



Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Moscow's Lonely Road from Bishkek to Dushanbe

By Mark N. Katz

One of Russian leader Vladimir Putin's most important foreign policy initiatives has been the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—a regional international organization he co-founded in 2001 that groups together Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The stated aims of the SCO are to combat the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, as well as to promote various forms of cooperation among the member governments. In addition to these stated goals, however, Moscow has attempted to make use of the organization to resist efforts at democratization emanating from inside and outside the member states, to limit American and other Western influence in Central Asia, and to promote Russian foreign policy goals generally.

Up through the August 2007 SCO summit in Bishkek, Putin had good reason to be pleased with the SCO. Although there were some important differences among various members, the SCO appeared to be a useful mechanism for advancing Moscow's priorities. In the year leading up to the August 2008 summit in Dushanbe, however, Moscow has experienced a number of setbacks with regard to the SCO. The most important of these occurred at the Dushanbe summit itself when the SCO members refused to endorse Moscow's military action vis-à-vis Georgia or its recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence. Although both the SCO and Russian membership in the organization will undoubtedly continue, these events suggest that the SCO's utility for advancing Russian foreign policy aims is quite limited.

The SCO grew out of the Shanghai Five, which was established in 1996 in order to resolve border issues between China on the one hand and the four former Soviet republics neighboring it (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). At the group's July 2000 summit (the first attended by President Putin), the leaders announced the organization's intention to “wield significant influence not just in the region, but globally as well.” With the addition of Uzbekistan at the June 2001 summit, the Shanghai Five became the SCO. The first SCO joint military exercise,

though only involving about 1,000 servicemen, took place in 2003. Mongolia gained observer status at the June 2004 summit.

What happened at the 2005, 2006, and 2007 summits in particular gave the impression that the SCO was emerging as a powerful organization successfully challenging American "hegemony." Shortly before the July 2005 summit, the U.S. and other Western governments criticized Uzbekistan for using force to suppress largely peaceful demonstrators in the town of Andijon. Uzbek leader Islam Karimov took offense at this and demanded that the U.S. forces that he had allowed into his country after 9/11 be withdrawn within six months. At the July 2005 SCO summit shortly thereafter, the SCO presidents issued a joint declaration calling upon the U.S. to set a timetable for pulling out all the military bases it had acquired in Central Asia after 9/11. Washington did indeed withdraw the forces it had stationed in Uzbekistan a few months later, and had to pay considerably more in order to retain its base in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, Iran, Pakistan, and India were granted SCO observer status in 2005.

The 2006 SCO summit was noteworthy because it was the first one attended by Iran's sharply anti-American president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (he has also attended the 2007 and 2008 summits). His presence raised concerns that the SCO might encourage or even support Tehran's confrontational approach toward the West. At the time of the 2007 SCO summit, SCO military exercises took place in China and Russia involving 6,000 troops. This raised concerns in the West that the SCO could become a military alliance.

Despite all this, it was clear that there were important differences among the SCO members. Putin in particular saw security cooperation as the primary focus of the SCO, whereas the Chinese leadership viewed economic cooperation as its primary purpose. Some Russian observers made clear their fear that the SCO was becoming a vehicle for Chinese economic penetration of Central Asia and even Russia itself. In addition, while Russia's (and Uzbekistan's) ties with the U.S. were deteriorating, China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan maintained relatively good relations with Washington. Finally, Uzbekistan had relatively poor relations with each of the other Central Asian SCO members (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) as well as Turkmenistan which the SCO appeared unable (indeed, unwilling) to do anything to ameliorate.

Since the 2007 Bishkek summit, other developments have occurred displaying the limits of Russian influence over the SCO. Although Tashkent had expelled American forces from Uzbekistan in 2005, it became clear in early 2008 that they had begun

returning to Uzbekistan. Tashkent's decision to allow this does not appear to have been motivated by any problem in Russian-Uzbek relations, but by Islam Karimov's fear that the deteriorating situation in neighboring Afghanistan could affect his country.

Russian relations with Kyrgyzstan, though, did deteriorate in early 2008. Instead of Bishkek setting a date for the departure of American forces as Moscow had hoped, anti-Russian feeling rose in Kyrgyzstan over the presence of Russian forces there. The Kyrgyz parliament seemed to fuel this by passing a resolution calling for a day of commemoration for the victims of the 1916 uprising in which many Kyrgyz were killed by Tsarist forces.

There were also differences between Russia and Kazakhstan over Georgia. As Moscow grew more supportive of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists, Astana was developing its business interests in Georgia and expressing interest in Kazakh participation in the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline which runs through Georgia and not Russia.

An important difference also emerged between Moscow and Beijing. China had bought from Russia a license to build 200 Su-27 fighter aircraft. But after assembling 105 of these, Beijing unilaterally cancelled the contract. In the first part of 2008, Moscow learned that China was exporting its own version of the Su-27, and was thus competing with Russia for this market. Further, although China had previously been Russia's best arms customer, by 2008 Beijing's arms purchases from Moscow had fallen off dramatically.

Thus, Russian relations with several other SCO members had already grown somewhat testy by the time the Russian-Georgian military confrontation burst forth in early August 2008. Although they did not condemn Moscow for sending its forces into Georgia proper and not withdrawing them like America and many Western countries did, none of Moscow's SCO partners expressed support for these Russian moves either. Nor did they join Moscow in its recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian secession from Georgia just prior to the 2008 SCO summit.

As he was going to the Dushanbe summit in late August, President Medvedev appeared to expect that he would get the other SCO governments to support Russian policy vis-à-vis Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Although the "Dushanbe Declaration of Heads of SCO Member States" expressed "concern" over South

Ossetia, it called for problems to be resolved “in a peaceful way through dialogue.” The declaration also expressed support for the August 12 “principles” for settling the conflict that French President Sarkozy had helped negotiate and even for “the active role of Russia in promoting peace and cooperation in the region.” But the declaration also called for respect of the “unity and territorial integrity of states.”

The fact that the other SCO states have been cool to Russian actions in Georgia is not surprising. Moscow’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia violated the SCO’s stated goal of preventing separatism. These other states may well fear the impact of Russia’s recognition of these two breakaway regions on separatist movements that they oppose. These include China’s opposition to secessionists in Xinjiang and Tibet as well as claim to Taiwan; Kazakhstan’s fear of secessionism in northern Kazakhstan where much of the country’s Russian population is located; Uzbekistan’s fears about its Karakalpak as well as Tajik regions wanting to secede; Tajikistan’s fears about its Uzbeks; and Kyrgyzstan’s fears of the country dividing along north-south lines.

Furthermore, the precedent of Russia intervening militarily to protect Russian passport holders in South Ossetia and Abkhazia is one that the Central Asian SCO members (especially Kazakhstan) may fear that Moscow might use to justify intervention against them. Finally, the fact that Moscow recognized Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence before the Dushanbe summit and did not consult the other members about whether it should take this step is something that the latter undoubtedly resented.

There has been speculation that Moscow may yet succeed in coercing one or more Central Asian governments into recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Any Russian attempt to do so, though, could backfire and induce the Central Asian SCO members (as well as Turkmenistan) to increase their reliance on China and/or America. Anticipating this possibility may dissuade Moscow from adopting a heavy-handed approach to them. But given that Moscow has adopted a heavy-handed approach to Georgia, there can be no guarantee about this.

If nothing else, the events occurring between the August 2007 and August 2008 SCO summits have shown that Moscow cannot rely upon the SCO either to endorse Russian foreign policy aims or to reduce American and Western influence in the SCO region. The problem for Moscow in influencing the SCO is that while the former Soviet republics of Central Asia may be afraid of it, China is not. And Chinese opposition to Russian foreign policy aims as well as increasing influence provides the Central Asian states greater freedom to avoid Moscow’s embrace. It would not

be surprising, then, if Moscow downplays the SCO in the future and reemphasizes regional organizations consisting just of former Soviet republics, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which it has greater influence over. If this occurs, though, the Central Asian states can be expected to resist through turning both to the West and to China for support.

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