and cooperation in the region”. On the other, however, it expressed “deep concern over the recent tensions surrounding the South Ossetia question and calls for the sides to peacefully resolve existing problems through dialogue”.

The Russia-Georgia conflict and subsequent escalation of Russian-US tensions was a test of China’s commitment to relations with Russia. Beijing cannot afford to see Russian influence weaken under the Western pressure, exposing China’s vast flank in Central Asia to potentially hostile powers. At the same time, China fears being dragged into a confrontation with the

US and European powers—China’s largest economic partners.

Beijing is also worried that South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence will encourage separatist movements within China. On the eve of the SCO summit, foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang cautiously expressed that concern, stating: “We are fully aware of the complicated history and reality of the issues of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and given our consistent position on such issues, we hope the relevant countries properly resolve the issues through dialogue and consultation.”

Beijing faces separatist movements in Tibet and in Xinjiang province, where Muslim Uighur militants have carried out attacks in recent months. Just before the SCO summit, two policemen were killed. Xinjiang possesses large oil and gas reserves and is the corridor for energy pipelines from Central Asia into China. Beijing fears that the US and other Western powers could exploit the local insurgency to advance their own influence in the region.

Chinese President Hu Jintao was clearly seeking to balance at the summit. Amid calls in the US to boycott the Winter Olympics in Russia in 2014 over Georgia, he publicly declared China’s support for Russian city, Sochi, holding the games. After all, Russia had expressed strong support for China as it faced threats from European leaders to boycott the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics following China’s crackdown on protests in Tibet in March.

The Central Asian republics present at the SCO summit displayed a similar ambivalence to Russia’s actions. While concerned at Washington’s backing for so-called colour revolutions in the region, these regimes fear being dominated by their two big neighbours—Russia and China—and confront their own separatist threats.

One of Moscow’s strongest backers, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev, declared: “I am amazed that the West simply ignored the fact that Georgian armed forces attacked the peaceful city of Tskhinvali... I believe that all subsequent steps taken by Russia have been designed to stop the bloodshed of ordinary residents or this long-suffering city.” He did not, however, explicitly support Moscow’s recognition of the two breakaway Georgian regions.

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The lack of full SCO support for Russia was noted in Moscow. Like the Russian president, Russian Communist Party deputy chairman Ivan Melnikov insisted that the SCO declaration “has put a stop to all this speculation about the international isolation of Russia”.

However, *Kommersant* was less optimistic, pointing out that the SCO statement left Russia “alone” in its confrontation with the NATO. It cited a senior Russian official saying that the SCO states had expressed sympathy for Russia, but apologised for “being unable to voice their position in public”. An analyst told the newspaper that China had pushed for the removal of the word “genocide” in reference to the Georgian army’s initial invasion of South Ossetia, in order to tone down the resolution.

Dmitry Kosyrev, a political commentator for the state-run RIV Novosti newsagency, commented: “When it made the decision to recognise these breakaway provinces, Moscow knew that its SCO partners would not be too happy about it... However, as unlike in [former Soviet leader] Comrade Leonid Brezhnev’s time, Moscow is not trying to press any countries into supporting it on this issue. If it did, it could find quite a few sympathisers, but who cares. For some countries, such ‘support’ becomes a commodity which they sell routinely to different customers.”

Russian government spokesman Dmitry Peskov sought to play down differences at the SCO summit, saying that Beijing’s position “does not mean China is isolating Russia”. However, note has been taken in Washington and other Western capitals of China’s stance. The *Wall Street Journal* observed: “China hasn’t joined the West’s chorus of criticism, but its disquiet over the recognition of separatist enclaves strains what had been a close diplomatic partnership between Moscow and Beijing”.

The *Financial Times* wrote on August 27: “At the moment, Beijing can afford to keep a low profile, safe in the knowledge that the US will veto recognition of the two regions if it ever comes to the UN Security Council. But the last thing China wants is an escalated conflict, let alone a new Cold War, that forces it to take sides.”

Pointing to the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, the *Financial Times* continued: “Just because the two countries are now pursuing forms of authoritarian capitalism does not mean they are automatic bedfellows. China has moved closer to Russia in recent years, but there are clear limits to the alliance that Washington could exploit.”

Whether the US can or will exploit such differences remains to be seen. Russia and China have come together in a developing “strategic partnership” since the 1990s out of mutual fear of Washington’s militarist policies. The US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are aimed at establishing American hegemony over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia—a matter of serious concern to China, which has rapidly rising energy needs. Both Russia and China fear the creation of American client states and military bases in their “backyards” in Central Asia.

Referring to the conflict in Georgia, China’s hawkish official newspaper, *Global Times*, warned on September 1 that the

Western powers wanted to create suspicion and distrust between Russia and China. “This will best benefit the West and the US”, because if the two powers were “united”, they would be very hard for the US to deal with, the paper wrote, urging Russia not to fall into the trap.

On one key issue, China may benefit from increasing Russian tensions with Europe in particular. An *Asia Times* article on August 19 pointed out that Moscow’s strategic goal had been to make Europe dependent on its energy supply, while using China as an alternative market for price and strategic bargaining against its European rivals. Thus, the escalating US-Russian tensions “suit China perfectly well”, as they would transform Russia’s lip service of supplying energy to China into reality. “As an energy guzzler, China will be a huge beneficiary if another Berlin Wall were to appear in Russia’s relations with Europe at this juncture,” the *Asia Times* wrote.

Just a week before Georgia attacked South Ossetia, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin went to Beijing for a secret meeting on energy cooperation. While no details have been leaked, the official *China Daily* enthused: “It seems that a shift of Russia’s energy export policy is underway. Russia might turn its eyes from the Western countries to the Asia-Pacific region... the political and geographic closeness of the two countries would put their energy cooperation under a safe umbrella and make it a win-win deal. China-Russia ties are at their best times... The two sides settled their lingering border disputes, held joint military exercises, and enjoyed rapidly increasing bilateral trade.”

China is walking a fine line. Russia’s economic resurgence in recent years is based on the energy boom. China, however, is a cheap labour platform heavily dependent on US and European markets and investment for its industrial expansion. The main focus of China’s leaders has been to maintain rapid economic growth while ensuring social stability at home. However, as the Chinese regime seeks to secure raw materials around the world, it is increasingly being drawn into great power rivalry. While wary about becoming involved in tensions between Russia and the US, China cannot afford to alienate Russia and be left isolated on the international stage.



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