

THE SCO AND THE WEST

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Introduction

The world community is showing an ever mounting interest in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which appeared in 2001 on the basis of the Shanghai Five. The United States (and the other NATO members for that matter) is apprehensive of China's stronger regional profile and the SCO's possible anti-Western vector for the simple reason that the Western political and academic community knows next to nothing about the new structure and the negotiations inside it. These fears do nothing for the relations between the SCO members and the West, where a large

number of skeptical (at best) or even negative assessments have cropped up in numerous articles.

The relations between the West and SCO are developing under the impact of the bilateral relations between the United States and individual SCO members and their rivaling interests in many regions, Central Asia in particular. This means that future cooperation among the interstate security structures present in the region depends on whether the West revises its SCO policy and whether the SCO members (Russia and China in particular) reciprocate.

How the West Sees the SCO

Today, there is no agreement about the SCO and its policies in the world, however the number of positive Western assessments of its future is growing, probably because much more is being written about the organization. The West is gradually revising its formerly negative opinion.

In 2001, as soon as the Shanghai Five became a full-fledged regional organization, its members clearly outlined their aims and responsibilities. As a relatively new regional structure of multisided cooperation, the SCO is ready to talk to all states and multilateral structures and cooperate with them. According to the SCO Charter and other official documents, "the SCO is a non-military organization; it does not act against third countries or international organizations. It aims at opposing the new non-traditional security threats."

The member states stand together against the transborder threats (international terrorism, religious extremism, and illegal trade in drugs and armaments) with no clear state borders. This means that the use of force is ineffective and that the member states should act together in the sphere of politics and diplomacy rather than building up their military-political capabilities.

It is not an anti-Western or an anti-American structure, since its members do not object to the regional presence of Western states and international organizations. None of its documents speaks negatively of the United States or any other Western country; its members, in fact, are convinced that tighter security at the global and regional level requires closer cooperation with other international structures.

Certain objective trends, however, are causing concern in the West and are seen as the first steps toward “anti-NATO of the East.”¹

These concerns are caused by several factors.

- *First*, the level of SCO international recognition is rising together with the large Asian countries’ increased interest in it: Iran, Pakistan, and India are consistently seeking SCO membership, even if their full membership is fairly doubtful. The West, however, fears any possibility of two nuclear powers and Iran, which claims the role of a regional leader, joining the SCO: this looks very much like a potential threat to Western strategic interests in Asia.²
- *Second*, not infrequently, Western analysts point to closer relations between Moscow and Beijing within the SCO.³ They are not quite right: the two countries’ rivalry in Central Asia (within the SCO) cannot be described as a conflict, however nor are their relations cloudless. It should be said, however, that, as they develop, Russia’s and China’s relations with the Central Asian countries implicate the West’s limited presence in the region.
- *Third*, the SCO members repeatedly indulged themselves in negative comments about the West and the United States in particular. Contrary to the commonly shared opinion that the SCO members do not intend to confront the West (the U.S.), all of them are openly displeased with the Western policies in the Central Asian Region; this was amply confirmed by the Declaration of the Astana 2005 Summit⁴ which suggested for the first time that the term of America’s military presence in the Central Asian republics should be clearly defined.

From the very beginning, the SCO members have been rejecting the unipolar world, an objective of the United States, which is seeking the role of a global leader. The analytical community is convinced that “while it does not seek to oppose Washington either globally or regionally, the SCO does not want any links with Washington either. This means it wanted to get along without the U.S. but not go against it.”⁵

- *Fourth*, the Western countries are very concerned about the SCO military exercises. Its anti-terrorist exercises called Peaceful Mission 2010, which took place in September 2010, received very negative media coverage in the West. Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* likened the SCO to the Warsaw Treaty Organization; *The New York Times* accused China and Russia of seek-

¹ Not infrequently, Western analysts regard the SCO as an eastern alternative to NATO (see, for example: [<http://www.infoshos.ru/ru/?idn=330>]).

² It should be said that the West will not object to India’s SCO membership because of its good relations with the United States and the other Western countries. China will object to its membership if Pakistan is left outside the SCO: Beijing’s relations with Delhi are too complicated.

³ See: “Uverenaya postup Vostoka vyzyvaet drozh u Zapada,” 18 August, 2007, available at [<http://www.fergananeews.com/article.php?id=5292>].

⁴ [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1120666800>].

⁵ For more detail, see: I. Safranchuk, “The Competition for Security Roles in Central Asia,” *Russia in Global Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1, January-March 2008.

ing control over Central Asia's natural resources through the SCO, while *Süddeutsche Zeitung* suspected the SCO members wanting to set up a power center independent of the West. *Le Figaro* of France and *Yomiuri* of Japan were of a similar opinion.

The West is very much displeased with the plans of some of the SCO members to become more involved in a military-political settlement in Afghanistan.

The above shows that the West fears that the SCO might develop into an alliance of the largest Asian powers (China, Russia, Iran, India, and Pakistan). These fears are premature, to say the least: the SCO can become a military-political alliance only if and when it resolves its numerous organizational problems and reaches an agreement on how to admit new members.

The following latent contradictions prevent the SCO from developing into an efficient security factor in the region:

1. Today, the SCO members are pursuing their own aims and are guided by their national interests to the detriment of collective goals. Russia regards its involvement as another confirmation of its claims to global or, at least, regional leadership. China is using the SCO to penetrate Central Asia; the local countries and Russia, in turn, do not object to this. The Central Asian SCO members rely on it as a counterbalance to Russia's and China's presence in the region. The Central Asian countries need the SCO so as not to be left outside the regional and global security structures.
2. The SCO members have not yet agreed on the priorities. Russia and China are drawing closer together while engaged in mounting latent rivalry over the spheres of influence in the region. Today, their different ideas about the SCO's future interfere with political decision-making within the SCO. The leaders of both countries are moving ahead to insist on their own version of the SCO's future. China is building up its economic presence on a bilateral basis, outside the SCO.

Russia is working hard to preserve its role in the region: the Customs Union is one such practical step intended to stir up cooperation in the security sphere. This affected the economic relations inside the SCO and trimmed China's ambitions in the Central Asian countries.
3. Everything said about the SCO's anti-Western nature does not hold water. Today, the local states are developing their bilateral relations with the West. In fact, the Central Asian countries want to preserve good relations with the Western powers; some of them regard the NATO military bases in their territories as an antiterrorist measure and guaranteed regime stability. We should bear in mind that American observers were invited to the 2010 Tashkent SCO Summit (for the first time in many years).
4. The SCO military potential and the antiterrorist exercises do not give grounds to call the SCO "NATO of the East." In his article "The SCO Cannot Become a Military Union," Secretary General of the SCO Research Center at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Sun Zhuangzhi pointed out that "the military-political component is not a dominant one; the exercises of the SCO member states are frequently conducted jointly with many countries and organizations, including NATO, and they are invariably antiterrorist."⁶
5. The SCO members favor their organization's more active involvement in the Afghan settlement in cooperation with the U.S. and NATO. The SCO members, in particular, believe that they need a dialog with NATO and the United States to jointly fight terrorism. They point out that a structural conflict with the U.S. and NATO in the geopolitical and military spheres should be avoided.

⁶ Sun Zhuangzhi, "The SCO Cannot Become a Military Union," 24 November, 2010 (in Chinese), available at [<http://news.163.com/10/1124/17/6M97CJE900014JB6.html>].

The above shows that those who write that the SCO is developing into a military-political organization that stands opposed to the West are wrong. It seems that many of the external observers are holding forth on the SCO's anti-American nature because they find it hard to reconcile themselves with the fact that the world has acquired another efficient structure.

Russian expert Alexander Lukin has written on this score: "Attempts to transform the SCO into an anti-Western or an anti-American bloc are doomed to failure since that would run counter to the vital interests in cooperation with the West in many areas. At the same time, while actively working to ensure the interests of its own members in particular, the SCO may meet—and already does—with misunderstanding and even hostility on the part of those who see the world as unipolar, while presenting their own interests as universal."⁷

Despite the illusory nature of the threat the SCO presents to Western interests in Asia, Washington has several strategic plans designed to prevent the SCO from developing into a larger and stronger structure; the Greater Central Asia project being the main one.

According to Western analysts, the SCO is still an enigma of sorts which probably challenges the West in Eurasia.

Cooperation between the SCO and the West: Problems and Prospects

Today, the international structures which represent the West and the East in Central Asia are locked in latent confrontation. The West is concerned with the fact that Russia and China belong to the same structure; the SCO members (China in particular) do not like the fact that a counterterrorist coalition is fighting on the CA borders.

The SCO's intention to be more actively involved in peaceful settlement in Afghanistan suggests that it should closely cooperate with NATO. So far, however, these structures have not begun a constructive dialog; there is no political will to cooperate and coordinate their actions.

It seems that cooperation between the SCO and the West is impeded by bilateral relations between some of the SCO members and the United States and other Western members. I have in mind America's relations with China and Russia, which might play an important role in forming new international political configurations.

Today *the relations between the United States and China* can be described as vague. In the wake of President Obama's first visit to China late in 2009, the relations between the two countries deteriorated: U.S. Congress passed a decision on selling weapons to Taiwan totaling \$6.4 billion; Dalai-Lama was invited to the White House; Google was involved in an incident; Washington moved closer to New Delhi, etc.

The United States and China cannot agree on the exchange rate of the yuan. For several years now America has been insisting on its higher exchange rate: it is commonly believed in America that it should be at least 40% higher. This was the linchpin of the G 20 discussions in November 2010 in South Korea.

The Chinese leaders and some Chinese political scientists are fairly negative about the Greater Central Asia project: they are rightly convinced that it is intended to contain China's influence in the region.⁸

⁷ A.V. Lukin, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: What Next?" *Russia in Global Politics*, No. 2, July-September 2007.

⁸ See: Pang Guang, "Corrections of the U.S. Central Asian Policy and Starr's Greater Central Asia Project," The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (in Chinese), available at [<http://www.coscos.org.cn/200806022.htm>].

America and China disagree on many things, however their ideological incompatibility is the main stumbling block. The United States regards Communist China as an anti-democratic state, while its rapidly growing economy looks like a challenge to America's world hegemony. This explains why the U.S. Administration leaves no tack unused to limit China's presence in Central Asia and elsewhere.

Their far from simple relations negatively affect the relations between the SCO and the West.

The relations between the United States and Russia are not simple either. The two capitals agreed to "reset" their bilateral relations with no real progress: they remain rivals. Washington and Moscow are operating under the spell of the Cold War, while no positive shifts can be expected in the near future either.

It should be said that the Central Asian countries will hardly profit from the worsening relations between the two powers: they will have to take sides with one or the other of them: the conflict between Russia and Georgia and Moscow's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states being ample evidence of this.

America does not want confrontation with Russia or worsened relations with the regional countries.

The NATO Lisbon Summit of 11-12 November, 2010 showed that the United States was resolved to move the Alliance further eastward, but, according to the new strategy, the NATO members should take Russia's interests into account, even if not seek its opinion.

It seems that cooperation between the SCO and the West hinges on the relations between China and Russia, on the one hand, and the United States and other Western countries, on the other. It should be said that China's involvement and its fairly ambitious plans are mainly responsible for the SCO's negative image in the West.

The relations between Beijing and Washington determine the nature of interaction between the main security structures (SCO and NATO) in Central Asia. We should take into account the fact that Russia and China are trying to contain America's and NATO's pressure in the region; both countries are very negative about the Partnership for Peace Program, which presupposes cooperation between the local countries and NATO.

Conclusion

There are no mechanisms of cooperation; there are no agreements and no regulatory base that can be used to promote cooperation between the SCO and NATO. So how can structures with different strategic interests and capabilities cooperate in the region?

There is an obvious need for efficient mechanisms to ensure cooperation among all sorts of multilateral structures. It seems that the region needs a new security architecture; after all, the SCO and NATO have many identical interests in the region.

The Alliance needs cooperation with the SCO countries to create new corridors to deliver supplies to the counterterrorist forces in Afghanistan, while drug trafficking from this country is a headache for both sides.

The West could delegate its observers to the SCO to improve relations with this structure. Much is written in the West about the United States joining the SCO as an observer or a dialog partner. The White House, on the whole, is of the same opinion. In his statement, Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert Blake said, "The United States has not made any decision about whether we are going to seek some sort of status, yet this is not excluded."⁹

⁹ "Robert Blake: SShA ne stremyatsya k chlenstvu v ShOS," available at [<http://www.newsland.ru/News/Detail/id/457728/cat/94/>].

Kazakhstan, in turn, is convinced that it should develop a constructive dialog with NATO to promote Euro-Atlantic partnership and the Partnership for Peace Program as a good basis for a political dialog and practical cooperation.

The world community is much more interested in the SCO than before; the leading geopolitical power centers are not letting the structure out of their sight. They are trying to obtain fuller information about it because their fears of its transformation into a military-political alliance are as alive as ever. For objective and subjective reasons, cooperation between the SCO and the West is not as effective as it should be in the present conditions.

It should be said that the Central Asian Region is a place where the interests of the leading powers are concentrated and polarized; this means that the structures present in the region should start talking among themselves so as to prevent local contradictions escalating into an open confrontation.
