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The NATO of the East?ⁱ

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Peace Mission 2005, the multi-national military exercises conducted by members of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), took the West by surprise. The exercises were officially described as an attempt to integrate multi-national forces to combat regional terror threats. In fact, they involved 10,000 troops with air and naval support, and served to showcase the SCO's capabilities in conventional warfare. Over a month previously the strongly anti-Western sentiment prevalent at the SCO's Astana Summit, demands for a timetable of US troop removal from Central Asia and the summary rejection of the United States' request for observer status had hinted at the SCO's ambition to position itself strategically as a counter to Western influence in Central Asia and perhaps beyond.

Until 2005, the SCO was shrouded in confusion and obscurity. The organisation has its origins in the *Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions*, concluded in the mid-1990s by the "Shanghai Five" – China and four of the countries that share its borders: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The admission of Uzbekistan in 2001 implied a move away from border-related co-operation and towards an integrated security community, and the admittance of India, Pakistan, Mongolia and Iran as observer states seems to have confirmed the SCO's significance in Central Asia. The SCO is primarily focussed on developing strong inter-national ties to combat the "three evil forces," somewhat vaguely defined as terrorism, separatism and extremism.

However, the SCO also focuses to some extent on trade, primarily in energy resources. The 2007 Bishkek Summit indicated a key development in this area: the installation of an “Energy Club” in the SCO. Proposed by Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin, the Energy Club aims to promote co-operation between SCO states and observers in energy security. As SCO members and observers command around 20% of the world’s oil supply and 50% of the world’s gas supply, this could prove of great concern to the West.

Some commentators have been quick to dub the SCO the “NATO of the East,” proclaiming the end of Western global dominance and predicting dire consequences for global security and energy regimes. Yet in spite of this apparently major strategic development, the SCO has remained woefully understudied in the West. Reasons for this lack of attention are not difficult to come by: SCO documentation is in Chinese and Russian, seldom released in English and even then occasionally inaccurately translated. The SCO has been reluctant to allow Western observers or to engage in dialogue with Western nations or international organisations. Even more frustrating is that it has frequently been difficult to pinpoint genuine multilateral activity in the SCO: member states have seemed to view the organisation as a convenient platform through which to conclude bilateral agreements, rather than act in concert with each other.

Undoubtedly, the SCO acting in concert on any level could provide staunch opposition to Western dominance, and particularly to US influence in Asia. It is not difficult to understand the knee-jerk reaction of some American policymakers. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States has been afforded a certain amount of luxury as the world’s only superpower, with those countries that might be inclined to challenge its dominance too weak to consider doing so practically. As such, the strategic co-operation of the SCO’s two main players, Russia and China, is of particular concern. Despite a brief period of rapprochement following China’s Communist Revolution in 1949, China and Russia share a long history of dispute. The political machinations of Nixon and Kissinger in the 1970s took advantage of this to build a Sino-American relationship of cautious respect. However, China’s dramatic economic growth in the last decade has given rise to numerous worrying questions about Chinese political ambitions, compounded by the reticence of Beijing policymakers. China has clearly indicated that it wishes

for a retraction of American interference from what it perceives to be its own sphere of influence, but has been less blatant in its demands than Russia.

Russia under Putin has shown distinct signs of wishing to resume its superpower status. There are indications that much of the blatantly anti-Western sentiment expressed by the SCO is driven by Russia – a stance for which it has found at least some open allies. The most important of these is Iran, which has been lobbying for an upgrade from observer to full membership of the SCO. Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has urged the SCO “to develop into a powerful body influential in regional and international politics, economics and trade, serving to block threats and unlawful strong-arm interference from various countries” – a role somewhat beyond the mandate of anti-terror co-operation. While Iran may lack legitimacy in terms of determining SCO policy, its support may lend weight to efforts to turn policy in a potentially antagonistic direction.

The rise of the SCO as a counter-bloc to the West may be a subtle herald of the re-division of the world into competing hemispheres, possibly provoking balancing behaviour on both sides as they try to gain or maintain dominance. However, the SCO is hardly a unified and committed entity, and there are several factors that may severely inhibit or prevent its development in this direction.

To begin with, although Russia and China clearly dominate the SCO's agenda, the smaller member states may not unquestioningly follow their lead because of split loyalties with the West, not to mention internal tensions within the organisation. Kyrgyzstan houses both American and Russian military installations. Kazakhstan is swift to point to its close allegiance with the US in the War on Terror. Most SCO states rely heavily on economic ties with America – in particular China, which has been able to develop as it has only by becoming inextricably embedded in the capitalist world economic system. Additionally, the former countries of the Soviet bloc may be somewhat reluctant to follow a Russian lead in all areas. The other members of the SCO have attempted, insofar as possible, to avoid dependence on Russia in areas of energy security, which has tended to work against Russian energy interests. Furthermore, while Russia and China may temporarily work together against Western influence in Central Asia, they are also competing for influence within the same region.

In short, the tensions within the SCO may well hamper its attempts to counter Western influence in the region. None of the SCO states can afford to alienate the West openly at this stage, meaning that the SCO does not pose an immediate threat to Western interests. However, it is also clear that the current trajectory of the SCO will bring it into conflict with the West sooner or later as this non-Western centre of power develops. It is thus imperative for the West – and in particular the United States – to re-examine its status and relationships with SCO states in order to pre-empt unfavourable global tension between these existing and developing centres of power.

ⁱ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for International Political Studies (CIPS) or the University of Pretoria

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