

Towards a Russia -China -Iran Military Alliance?

Will Iran become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?

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Global Research, February 08, 2010

[The Race for Iran](#) 5 February 2010

Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

The new secretary general of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Muratbek Sansyzbayevich Imanaliev, said at a news conference in Beijing earlier this week that the conflict in Afghanistan and [expanding the SCO's members to include Iran and Pakistan were the top issues on the SCO's agenda in 2010](#). Certainly, these issues are likely to dominate preparation for the SCO's annual summit, which will take place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan sometime this coming summer.

The SCO was founded in 2001 by six original members: Russia and China along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Formally, the SCO was created to institutionalize the founding members' ongoing cooperation on border security, counterterrorism, and fighting extremist and separatist activism, as well as for economic cooperation. More broadly, the SCO has established itself as an increasingly important factor in Central Asian affairs, Sino-Russian relations, and the formation of an international "coalition"—loosely organized around Beijing and Moscow—opposed to what its members see as excessive U.S. unilateralism.

In 2004, Mongolia became the first state to receive observer status in the SCO; in 2005, Iran, India, and Pakistan were also granted observer status in the SCO. If one includes the populations and territorial extent of the four observer states along with those of the six core members, the SCO has become the world's largest regional security organization, in terms of the number of people and the amount of territory it covers. Among other things, the inclusion of Iran, India, and Pakistan as observers significantly expands the SCO's already considerable latent potential to exert influence over the development and marketing of Central Asia's oil and gas resources.

Over the past three years, Russia has pushed for Iran to be accorded full membership in the SCO. China has quietly resisted this push. In public, Chinese officials say only that the issue needs to be studied, as a formal mechanism through which the SCO can bring in new members does not currently exist. In private, Chinese officials say that including Iran would change the character and function of the SCO in important ways. In particular, Iranian membership would make it harder for Beijing to insist, as it regularly does, that the SCO is not an alliance directed against any specific country—e.g., the United States.

It is not clear that Beijing is ready to endorse full membership for Iran in the SCO. But, [as Andrei Ibanov, a Russian analyst, wrote this week in China's Global Times](#), Beijing's heightened strategic standing "allows it a more direct role in advancing its national interests faster than ever". And, as we have pointed out repeatedly on this blog and elsewhere, since 2007, China has become more assertive in advancing its perceived interests vis-à-vis Iran,

even as U.S. pressure on Beijing to take a tougher line against Tehran intensifies. We certainly expect that trend to continue.

In this context, Ibanov argues that

“China’s best move, particularly as the leader of the SCO, would be to encourage and facilitate the acceptance of Iran’s membership into the pact quickly before a new round of sanctions are imposed. Doing so would not only add strength to China’s ability to access Iran’s energy sources, it would also very seriously dampen any unilateral moves, whether sanctions or missiles aimed at Iran and its nuclear facilities.”

Two years ago, a general in the People’s Liberation Army intelligence branch told us in Beijing that China would agree to full Iranian membership in the SCO “only if the United States forced its hand”. Given the Obama Administration’s gratuitous antagonism of China, over Iran and other issues, it will be interesting to see whether Beijing is more open to the prospect of full SCO membership for the Islamic Republic.

On the Obama Administration’s approach to China, we were surprised to find ourselves in rather strong agreement with a [recent Op Ed on this subject in The Wall Street Journal by George Gilder](#), an intellectual darling of conservative and neoconservative Republicans for many years. We disagree with Gilder on many subjects, particularly with regard to the Middle East. But his Op Ed, entitled “Why Antagonize China?”, contains passages of real insight:

It started last June in Beijing when U.S. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner lectured Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who recoiled like a man cornered by a crank at a cocktail party. Mr. Geithner was haranguing the Chinese on...the need for a Chinese dollar devaluation, on which one can scarcely imagine that he can persuade Chinese holders of a trillion dollars of reserves. This week in a meeting with Senate Democrats, President Obama continued to fret about the dollar being too strong against the yuan at a time when most of the world’s investors fear that the Chinese will act on his words and crash the dollar...

Yes, the Chinese are needlessly aggressive in missile deployments against Taiwan, but there is absolutely no prospect of a successful U.S. defense of that country. Sending them \$6 billion of new weapons is a needless provocation against China that does nothing valuable for the defense of the U.S. or Taiwan...

[But] a foreign policy of serious people at a time of crisis will recognize that the current Chinese regime is the best we can expect from that country. The Chinese revitalization of Asian capitalism remains the most important positive event in the world in the last 30 years. Not only did it release a billion people from penury and oppression but it transformed China from a communist enemy of the U.S. into a now indispensable capitalist partner. It is ironic that liberals who once welcomed appeasement of the monstrous regime of Mao Zedong now become openly bellicose at various murky incidents of Internet hacking...

The U.S. is as dependent on China for its economic and military health and economic growth as China is dependent on the U.S. for its key markets, reserve finance, and global capitalist trading regime.

It is self-destructive folly to sacrifice this core synergy at the heart of global capitalism in order to gain concessions on global warming, dollar weakening, or

Internet politics.

How many enemies do we need?

How many indeed. This blog is, in many respects, dedicated to the proposition that the United States does not need the Islamic Republic as an enemy. It is a disturbing sign of how far off the track the Obama Administration's foreign policy has gone that both the Leveretts and George Gilder feel compelled to point out just how dangerous it could be for the United States to turn China into an enemy.

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