

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

– A View from the US –

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Russian President Vladimir Putin places great store by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional international organization Russia co-founded in 2001 that also includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The ostensible aims of the organization 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, the organization also seeks to limit American and other Western influence in Central Asia, and to help member governments resist democratization efforts emanating both from inside and outside of the member states.

So far, Putin has good reason to be pleased with the SCO, which he portrays as becoming a powerful bloc that other governments want to join in defying American influence. There are, however, several factors present (many of which the Russian press acknowledges) which limit Putin's ability to implement his ambitious visions for the SCO.

Statements by Putin and his supporters about the SCO suggest that he regards it not just as a budding alliance, but as an alternative to what Moscow sees as the American-dominated world order. Further, he sees Russia as playing a leading role in world affairs through the SCO.

The basic principle upon which Putin sees both the alliance and the alternate world order as based upon is what he called the SCO's "philosophy of respect for diversity of cultures, religious beliefs and traditions" – including, apparently, traditions of authoritarian government. In other words, Putin seeks to create an alliance and world order with governments that respect Putin's dearly held "principle" of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, especially those of Russia. To the extent that additional states accepting this principle either become SCO members or observers, Putin may hope to create a situation in which America must also recognize the legitimacy of the SCO's authoritarian regimes or face international isolation for not doing so.

If these are indeed Putin's goals for the SCO, they certainly are ambitious. But can they be accomplished? There are five factors present that work to prevent Putin from doing so.

First, the Chinese leadership does not share Putin's vision of the aims and purposes of the SCO. Instead of seeing the SCO as developing into a politico-military alliance, Beijing views it more as an economic cooperation zone.

Second, China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan have better relations with the US

than Russia and Uzbekistan. While the former (including supposedly democratic Kyrgyzstan) are wary of American democratization efforts, each wishes to maintain good relations with Washington. Neither China, Kazakhstan, nor Kyrgyzstan is willing to reduce its cooperation with America just because Putin may want them to.

Third, while on the one hand Moscow wants the SCO to become more of a military alliance than Beijing wants, several Russian commentators have on the other hand expressed fear about China's growing strength and power. Considering that the Russian press has become increasingly influenced (if not completely controlled) by the Kremlin under Putin, it is highly likely that these sentiments reflect fears that are also present in the Russian governing elite. Needless to say, building and maintaining an alliance with a neighboring state one fears is highly problematic.

Fourth, in addition to its relationship with the US turning sour in 2005 over human rights issues, Uzbekistan has had chronically poor relations with neighboring SCO members Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Further, neither Moscow nor the SCO seem able – or even willing – to ameliorate these tensions. To the extent that they continue to fear Uzbekistan and cannot get what they consider sufficient help from Moscow or the SCO to contain it, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have an incentive for seeking security assistance from outside powers, including the US.

Fifth, there are downsides for Moscow if either the SCO admits new members or it does not. In addition to its six full members, there are currently four SCO observers: Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Iran. Mongolia, Pakistan and Iran have applied for full membership, while other states still (Belarus, Nepal and Sri Lanka) have expressed interest in affiliating with the SCO in some capacity.

Admitting new members, though, will not necessarily make them more amenable to Russian influence than they already are now. Indeed, Russia could find that its influence within the SCO diminishes as the organization's membership grows. In addition, Russia and other current SCO members may fear that admission of any new member will be interpreted as SCO support for it in any dispute it may have with other states, which could then react by moving closer to the US.

On the other hand, not admitting countries seeking entry into the SCO risks their sooner or later losing interest in joining. Some governments might even take offense at Russia and other current SCO members for being kept waiting on a decision since this implies a lack of enthusiasm about their candidacy.

So far, Russia and the other SCO members appear more willing to run the latter risk than the former. At the latest SCO summit held in Bishkek in August 2007, none of the observer members were elevated to full membership – even though Iran and Pakistan in particular wanted to be. No new observer members were

admitted either.

While Putin may want the SCO to become not just a powerful military alliance but also the centerpiece of an alternative world order to that dominated by the US, achieving these ambitious goals is being hindered by the five problems identified here. These problems are so severe that the possibilities for meaningful action on the part of the SCO appear quite limited.

Despite this, the SCO may be of value to Putin if it can help him foster the illusion of Russia being at the head of a powerful alliance and alternative world order. This may work with certain audiences – such as the Russian public or even just the Putin administration itself – for a time. Eventually, though, a protracted divergence between illusion and reality is likely to result in disillusion.

The SCO and the US

There were several reasons why the US government has reacted warily to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

First, when Washington asked to observe the summit meetings, its request was refused. Later, though, Iran – which has become especially antagonistic toward the US under President Ahmadinejad – was admitted to the SCO as an observer member (along with Mongolia, Pakistan, and India). It appeared to many American observers that Russia and China were working together to build an anti-Western, anti-democratic alliance.

Second, the 2005 SCO summit's call for the US and its Coalition partners to set a timetable for withdrawal from the military facilities they were temporarily granted to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan – combined with Uzbekistan's expulsion of American forces stationed there that year and the increase in Russia's military presence in the region – was viewed in Washington as an attempt to exclude the US from Central Asia.

Third, the prospect (which seemed especially strong in 2006) that Iran might be admitted as a full member of the SCO aroused fear in Washington that Russia and China were working together through the SCO to shield Iran from European and American efforts aimed at persuading Tehran to adopt measures that would ensure that its atomic energy program could not be used for military purposes.

More recently, however, Washington's view of the SCO has grown more sanguine. There are three principal reasons for this:

First, while Russia appears eager to make the SCO look like a military alliance (if not actually become one), it is increasingly clear that China views it more as a zone of economic cooperation – and that China is not going to allow the SCO to evolve in a manner that Beijing disapproves of.

Second, while Moscow may seek to end the American military presence throughout Central Asia and Tashkent did end it in Uzbekistan, other SCO members have sought to continue or even expand their military cooperation with

America and NATO. Although there was concern in Washington that the US would also lose its military facilities in Kyrgyzstan, it ended up keeping them – at a higher rent. In addition, Kazakhstan has expanded its cooperation with the NATO Partnership for Peace program. Tajikistan has continued to host French forces, and even Uzbekistan has continued to host German ones.

Third, the testiness that has occurred in Russian-Iranian relations during 2007 has served to reassure Washington that Moscow is indeed concerned about the possibility that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons, and is taking its own measures aimed at preventing this.

These reasons, as well as the important differences within the SCO (particularly between Russia and China, and between Uzbekistan on the one hand and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan on the other) have led many in Washington to dismiss the SCO as meaningless. This view, though, is as mistaken as seeing the SCO as a threat to the US.

If the current SCO members are united upon anything, it is their common opposition to Islamic fundamentalism (especially of the Sunni variety), secession, and democratization. Even if they exaggerated how much America and not local forces were behind the “color revolutions” that ousted autocratic rulers in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, the SCO members (including the new “democratic” Kyrgyz government) feared that the US was seeking to install pro-American democratic governments throughout Central Asia and would use its military presence there to help do this.

The US and the SCO, though, do have common interests. Both the US and the SCO oppose Islamic fundamentalism. Indeed, while the 2005 SCO summit declaration described Coalition military operations in Afghanistan as being nearly completed, there is now growing recognition that the Taliban threat is increasing—and that the threat it poses to Central Asia will only become greater if American and other Coalition forces leave Afghanistan. Nor does the US support secession anywhere in Central Asia or Russia (despite Putin’s petulant statements indicating that America does support the Chechen cause). Chinese-American relations over the Taiwan issue are complex, but the US certainly does not support secession by any part of China not currently ruled by Beijing.

This leaves, however, important differences between the US and the SCO over democratization, which Washington unabashedly supports and the SCO governments unashamedly oppose. However, Washington’s previous enthusiasm has waned over the prospects for additional democratic revolutions, or even what those which have already occurred can achieve. With the SCO governments all opposed to democratization, and the conditions for democratization appearing absent in Central Asia anyway, it is clear that democratization is only going to occur slowly in this part of the world, and is not likely to arrive all at once in a sudden burst.

While neither the SCO nor the US want America to become a full or even an observer member of the SCO, a dialogue between the US on the one hand and the SCO on the other would be beneficial to both sides for three reasons. First, this would help both sides allay American fears about some SCO members seeking to push the US out of Central Asia and the fears of some SCO members that America is trying to displace Russia and China as well as replace the existing governments there. Second, an SCO dialogue with the US (as well as the EU and Japan) could be an important means of enhancing their common struggle against Sunni Islamic fundamentalism. Third, since it is now clear that Russia – and probably China too – are concerned about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, SCO cooperation with the US and the EU-3 on this issue would signal Tehran that it cannot use the SCO as a shield against international demands for it to curtail actions that fuel concerns about its nuclear intentions.

A dialogue, then, between the US (as well as the EU and Japan) on the one hand and the SCO on the other could only benefit both sides. Both sides, though, have to be willing to undertake such a dialogue. If Russia succeeded in pressuring Kyrgyzstan to expel American forces, or if the SCO admitted Iran as a full member, prospects for a US-SCO dialogue would be set back. While both of these events seemed possible earlier, the fact that neither had occurred by the time of the August 2007 SCO summit or appear particularly likely in its aftermath suggests that there now exists an opportunity for such a dialogue.