

SCO summit points to deepening global tensions

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit held in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, on June 15, marked a further consolidation of an emerging bloc led by China and Russia that could potentially rival the US and its European allies. As well as the other SCO members—the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia attended as observers; Belarus and Sri Lanka as dialogue partners; and Afghanistan as an invitee.

Russia and China used the forum to challenge Washington on a range of issues. Of particular concern to both Moscow and Beijing are US plans for anti-ballistic missile systems based in Europe and Asia. While nominally directed at so-called rogue states such as North Korea and Iran, the anti-missile systems would undermine the effectiveness of Chinese and Russian nuclear missiles, especially in the event of a first strike by the US.

A joint declaration's denunciation of "unilateral and unlimited build-up of missile defence" was an obvious reference to the US plans. Speaking to reporters, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the criticism was directed not only at the proposed US anti-missile shield in Europe, but "the global missile defence system being set up by the United States, which also covers East and South Asia."

The SCO also provided a platform for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to condemn the current US-led world order "managed and run by slavers and colonisers of the past." He told SCO members: "I believe together we can reform the way the world is managed. We can restore the tranquillity of the world."

Iran is one of four countries that have SCO observer status, but significantly the body has rejected its application for full membership on the grounds that countries under international sanctions cannot be members. Russia and

China have significant interests in Iran, but both countries have been seeking to avoid a direct confrontation with the US over Iran's nuclear program and have voted for UN sanctions resolutions against Tehran.

At a meeting last Thursday following the SCO summit, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Chinese President Hu Jintao voiced their common concern about the NATO bombing of Libya. Their joint statement called for a halt to "wilful interpretation and expanded application" by the US and NATO of UN resolutions 1970 and 1973 to justify their efforts to oust the Gaddafi regime.

Not wanting an open diplomatic row with Washington, both Russia and China abstained on the UN resolutions, which accepted the lie that the bombing was necessary to protect Libyan civilians. Having declined to exercise their UN Security Council veto powers to block the resolutions, Beijing and Moscow are now concerned that the ousting of Gaddafi will undermine billions of dollars in contracts signed with Tripoli. Moreover, the joint statement expressed a fear of further US interventions, declaring that "outside forces should not interfere in internal processes in the countries of the region."

The SCO summit also called for a "neutral" Afghanistan, in opposition to US efforts to establish permanent military bases in the country as part of any winding back of US and foreign troop numbers in the country. Significantly, Afghan President Hamid Karzai was present in Astana, indicating the existence of disagreements with Washington over the terms of any continued US military occupation. Afghanistan has applied for, but not yet been granted, SCO observer status.

Russian opposition to ongoing US bases was voiced in a foreign ministry statement in February, which declared: "Why will US military bases be needed if the terrorist threat in ... Afghanistan is ended? ... How will Afghanistan's

neighbours view the deployment of a foreign country's military bases near their territory?" The US has no intention of quitting Afghanistan, however. Washington plans to maintain its large military bases as part of its efforts to dominate South and Central Asia.

The conflict over Afghanistan underlines the reasons for the formation of the SCO a decade ago. At the time, Moscow and Beijing were concerned at US efforts to establish a strategic and economic presence in Central Asia—a region that both countries regard as their backyard. Those fears only escalated after the US occupation of Afghanistan in late 2001 and the establishment of US military bases in several Central Asian states.

China and Russia used rising concerns among their Central Asian partners over US-sponsored "colour revolutions" in former Soviet republics to issue a SCO communiqué in 2005 calling for a US timetable to withdraw from its Central Asian military bases. In the same year, Uzbekistan, under pressure from Beijing and Moscow, ordered the US out of an air base in that country.

In 2009, Kyrgyzstan President Kurmanbek Bakiyev ordered the shutting of an American base used to transport supplies for Afghanistan, only to reverse the decision under the US pressure. The base was a major issue in political unrest last year that led to the ousting of Bakiyev and the installation of a regime more sympathetic to Moscow and Beijing.

The SCO has repeatedly denied that it aspires to become a military alliance or a "NATO of the East." Nevertheless, the past decade has witnessed growing security ties between its member states. Since 2003, the SCO has held a series of joint military exercises, dominated by Chinese and Russian forces. The military chiefs of SCO members met in Shanghai in April for what is planned to be a regular forum to boost defence and security cooperation.

China's rise as an economic power has given it considerable clout within the SCO. Over the past decade, China's trade with SCO members has soared from \$US12 billion to about \$90 billion, of which \$60 billion is with Russia. As a major energy consumer, China's interests are bound up with establishing the infrastructure and agreements necessary to guarantee access to Central Asian oil and gas. That has become a bone of contention with Russia, which is seeking to maximise its energy prices.

While Russia and China have mutual interests in keeping the US out of Central Asia, their underlying rivalry for

influence in the region remains. Moscow has supported India's bid for full SCO membership as a means of countering growing Chinese influence, while Beijing has encouraged the efforts of its close South Asian partner, Pakistan, to likewise apply for membership.

While India has longstanding relations with Russia, China regards India as a regional rival and a competitor for Central Asian energy supplies. Indian foreign minister S.M. Krishna lauded SCO's "constructive and forward looking role" in Afghanistan and expressed his hope that India's SCO membership would encourage trade ties between Central and South Asia.

Although neither country was accepted as a SCO member, the summit set out a framework for Pakistan and India to join. Despite their manoeuvring for influence within the SCO, both Beijing and Moscow are concerned at the implications of drawing the two South Asian rivals—which have fought three wars against each other since 1948—into the organisation. An added fear is that the two countries, rather than drawing away from the US, might become stalking horses for Washington inside the SCO.

Ten years after the SCO's formation, the 2011 summit is another sign that the eruption of US militarism in Afghanistan, Iraq and now Libya has immensely heightened global tensions that are leading to great-power conflict.



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