

# Shanghai Cooperation Organisation warns against US-led war on Syria

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The latest summit of the Russian- and Chinese-led Central Asian grouping, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), held in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, on September 13, was dominated by the rising global tensions produced by the US preparations for war against Syria.

Russian President Vladimir Putin insisted that “military interference from outside the country without a UN Security Council sanction is inadmissible.” The summit’s joint declaration opposed “Western intervention in Syria, as well as the loosening of the internal and regional stability in the Middle East.” The SCO called for an international “reconciliation” conference to permit negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition forces.

As he had done at the recent G20 summit in St Petersburg, Chinese President Xi Jinping lined up with Russia against any military assault on Damascus, fearing that it would be a prelude to attack Iran, one of China’s major oil suppliers.

Significantly, Iran’s new President Hassan Rouhani attended the meeting, despite suggestions that his government would mark a shift from former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his anti-American rhetoric at previous SCO summits. Rouhani welcomed Russia’s proposal to put Syria’s chemical weapons under international control, claiming that it has “given us hope that we will be able to avoid a new war in the region.”

The SCO explicitly supported Iran’s right to develop its nuclear program. Putin insisted in an address that “Iran, the same as any other state, has the right to peaceful use of atomic energy, including [uranium] enrichment operations.” The SCO declaration warned, without naming the US and its allies, that “the threat of military force and unilateral sanctions against the

independent state of [Iran] are unacceptable.” A confrontation against Iran would bring “untold damage” to the region and the world at large.

The SCO statement also criticised Washington’s building of anti-ballistic missile defence systems in Eastern Europe and Asia, aimed at undermining the nuclear strike capacity of China and Russia. “You cannot provide for your own security at the expense of others,” the statement declared.

Despite such critical language, neither Putin nor Xi want to openly confront Washington and its European allies. Prior to the SCO summit, there was speculation that Putin would deliver advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran and build a second nuclear reactor for the country. Russian officials eventually denied the reports.

Russia and China are facing growing pressure from US imperialism, including the threat that it will use its military might to dominate the key energy reserves in the Middle East and Central Asia. The SCO was established in 2001, shortly before the US utilised the “war on terror” to invade Afghanistan. Although the SCO’s official aim is to counter “three evils”—separatism, extremism and terrorism in the region—it is above all a bid to ensure that Eurasia does not fall completely into Washington’s orbit.

Apart from the four former Soviet Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—the group also includes, as observer states, Mongolia, Iran, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The “dialogue partners” are Belarus, Sri Lanka and, significantly, Turkey, a NATO member, which was added last year.

However, US influence is clearly being brought to bear on the grouping. Before the summit, there were reports in the Pakistani press that the country could be

accepted as a full SCO member. Russia invited new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to attend. However, Sharif only sent his national security advisor Sartaj Aziz, and no Pakistan membership was granted.

While the SCO is looking to enhance its role in Pakistan's neighbour, Afghanistan, after the scheduled withdrawal of NATO forces, Aziz said Pakistan's policy was "no interference and no favorites." He insisted that the US-backed regime in Kabul could achieve an "Afghan-led reconciliation" if all countries in the region resisted the temptation to "fill the power vacuum."

China and Russia are also deeply concerned by the US "pivot to Asia" to militarily threaten China and to lesser extent, Russia's Far East, by strengthening Washington's military capacities and alliances with countries such as Japan and South Korea. In June, China and Russia held a major joint naval exercise in the Sea of Japan, and in August, they carried out joint land/air drills in Russia involving tanks, heavy artillery and warplanes.

Facing US threats to its interests in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific, China is escalating its efforts to acquire energy supplies in Central Asia. For President Xi, the SCO summit was the last stop in a 10-day trip to Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan—where he signed or inaugurated multi-billion-dollar deals for oil and gas projects.

At his first stop, Turkmenistan, Xi inaugurated a gas-processing facility at a massive new field on the border with Afghanistan. Beijing has lent Turkmenistan \$US8 billion for the project, which will triple gas supplies to China by the end of this decade. The country is already China's largest supplier of gas, thanks to a 1,800-kilometer pipeline across Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China.

In Kazakhstan, where Xi signed a deal to buy to a minority stake in an offshore oilfield for \$5 billion, he called for the development of a new "silk road economic belt." Trade between China and the five Central Asian republics has increased nearly 100-fold since 1992, and Kazakhstan is now the third largest destination of Chinese overseas investment.

Xi delivered a speech declaring that Beijing would never interfere in the domestic affairs of the Central Asian states, never seek a dominant role in the region and never try to "nurture a sphere of influence." This

message clearly sought to also placate concerns in Russia over China's growing clout in the former Soviet republics.

During the G20 summit, the China National Petroleum Corporation signed a "basic conditions" agreement with Russia's Gazprom to prepare a deal, expected to be inked next year, for Gazprom to supply at least 38 billion cubic metres of gas per year to China via a pipeline by 2018.

With so much at stake, Wang Haiyun of Shanghai University declared in the *Global Times* that "maintaining regime security has become the utmost concern for SCO Central Asian members, including even Russia." He accused the US and other Western powers of inciting "democratic turmoil" and "colour revolutions" and warned that if any SCO member "became a pro-Western state, it will have an impact on the very existence of the SCO." If necessary, China had to show "decisiveness and responsibility" to join Russia and other members to contain the turmoil, i.e. to militarily crush any "colour revolution" in the region.

The discussions at the SCO meeting are a clear indication that Russia and China regard the US war plans against Syria and Iran as part of a wider design to undermine their security, underscoring the danger that the reckless US drive to intervene against Syria will provoke a far wider conflagration.



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