

NATO-SCO: STRUGGLE AGAINST TERRORISM AND/OR FOR DOMINATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

Farkhad KHAMRAEV

*Representative of the Central Asia and the Caucasus journal in Uzbekistan;
assistant professor at Uzbek State University of Foreign Languages
(Tashkent, Uzbekistan)*

The cardinal changes of the early 1990s altered the geopolitical structure and the map of the world beyond recognition. The world is gradually becoming more interconnected and more vulnerable, as well as more complex and dynamic. Globalization has already destroyed the West-East and the North-South structures; the old thinking along the “friend or foe” line died while the new realities reject the approach that described the regions as the “center” and “periphery” or as of “primary” and “secondary” importance.

The 9/11 events confirmed this paradigm, but anybody wishing to assess their impact on the international system should avoid extremes. The world is changing beyond recognition, yet new realities are rooted in the past while the old ones are not retreating without trace. The situation is very much complicated by this coexistence, which adds uncertainty to international relations, imposes moderation on all participants, calls for caution in political decision-making, and urges to take account of the current varied developments and the wealth of human history.

The global political developments indicate that the great powers are resuming their Big Game in Central Asia; today they are driven by geo-economic (read: resources) rather than geopolitical factors as in the past. Considerable fuel reserves and development projects are turning the region into a nerve center of world politics.

Central Asia, which has found itself at the frontline of struggle the world community is waging against international terrorism, religious extremism, drugs, and organized transborder crime, is gaining weight in the newly emerging system of international relations.

The following describes the new geopolitical situation in a broad strategic context. First, the West’s active presence in the region as a logical consequence of the need to do away with the threat of international terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. Second, America’s long-term politics in the macroregion of Central and South Asia prompted by U.S. national security interests in the 21st century. Third, as a result of the above processes and the considerably reduced threats presented by Afghanistan the region has acquired unique possibilities for integrated development and modernization with the international community’s active support.

Since the very first days of independence the Central Asian countries have been building up a flexible and reliable regional security system to oppose external and internal threats and challenges. The process is slowed down by unresolved problems and contradictions. The first steps have been taken: the region is a nuclear-free zone; it should be said in this connection that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) set up in June 2001 is gaining weight and influence as time goes on.

How NATO Looks at SCO

Let me preface the issue of Western presence in the region with a short outline of NATO’s changing attitudes to SCO. From the day the Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military

Sphere along the Borders was signed in 1996 to the present the attitude of the United States and NATO toward this structure has changed from passive observation to active interest. While the Shanghai Five was being formed, the Clinton Administration and the NATO leaders preferred to think that it would never challenge Western interests and that it was created purely for the delimitation and demilitarization of the former Soviet-Chinese border. At that time the structure to a certain extent indicated that Moscow's position in Central Asia, the region of its traditional domination, had weakened and that China, a new regional player, was actively making strides into Central Asia. The West seemed to be satisfied.

It was in the middle of 1997 that NATO and the U.S. first betrayed their serious concern when the Kazakhstani government made public its multi-billion long-term agreements with the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation on developing the large hydrocarbon fuel deposits in Aktob and Uzen. Washington interpreted that as China's increased involvement in the rivalry over regional fuel resources and a threat to Western interests. Analysts were inclined to regard the situation as China's desire to extend market outlets for its products.

NATO's response to the news about the transfer of the Shanghai Five into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was a fairly negative one: the new organization was assessed as an anti-NATO structure. The analysts were guided by the following:

- leadership in the new organization belonged to Russia and China, two powers obviously displeased with America's hegemony and clearly wishing to promote the idea of a multipolar world, the conception of which was approved at the 1997 summit of the two countries. Some Western analysts believed that the Central Asian republics joined the SCO under pressure from the two regional powers and in exchange for their support. At least, this opinion was confirmed by the fact that Uzbekistan, which had stayed away from multi-sided military-political organizations, joined the SCO. Tashkent was driven by threats of international terrorism: its participation promised support from both Moscow and Beijing. At that time America was pursuing an inconsistent and far from active policy in Central Asia—the absence of alternative forced the local states to seek closer relations with Russia and China;
- military-political issues on the new organization's agenda. Even though from the very beginning the SCO claimed wider contacts in the sphere of trade, investments and transport as its priorities, NATO paid special attention to the plans for setting up an Antiterrorist Center in Bishkek and creating rapid deployment forces consisting mainly of Russian and Chinese military units. American apprehensions were strengthened by the intention to make the Center a coordinator of the military structures of the SCO and CIS, as well as by more active Russo-Chinese cooperation, which envisaged, among other things, an increase in arms trade with China and training of Chinese officers in Russian military academies.

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan somewhat decreased the SCO's role in international and regional politics. Moscow and Beijing had to adapt the organization to the new conditions when NATO deployed its armed forces in Central Asia, thus radically changing the balance of forces there.

Time has shown that China and especially Russia are seeking, and finding, new forms of adaptation and that their influence in the region is growing. Some experts believe that a stronger SCO may become a counterbalance to NATO. I doubt this for many reasons. First, the organization is designed to fight international terrorism—a task that calls for constructive mutually advantageous cooperation rather than opposition.

Today, both the SCO and NATO members need more active antiterrorist efforts not only for practical, including international policy, reasons: the ruling elites have acquired a chance to count their own troublesome ethnic minorities and even regions among the international terrorists (Chechnia in the case of Russia, and Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan in China). The NATO countries, the U.S. in the first place, have grave problems of their own—al-Qa'eda, Iraq and the Taliban—which accounts for their community of interests. On the other hand, the interests of individual countries and organizations do intersect in

Central Asia: this is a natural development against the background of growing worldwide disappointment with the “American model” for settling conflicts and stemming terrorism.

The Alliance in Central Asia

The American model of antiterrorist struggle, as well as the American and NATO presence in the region, has become a reality. Washington has even described the main Western aim in Central Asia as a new geopolitical context suitable for the United States. Today, NATO armed units are deployed in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The White House has essentially lost its interest in Afghanistan and in funding its new government; its old interest is rekindled from time to time. We must admit that this is a hard issue calling for careful consideration. There are two aspects worth mentioning. First, during America’s presence in Afghanistan the country started growing much more poppy; today it accounts for over two-thirds of its world production. According to General V. Cherkassov, in 2003, 4 thousand tons of poppy were gathered against 3,422 tons in 2002. Many of the terrorist organizations, al-Qa’eda among them, operate on drug money. Obviously, the United States has either failed or, as Cherkassov put it, has “inadequately” used its huge resources to cut down the production of opium, or continues using its double standards in its antiterrorist struggle. Second, for the first time in its history NATO is operating outside Europe: it commands the five-thousand-strong peacekeeping corps in Afghanistan. Washington seems to think its mission in that country has been completed and decided to share responsibilities with NATO.

This confirms what analysts said about the war in Afghanistan: the “phoney war” will go on until the Americans have reached all their goals in Central Asia. It seems that the goals are numerous.

Whatever the case, Operation Enduring Freedom brought Washington to Central Asia, a zone of its new geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Over the last two years the local attitude toward the U.S. military bases has run the gamut from welcoming and constructive to negative. It depended not so much on the politics pursued by the Central Asian countries as on the situation around them and on the positions of Russia and China, which used all the instruments at their disposal, the SCO included, to become more actively involved in Central Asian developments.

The SCO as an Instrument of Moscow and Beijing’s More Active Policies in the Region

China and Russia are two leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while the radical geopolitical changes in Central Asia have boosted the organization’s strategic status in the system of international relations.

Under the new conditions, the Chinese leaders are trying to readjust their policies in the region as a whole, and in individual countries in the short- and long-term perspective. It is important to note that in the process Beijing has to correlate its ambitions with its limited strategic potentialities; the geopolitical changes in Central Asia forced China to revise its geopolitical aims by shifting the issue of better relations with Washington from the long-term to the short-term group. This is confirmed by the development of U.S.-China bilateral relations.

In an effort to reach genuine strategic partnership in its relations with the United States, China nevertheless is not prepared to revise its ideas about Russia’s place in the regional balance of power. Russia

and China are brought together by their traditional policy of containment of Washington and counterbalancing it. This explains why the Chinese politicians do not mince words when saying that the U.S.'s stronger positions in Central Asia primarily contradict Moscow's interests while China's interests remain unaffected. This is probably promoted by Beijing's secret hope that the Kremlin will actively oppose the White House's military presence in the region. By remaining an "outside observer" and by exploiting the contradictions between the RF and the U.S. the Chinese strategists are trying to prevent the two countries' rapprochement, which is deemed hazardous for China, and hope to profit from this policy in the long-term perspective.

Beijing's corrected Central Asian policy is bearing fruit: the region no longer threatens China as far as the situation in Xinjiang is concerned. In the past the newly independent neighbors extended considerable aid to the autonomous region. The border issues have been removed from the agenda. Despite these positive developments, Beijing initiated the SCO since the People's Republic of China is less important to Central Asia than to the U.S. and Russia. While Washington can count on its global might, Moscow can use its traditionally closer ties with the Central Asian states. It seems that China hopes to use the SCO to close the gap between itself and the main rivals.

Beijing is seemingly convinced that when dealing with global and regional issues, the United States will never be able to ignore China, which has acquired more clout by joining the U.S.-led antiterrorist coalition; equally the United States cannot ignore the alliance between China and Russia, a political force to be reckoned with. This confirms that the Chinese government is heading toward active cooperation with the Central Asian states, since better relationships between the local countries and the West make peaceful competition the only instrument of rivalry. It would be highly naïve to assume that in Central Asia China limits itself to energy, transport and communication interests, while also looking at it solely as a potentially capacious market for its products. The Chinese leaders attach great importance to the political tasks associated with the American factor in Central Asia and the Xinjiang and Tibet issues. China has two trump cards—terrorism and separatism—to use in this situation.

We should not exclude the possibility that the present, mainly political, interests of Beijing in the region may transform into specific economic tasks. It seems that China is gradually developing into a serious rival for the U.S., Russia, Iran, Turkey, and certain other countries in the "big game" over the Central Asian fuel reserves. In fact, the still uncompleted energy projects of the region, which has not yet become a supplier of oil and gas, and the persisting contradictions over the Caspian's status are playing into China's hand. This is graphically confirmed by the intensively developing Western Kazakhstan-Western China project.

It can be surmised that the follow-up of the 9/11 events to a certain extent helped China realize its Central Asian policies as one of its priorities. It seems that it will object to the ever-widening American and NATO presence; it will try to counterbalance Turkey's, and possibly, Iran's presence in the region in view of the latter's positive attitude toward the radical Islamic organizations. To achieve this Beijing will actively exploit the antiterrorist aspects of its policy within the SCO and will extend financial, technical, and other aid to the young Central Asian states. This is confirmed, in particular, by the antiterrorist training exercises of the SCO countries in Kazakhstan and China in August 2003.

Even though the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is less important for Russia than for China, Moscow will tap all the possibilities offered by the SCO to strengthen its influence in the region and will never forget all the other factors at its disposal, that is, the powerful potential of its bilateral relations with the local states. Russia will continue strengthening the SCO to preserve its geopolitical influence on the states in the zone of its priority interests; this is especially important since Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are turning into an area where the United States is realizing its geopolitical interests. The Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, in particular, missed the recent meeting of the SCO foreign ministers that condemned the U.S. war on Iraq. The NATO troops deployed in Central Asia urge Russia to strengthen the SCO as a regional organization—a priority easy to formulate, but hard to implement. Certain progress has been achieved though: a Russian military air base was opened in Kant (Kyrgyzstan), another sign that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty are gaining weight. It should be

said that the new base makes it possible to rapidly deploy considerable forces (from 10 to 100 thousand-strong); NATO, on the other hand, has no similar facilities since troop movement depends on the use of the air space of Russia and its allies.

The above suggests that Russia is skillfully using the “antiterrorist struggle” to set up a powerful and battle-worthy base in the region. I am convinced that it will not stop at this: it has every reason and opportunity (some of them supplied by the SCO) to go further.

China and Russia will continue exploiting the antiterrorist struggle within the SCO to address their own geopolitical and geo-economic tasks.