

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) versus Bilderberg: Where are Real Decisions Being Made?

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Global Research, June 22, 2011
22 June 2011

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [History](#),
[Militarization and WMD](#)

As the Western elite gathered in picturesque St Moritz to grapple with pressing world crises, the outsiders met in the bleak steppes of Central Asia.

Last week's 10th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in the Kazakh capital Astana highlighted how the major rivals to empire, led by Russia and China — themselves rivals, are trying to fashion an alternative to US hegemony.

The SCO is the only major international organisation that has neither the US nor any close US ally among its members, and its influence is growing across Eurasia. Leaders of member states Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were joined by leaders from observers Iran, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Mongolia. Belarus and Sri Lanka have been admitted as dialogue partners, and prior to his arrival in Astana to attend the summit, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Ukraine.

With a Chinese rhetorical flourish, the Astana Declaration stressed the goal of combatting the “three forces” of “terrorism, extremism, and separatism”. The summit called for a “neutral” Afghanistan (read: no permanent US bases), supported by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, even as the US is actively discussing a post-2014 strategic partnership agreement with him. The prospect of permanent US military bases in Afghanistan lies at the core of current US-Pakistan tensions. India has indicated its aversion to “new cold war” tensions appearing in the region.

Russia and China fear that the US plan is to establish permanent bases in Afghanistan and to deploy components of its missile defence system. The SCO meeting supported Russian criticisms of the planned NATO missile defence shield underway in Europe . Plans by “a country or small group of countries unilaterally and without restriction to deploy an anti-missile system could undermine strategic stability and international security”.

The summit also called for Afghanistan's neighbours to play the leading role in improving security and helping to rebuild Afghanistan, rejecting a purely military solution. “It is possible that the SCO will assume responsibility for many issues in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014,” said Kazakh President Nurusultan Nazarbayev, echoing Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's call “for more intensive and deeper cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan”.

Both Beijing and Moscow are already rebuilding their influence there, China in mining, and both countries in infrastructure projects and cooperation with Western forces to combat drug trafficking. “Afghanistan was the main reason the SCO was created 10 years ago, even

before 9/11 forced the Americans to recognise the threat,” says Duma deputy Sergei Markov. “The threat of radical Islamism being exported into our region is something we’re very familiar with. And a resurgence of that threat has got to be a major concern.”

During the conference, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) signed an accord with the SCO to promote cooperation in fighting drug trafficking, organised crime, human trafficking and international terrorism. UNODC Executive Director Yury Fedotov said, “Countries such as Kazakhstan are on the frontline of the flow of Afghan heroin headed towards the West. The work in countering organised crime and drug trafficking, which I am pleased to see is increasingly taking on a cooperative approach.” The most urgent issue is heroin trafficking from Afghanistan via Tajikistan which surged after the 2001 US invasion.

Security cooperation and economic development were described as the “two wheels” of the SCO by its General Secretary Zhang Deguang. China’s People’s Daily noted, “Among other concrete moves is the construction of a railway, highway and pipeline network linking landlocked Central Asia and its rich natural resources to the global economy.” Currently a natural gas Pease Pipeline is under construction which could eventually link Iran, Pakistan, India and China, helping to overcome India-Pakistani animosity and integrate the entire region on the basis of mutual interests, carefully shepherded by China.

Central Asian and South Asian security are indivisible, and the proposed memberships of India and Pakistan were seriously discussed. Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari vowed to work with SCO members to achieve regional peace. Zardari stated Pakistan belongs to the SCO region and is keen to cooperate with the other countries in financing joint ventures in energy, infrastructure, education, science and technology. He pointed to its newly opened port at Gwadar, which China helped fund, as a useful transport hub for the region.

The SCO has been increasing security cooperation among its members, including joint Russia-China war games, and beginning in April this year, meetings of military chiefs of the SCO countries. However, the SCO is far from being a cohesive military alliance such as NATO. The admission of Pakistan and India, long term enemies, will only complicate military cooperation, with India’s patron Russia vs Pakistan’s patron China.

China is clearly the power behind the SCO, its “wheels” offering the region much more economically than Russia, but the common will of all to keep the US at bay is a balm to all. What better way to ease tensions between all these rivals than through SCO security drills enhancing the inter-operability of militaries and law-enforcement agencies? According to MK Bhadrakumar this will make “NATO (and Pax Americana) simply irrelevant to an entire landmass”.

The high-flown words about peace, regional security and cooperation were for the press (and Obama). Behind closed doors, the leaders discussed their growing concerns about how the Arab spring might impact the region, particularly Central Asia’s most populous state and harshest dictatorship – Uzbekistan. The SCO summit is one of the few international events where its leader Islam Karimov is still welcomed.

Another topic at the SCO meeting was how to move towards a new world currency, one established not by world bankers at secretive Bilderberg meetings, but openly, by the major world resource and population centres as represented by the SCO. Nazarbayev said that a healthy supranational currency is needed and recommended a return to some form of gold

standard. "The SCO is capable of doing this. The swap operations that we have started is the first step. This is necessary for equal cooperation within the SCO."

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad provided some colour to the otherwise muted affair with his call for the SCO to take a more active role in undermining the US-led global system of "slavers and colonisers" and replacing it with a more just order. "Which one of our countries [has played a role] in the black era of slavery, or in the destruction of hundreds of millions of human beings? I believe together we can reform the way the world is managed. We can restore the tranquility of the world."

The SCO meeting came days after the close of the Bilderberg Group's summit in St Moritz Switzerland, which China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Fu Ying attended this year — acknowledgment that without China's approval, nothing is possible in the world of finance anymore. Like the SCO, its agenda reportedly also included what to do about the Arab spring, but also, in a more sinister vein, plans for internet censorship, choosing the next IMF chief, more Euro-bailouts and higher oil prices.

China, Russia, Pakistan, India — not to mention Iran — the SCO brings together the most serious threats to the empire's plans in one clutch. With the possible exception of China, Bush didn't take any of them seriously. Obama does. But so far, the SCO has been more bark than bite. If by this time next year, India and Pakistan are admitted, and if non-dollar denominated "swaps" reach a critical mass, Bilderberg may well have to put the SCO and what to do about it at the top of its next agenda.

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