

## CENTRAL ASIA: SCO AND NATO IN REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POLITICS

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There is a more or less general agreement among political scientists that the center of gravity of the most important (or even critically important) world developments is shifting toward Central Asia. The sequence of events brings us back to square one: the Soviet Union's disintegration and the emergence of the newly independent states. A potential boon that could have opened access to the region's oil and gas riches and could have enriched the local states and their extra-regional partners was buried by the inadequate behavior of the sides involved. Business cooperation presupposes mutual understanding and mutual concessions for the sake of mutual benefit. It would have been wise to keep political and ideological considerations and business strictly apart, but this is much harder to achieve in reality. Reality proved different: encouraged by the disintegration of the Soviet "empire of evil," the West, led by the United States, tried to use this opportunity to achieve unilateral advantages.

An article by Helena Cobban, member of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, which appeared in *Christian Science Monitor* reminded everyone that the interests of the world powers were

closely intertwined. Indeed, China and Japan are the largest among America's creditors while Russia is one of Europe's largest suppliers of energy resources. Market, investment, and production structures are intertwined and know no state borders.<sup>1</sup>

We might have rejoiced at these developments which could have improved, in the near future, the living standards of the destitute population groups across the planet, extinguished the national, religious, and ethnic conflicts, and done away with the unipolar world as the political and economic hegemony of one state. But it is too early to talk about the end of the Cold War and laying the cornerstone of mutual understanding.

Former Deputy Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union G. Kornienko, who calls himself a "Cold War participant," has the following to say on this score: "The Cold War, which never ended (contrary to numerous declarations), **stopped** all of a sudden since the Soviet Union, one of its subjects and its main object, disappeared. This is very different from the orderly discontinuation of the Cold War when international relations are smoothly transferred to a new non-confrontational level."<sup>2</sup>

This never happened; as soon as the jubilation over the death of the Soviet Union, the WTO disbandment, the melting down of the "socialist camp," and Russia's withdrawal from Vietnam and Cuba quieted down, the United States and the West demonstrated the "paternalist approach of the victors" toward Russia and the former Soviet republics. G. Kornienko has offered the following comments: "They obviously intended to treat us not as equal members of the world community; their attitude depended on our readiness to accept Western patterns in our domestic affairs and to take orders from the United States on the international arena." This treatment continued in the early 21st century; its echo can be heard today when new Russia is actively affirming itself as an equal partner in international affairs.

It was a time when the position of the former "main foe," the Soviet Union, was undermined. The Russian Federation, which had recently acquired its legal status, looked like a gravely ill patient. The former Soviet republics were engrossed in dividing the unexpected wealth of independence and lavished promises on the West European and American partners who arrived at the auction. The Central Asian newcomers, who had no previous experience of "surviving in the world of free enterprise," found themselves in dire straits: each deal was accompanied by political demands and the order to part ways with Russia.

At first the task of incorporating the newly independent states into the Western markets on the conditions imposed by the West and the United States looked easy once the main political rival was safely out of the way. The rapidly growing demand for hydrocarbons, however, added more frenzy to economic rivalry that might have easily developed into confrontation. The 9/11 events pushed the U.S. administration towards the country's ominous occupation of Afghanistan and later Iraq where protracted fighting under the slogan of struggle against terrorism and extremism is still going on and which keep the 36 NATO members and their allies riveted.

It was in this fairly complicated situation of the mid-1990s that the SCO (based on the Shanghai Five) was set up to address the regional security issues. The declaration of the SCO summit of June 2006 said that its continued successful functioning "is of significant importance for the world community looking for a new non-confrontational model of interstate relations that would exclude the Cold War patterns of thinking and would be above all ideological disagreements."

At first the West looked at the new structure as another discussion club or exertion on the part of Russia and China to expand their influence in Central Asia. Some of the political observers seemed

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<sup>1</sup> See: *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 August, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> G.M. Kornienko, "Kholodnaia voyna." *Svidetelstvo uchastnika*, OLMA-PRESS, Moscow, 2001, p. 413.

concerned about the fact that the population of the six Eurasian and Asian members was much larger than that of Europe or the United States. On the whole, no one, except the experts in anti-Russian propaganda, was perturbed. The sober politicians knew that in no way could the SCO be presented as an “anti-Western and anti-American bloc ... since this contradicted the deeply rooted interests of the member states that wanted to cooperate with the West in various fields.”<sup>3</sup>

On the eve of the August 2008 Dushanbe summit some members of the expert community voiced the opinion that if Russia and China entered into closer cooperation the SCO would be able to stand opposed to America’s influence in Central Asia. “Bringing Iran and Pakistan into the SCO would also accredit China and Russia in the Muslim world, an important factor in their continual search for energy resources and their efforts to fight Islamists extremism within their own countries.”<sup>4</sup>

It was pointed out that the SCO would be unable to gain enough power to affect worldwide developments because of the polemics between Russia and China: “They have very different views on how to approach the energy crisis as they both are confronted with different problems, one being a large oil importer and the other a high-cost exporter.”<sup>5</sup>

The SCO’s main documents indicate that its members are concentrating on pooling their forces for the sake of regional security and stability through a stable and reliable regional security system.

- The SCO intends, first, to oppose the threat of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia that has come to stay. In many cases the threat is taking on fundamentalist hues and, as we have witnessed, pushing public sentiments toward radicalism in those local countries that are living under pressure from their neighbors’ conflict zones.
- Second, each of the SCO members should take harsh measures to stem the flow of illegal narcotics. This is treated as a priority which is expected to strengthen the regional security and national security of each of the members. Central Asia has become the crossroads of world drug routes and its by-product—illegal trade in weapons—one of the many occupations of the emissaries of Islamist terrorist organizations.
- Third, the SCO is crafting the strategy and tactics of reaching stability in the conflict situation caused “mainly by the rivalry of the world forces for regional domination.”<sup>6</sup>

Various international structures (the U.N., EU, OSCE, SCO, NATO, and others) are involved in the region where their offices are engaged in elaborating regional security measures. The results can hardly be described as positive not only because political, ideological, and economic disagreements keep them disunited.

Each of the structures in pursuance of the aims formulated by its founding fathers favors its own approach to what are in fact absolutely identical problems. NATO as a military-political organization is intent on defending freedom and democracy; the European Union formulates its aims as European citizenship, ensuring freedom, security and rule of law; promoting economic and social progress; and strengthening Europe’s worldwide role. The SCO has stated that it seeks stronger mutual confidence and good-neighborly relations among its members; more effective cooperation in politics, trade, economics, science, and technology and culture; it intends to exert the concerted efforts needed to pre-

<sup>3</sup> A. Lukin, “Shankhaiskaia organizatsia sotrudnichestva: chto dalshe?” *Polit.Ru*, 10 October, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> A.C. Castillo, “SCO: Rise of NATO East?” available at [<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=90108>].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> E. Madiev, “Perspektivy vzaimodeystvia stran ShOS v sfere bezopasnosti,” Institute of World Economics and Politics, available at [[http://www.iwep.kz/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1823&Itemid=44](http://www.iwep.kz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1823&Itemid=44)].

serve peace, security, and stability in the region and advance toward democratic, fair, and rational new international political and economic order.

Their documents create the impression that each of the structures is devoted to the noblest of aims. This impression is superficial. U.S.-led NATO, first, relies on force to address all problems (its own in particular). Second, the absolute majority (!) of the EU members belong to NATO. They never hesitated to move NATO forces into Central Asia, a region far removed from the European continent, at the mere suspicion that “Western democracy is threatened there.”

Washington wraps its interests in a highly attractive cover: constant support of the democratic institutions, the local NGOs, and the independent media. The latest events have revealed beyond a doubt that American “democratization” goes hand in hand with an impudent expansion of America’s presence. This is, in fact, a new practice of gaining world domination through complex military-political and economic strategy realized through NGOs of all kinds.

The radical changes that are taking place in the rapidly changing world notwithstanding, the NATO leaders remain convinced (and try to convince others) that this military-political organization as an effective instrument for planting “democratic values” far away from its responsibility zone, in Central Asia in particular, has no alternatives. The results are hard to predict.

The frantic activities of America and NATO in Central Asia are aimed at perpetrating their military presence in the region through numerous bilateral and multilateral programs aimed at tying the local states to NATO. The Alliance is seeking control over their transit and transportation potential; there are plans to turn NATO into a power security instrument.

Experts from the “near” and “far” abroad have pointed out that “the NATO troops in Central Asia serve as the basis for the Alliance’s continued control over the neighboring countries that threaten, to a certain extent, the West and its interests.”<sup>7</sup> NATO is obviously moving to the fore as the key geopolitical and military player in Central Asia with the foundation for this role already in place: the Partnership for Peace program, bilateral relations with the Central Asian countries, and military-political cooperation with them.

The SCO has never positioned itself as a military-political organization and it is not such. It is not guilty of the sin of democratization with the use of force and meddling in the domestic affairs of other states. In the last decade NATO troops were moved, on America’s initiative, into Afghanistan to plant the “new world order” and into Iraq to allegedly fight terrorism there.

We should always bear in mind that the SCO is very clear about its regional role and about its readiness to cooperate on the global scale. It has never mentioned the use of force, which means that it favors multisided economic and cultural cooperation. The numerous attempts to identify the SCO with the CSTO invariably failed. In one of his interviews Professor A. Kniyazev of the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University said that their formats are different: “The CSTO is a military-political organization with the stress on military aspects. The SCO is a political alliance with a still unclear mission and mandate. Specification of both will be slow because of China’s interests.”<sup>8</sup>

The above should not be dismissed as the opinion of a competent analyst who stands too close to the pro-Moscow circles of the CIS. In 2007, for example, senior analyst of the British Academy of Defense Henry Platter-Zyberk<sup>9</sup> offered a more or less similar opinion: “I do not think it (the SCO.—*V.P.*) intends to become a military alliance. No such threat exists because two key members (Russia

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<sup>7</sup> T. Shaymergenov, “Problems and Prospects of NATO’s Central Asian Strategy: The Role of Kazakhstan,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (50), 2008.

<sup>8</sup> See: [<http://www.np.kz/index.php?newsid=1830>], 5 October, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> The interview is tagged with “The interview does not reflect the official policy of the HMG or War Office;” the usual practice of our NATO colleagues.

and China) do not need it. I'd even say that they do not trust each other sufficiently to form a military alliance. The Organization may become a trade partner for the European Union even though it will be extremely difficult because every member in both structures has its own economic and political interests. If you ask me, viewing the Organization as a sort of rival to NATO (an idea suggested by *The Times*, for example) is a mistake—to say the least.”<sup>10</sup>

Henry Platter-Zyberk pointed to another aspect of the relations among the Central Asian SCO members, the EU, and NATO or, rather, to their very important part closely related to regional developments. The SCO is operating on its own territory, that is, in a geographically important expanse, while NATO and the EU have been lured there by the smell of oil. The SCO granted Afghanistan, Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan, and India an observer status. Some of them are seeking membership which could have created certain problems for an organization “with a still unclear mission and mandate.” The British expert was very open about this: when answering the question: “What about India and Pakistan?” he said: “Offering membership to both countries simultaneously means that Cashmere will be a problem of the Organization. And the Organization does not really need it. Had the Organization been prepared to expand, it would have told India and Pakistan to sort out their problems first and then apply for membership.”

This sounds reasonable especially in view of his other comment: “I'd be surprised to see the Organization offering full membership to Iran. Europe and the United States will hit the roof. I repeat: it is a problem the Organization does not need.”

The Iranian nuclear file, the smoldering Cashmere and other problems defy simple solutions. The SCO leaders have discussed these far from simple issues while taking into account the positions of their partners, opponents, and obvious ill-wishers and being guided by the 2002 SCO Charter.

Art 1 of the document says that the Organization intends “to jointly counteract terrorism, separatism, and extremism in all their manifestations and fight against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking and other types of criminal activities of a transnational nature, as well as illegal migration.” This could have promoted cooperation between the SCO and NATO, at least in Afghanistan where the ISAF contingent staffed with NATO troops has been fighting for nearly seven years, without much success.

On 18 September, 2008, speaking at the First EU-Central Asia Forum on Security in Paris, SCO Secretary General B. Nurgaliev said that the SCO member states were ready for close cooperation with international regional organizations and other interested countries for the sake of a wide partner network to control the flow of narcotics. He reminded the Paris Forum that the latest SCO summit in Dushanbe suggested that practical steps toward a conference on Afghanistan under the SCO aegis should be convened to discuss the joint struggle against terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, and organized crime. Some of the heads of state of the SCO members pointed out that the EU, along with U.N., OSCE, CSTO, and NATO, should be invited.

The SCO is engaged in talks on these issues with all the interested sides; its cooperation with NATO in the Afghan context, however, is not smooth. On 3 September, 2008 P. Goncharov of RIA Novosti pointed out: “During the days of trial for Russia-NATO relations the issues of their cooperation on Afghanistan was removed from the agenda without much ado. This means that military transit to Afghanistan across Russia (practically the only sphere of real cooperation) has survived. No one talks any longer about possible cooperation between CSTO and NATO with respect to Afghanistan. The issue has been suspended.”<sup>11</sup> The political observer goes on to say: “The CSTO

<sup>10</sup> For the full text, see: [<http://www.fergana.ru/article.php?id=2093>], 14 August, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> P. Goncharov, “Bez osobogo shuma. Moskva i NATO prodolzhaui sotrudnicat po Afganistanu,” available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1220420580>], 3 September, 2008.

will never enter Afghanistan proper—this is totally excluded, at least today.” We can readily agree with this especially since P. Goncharov specified his statement with “Afghanistan proper” and “at least today.” He goes on to ask what format and what status would have allowed CSTO to contribute to stabilization in this country. Direct military involvement together with the ISAF under NATO command is unthinkable. Today the possibilities of such cooperation are limited since none of the sides has crafted suitable approaches (and it is unlikely that any of them will try to do this) that would make concerted actions possible and take into account the interests of Afghanistan along with the interests of NATO and CSTO.

Moscow is obviously aware of the issue’s far from simple and highly sensitive nature. Today, Moscow has limited itself to suggesting that a workgroup be set up at the CSTO Council of Foreign Ministers on post-conflict settlement in Afghanistan. It consists of national coordinators but it is not clear what they can coordinate in a country bogged down in an armed conflict and in the presence of the ISAF acting under the SC U.N. mandate.

It is advisable to move ahead on issues related to post-conflict settlement in Afghanistan by drawing on the experience of Russia’s SCO and CSTO Central Asia partners that, as P. Goncharov put it, “are tilling Afghanistan’s economic fields . . . exclusively on a bilateral basis.” Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are equally successful where their economic cooperation and joint security efforts are concerned. Russia, too, should learn from its SCO and CSTO colleagues; it should formulate its own suggestion to the Afghan side without delay before NATO comes up with the same through its Central Asian NGOs. In fact, today NATO prefers bilateral relations in Central Asia in an effort to fragment the region by backing the pro-Western countries and setting them against those who side with Russia. This can be described as “divide and rule diplomacy” which plays on the contradictions between the local states.

Moscow’s ample Afghan experience may prove useful today: economic cooperation and trade can be complemented with revived military-technical cooperation. There are spheres where this can be done without stepping on NATO’s toes. In any case, in the current regional situation it is advisable to pursue bilateral agreements (something that the Afghan side suggests) without missing the chance of talking to the EU and NATO (even though nearly all EU members belong to NATO).

This context suggests that our relations with the EU should be readjusted. Recently Yuli Kvitsinsky, First Deputy Chairman of the RF State Duma Committee for International Affairs, pointed out: “After the crisis Europe, for obvious reasons, has been demonstrating more independence. America is responsible for the crisis, which means that it can no longer serve a positive example for Europe.” At the same time, said the deputy, “the strategic aims of the EU members remain the same.”<sup>12</sup> This means that Russia, an independent state and a SCO member, should pursue an independent policy while coordinating it with its partners.

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<sup>12</sup> *Literaturnaiia gazeta*, 15-21 October, 2008, p. 2.