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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Partner for Stabilising Afghanistan?

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Abstract

In efforts to bring stability and security to Afghanistan, the international community of states may have overlooked a critical ally; the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This paper argues that the Organisation should be considered a partner in the international stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan, and proposes that Australia is well-placed to be the facilitator for such a venture.

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Introduction

On 27 March 2009 the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) met in Moscow to hold a Special Conference on Afghanistan. This conference injected China, Russia and four Central Asian republics into the international dialogue over Afghanistan, establishing the SCO as an increasingly important stakeholder in the security and stability of Afghanistan.[1] Yet, at a time when Canberra was considering its future military commitment to Afghanistan, few Australians noticed this important event.[2]

This paper will address the SCO's potential as a partner to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in stabilizing Afghanistan. It will contend that by leading SCO in such a partnership, China will further its position in the region and achieve recognition as a responsible stakeholder in the global community[3]. The paper will propose that Australia, as a non-NATO nation, is well positioned to facilitate NATO-SCO security cooperation in Central Asia.[4]

China, Russia and the United States: Balancing Interests in Central Asia[5]

Emerging from the former Shanghai Five grouping[6], the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was established in June 2001 following agreement between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to define a common platform on issues aimed at improving regional security.[7] Its member states cover more than three-fifths of Eurasia, with a quarter of the world's population. On

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[1] 'The SCO and the future of American Central Asian Strategy (I),' 6 April 2009, available at: <http://www.neweurasia.net/2009/04/08/the-sco-and-the-future-of-american-central-asian-strategy-ii/>, accessed 3 May 2009.

[2] Despite Afghanistan's high profile in the Australian media over the past six months, an internet search for Australian reporting on the outcomes of the 27 March 2009 SCO Special Conference on Afghanistan resulted in no returns. Only international media reported the event outcomes.

[3] This paper uses the Afghanistan conflict as the context for examining the prospect of China taking a greater role as a regional leader through the SCO, and be more involved in resolving global and regional issues. It is not a discussion of the Afghanistan conflict in detail.

[4] Central Asia usually refers to the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Other areas are often included such as Afghanistan, northeastern Iran and western parts of the People's Republic of China such as Xinjiang province (various sources). For the purposes of this paper, when discussing Central Asian security this will include Afghanistan.

[5] Limitations to this essay restrict detailed discussion and analysis on security, economic and energy interests for each of the six SCO member states. It is assessed that on the issue of Afghanistan's stability and defeat of violent extremism and terrorism in Central Asia, the other SCO member states are aligned with Russia and China in their desire for a stable and secure region.

[6] The Shanghai Five (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan) was established in Shanghai in 1996 as a forum designed to help harmonize regional security policies. Jeffery Nickeson, 'Has the West Lost the Battle for Central Asia?' *Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 8, August 2007, p. 1.

[7] The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism*, 15 June 2001, available at: <http://www.sectsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=68>, accessed 24 March 2009. The SCO Charter calls for 'strengthening mutual trust, friendship and good-neighbourly relations among the member countries; … making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region, and to establish new, democratic, just, and rational political and economic international order'.

numbers alone, the SCO is the largest international security organisation in existence and the most important one to Central Asia.[8]

In less than a decade, the SCO has become a 'global strategic factor', effectively marginalizing or reducing US and western European influence in Central Asia.[9] Not surprisingly, few Western governments have acknowledged this development. Once labelled the 'NATO of the East', the SCO has invariably been described as a challenge to the West, a counterbalance to the US, and even 'a foil to Western geopolitical blocs'.[10] However, the Russia-China partnership within the SCO should not be seen primarily as an anti-US bloc, because divergent interests within the SCO limit any coordinated anti-US activity.[11] Richard Weitz contends that although relations have improved, security cooperation between China and Russia has remained tenuous. He describes the relationship as 'opportunistic' in which both countries follow their own interests; 'since these interests conflict as well as coincide, the relationship is not necessarily moving in an anti-American direction.'[12]

A number of scholars agree that Russian and Chinese interests, rather than western interests, will most heavily shape Central Asia's future.[13] Russia and China are competitors for political and economic influence in Central Asia and their approaches to a range of important subjects are largely uncoordinated, and at times conflict. Subjects such as illegal Chinese immigration into Russia and economic differences relating to energy security have stifled prospects for greater cooperation.[14] Ariel Cohen describes the relationship akin to Russia having a 'Chinese elephant in the room', with the shadow now cast by Beijing in Central Asia much larger than that envisaged by Moscow in 2001; indeed China's interests directly affect economics and business in the region.[15]

China has used the SCO to extend its influence in Central Asia more effectively than Russia has. Since 2001, aid packages, trade agreements and resource exploration arrangements have all been achieved between China and the Central Asian republics.[16] The latter's oil and gas reserves are important for China's high levels of

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[8] Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* University of California Press, May 2006, p. 101.
[9] Jeffery Nickeson, 'Has the West Lost the Battle for Central Asia?' p. 1.
[10] See K. Raghunath, 'SCO in Search of Itself', *Daily Excelsior* (Jammu), 9 April 2008, <http://www.dailyexcelsior.com/web1/09apr08/edit.htm#4>, accessed 4 May 2009, and Fariborz Saremi, 'Iran's Journey to Shanghai', *Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy,* Vol. 35, No. 8, August 2007, p. 12.
[11] Elizabeth Wishnick, 'Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the Shadow of the Georgian Crisis', *Strategic Studies Institute,* February 2009, p. iii.
[12] Richard Weitz, 'China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism without Partnership or Passion?' *Strategic Studies Institute,* August 2008, pp. 117-118.
[13] Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* p. 101, and Sean Yom, 'Power Politics in Central Asia: The Future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', *Harvard Asia Quarterly,* Vol. 6, No. 4, Autumn 2002.
[14] Richard Weitz, 'China-Russia Security Relations' pp. 2-3, 12-13, 17.
[15] Ariel Cohen, *Competition over Eurasia: Are the U.S. and Russia on a Collision Course?* Heritage Lecture No. 901, 4 September 2005, p. 4.
[16] Charles Ziegler, 'China, Russia and Energy in the CCA Region and East Asia', in Richard Auty and Indra de Soysa, (eds.), *Energy, Wealth and Governance in the Caucasus and Central Asia,* Routledge, London, 2006, p. 240.

economic growth. Having stable, strongly developing neighbours in Central Asia will also enhance stability and economic prosperity of China's resource rich Xinjiang province, which borders Central Asia, and China's revival of the ancient Silk Road for trade and infrastructure development is attractive to its western neighbours.[17] This has further advantages as Beijing remains concerned with Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang and has persuaded SCO member nations to restrict activities of their Uyghur populations and disband Uyghur political parties.[18] For Central Asian governments, membership of the SCO has it obvious attractions. The Central Asian states are attuned to the growing rivalry between Moscow and Beijing, and the SCO is a forum that allows them to balance Chinese and Russian interests in order to benefit their own economic and security objectives.[19]

Yet Sino-Russian relations are the closest they have been for decades. President Hu Jintao is viewed as pro-Russian and has relied on Moscow for diplomatic and military support against Washington's activities in Asia.[20] However Beijing must be careful not to alienate Moscow when dealing with the Central Asian states. China's pragmatic approach has created fault lines, such as reaching border agreements with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan without consulting Russia.[21] For its part, Moscow desires a restoration of its influence over Central Asia, partly to guarantee access to needed energy supplies, but also to keep the US at bay.[22]

China's ability to lead and influence the Central Asian states is already demonstrated, which means Moscow risks becoming a junior partner in the coalition.[23] China's 2008 Defence White Paper (*China's National Defence in 2008)* reaffirms Beijing's commitment to the SCO for security cooperation, noting 'the ushering in [of] a new phase of political mutual trust among the member states'.[24] Beijing views Russia as a power in decline in Central Asia, and is well positioned to challenge Moscow for leadership in the region.[25] The challenge facing SCO today is as much one of Moscow and Beijing balancing each other, as it is to balance the US in Central Asia.

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[17] Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* p. 99.

[18] Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* p. 94. Sznadjer further states that Uyghur separatists seek an independent Islamic 'East Turkestan' state in the region. Uyghur mujahadeen have fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan, with around one thousand militants from Xinjiang reported to have attended training camps in Afghanistan. Islamic groups in Xinjiang have allegedly received support from the Taliban and other Islamic extremist groups.

[19] Daniel Kimmage, 'Central Asia: Does the Road to Shanghai go Through Tehran?' *Global Security*, 12 June 2006, p. 3.

[20] Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* p. 98.

[21] Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* p. 98.

[22] Elizabeth Wishnick, *Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia:,* p. 3.

[23] Ariel Cohen, *Competition over Eurasia:* p. 6.

[24] Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defence in 2008,* The People's Republic of China, January 2009, p. 28.

[25] Charles Ziegler, 'China, Russia and energy in the CCA region and East Asia', p. 240.

Afghanistan: An Opportunity Knocking

Regional members have an opportunity to turn the location of Afghanistan into an asset for the region.[26]

A lack of internal unity, compounded with an inability to mount a cohesive Afghan strategy, has hurt the SCO's credibility in the past.[27] Its pace of deliberations on regional issues of major significance, such as Afghanistan, has been slow. The SCO has also been guilty of balancing US interests in Central Asia at the expense of advancing stability in Afghanistan.[28]

The recent Special Conference on Afghanistan renewed the importance of the SCO's regional security agenda. Chinese commentators reported this event as a meeting aimed at 'finding a way out for war-ravaged Afghanistan', noting the current situation threatens 'the security and stability of not only the country, but also the entire region', and that the SCO 'has become an efficient international platform to discuss measures of assistance for Afghanistan'.[29] The invitation for representatives from NATO, the Group of Eight member nations, European Union and United Nations to attend a SCO Conference for the first time reflects the seriousness of Afghanistan's current situation.[30] It also showed signs of maturity in the SCO, engaging beyond its own members and traditionally aligned observer nations.[31]

The SCO literally seized the initiative on Afghanistan, with this conference strategically timed to coincide with the new Obama administration shifting its focus from Iraq to Afghanistan.[32] Afghanistan is President Obama's most urgent foreign and defence policy issue,[33] yet the US approach has relied on finding solutions through NATO and western coalition arrangements. A primary aim of the conference was no doubt to obtain US and NATO recognition for the SCO as 'a legitimate and effective security interlocutor' on Afghanistan.[34] However, the conference was not

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[26] Mahmoud Saikal, *Regional Cooperation Strategy of Afghanistan,* lecture delivered to the ANU Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, 22 April 2008, available at:
< http://arts.anu.edu.au/cais/audio/CAIS9999_20080422_1700_Law-Link-Theatre.mp3,> accessed 6 May 2009.

[27] Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* p. 101.

[28] For example, in 2005 the SCO called on the United States to set a timetable for U.S. military withdrawal from Central Asia. The U.S. believed Moscow and Beijing pressured both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to close U.S. bases that supported the Afghanistan effort. Uzbekistan obliged. See Ariel Sznajder, *China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Strategy,* p. 95. In early 2009 the US was forced to substantially renegotiate continued operation of the strategically important Manas military base in Kyrgyzstan.

[29] Yang H. and Yang L., 'Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization Highlighted at Conference on Afghanistan', *Xinhua,* 29 March 2009, available at: <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-03/29/content_11092204.htm>, accessed 26 April 2009.

[30] Eric Walberg, 'Eurasian "Diplomacy": Russia and China confront the U.S. and NATO over Afghanistan', *Global Research,* 22 April 2009, available at: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=13291>, accessed 21 July 2009.

[31] SCO observer states are Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia. Afghanistan, CIS and ASEAN members are treated as guest attendees, see The Shangahi Cooperation Organisation website at: <http://www.sectsco.org/EN/,> accessed 21 July 2009.

[32] 'The SCO and the Future of American Central Asian Strategy (I),' p.1.

[33] Stephen Blank, 'What does Moscow want in Afghanistan?' *Perspective*, Vol. 19, No.1, April 2009, p. 1.

[34] Stephen Blank, 'What does Moscow Want in Afghanistan?' p. 5.

without a reminder to the US that the SCO is opposed to the expansion of US military interests in Central Asia. The SCO Secretary-General took an opportunistic swipe at the US, stating: 'It is stability, not transformation imposed from outside, it is long-term and steady international aid, not interference aimed to achieve unilateral interests, which Afghanistan needs the most.'[35]

The action plan resulting from the conference calls for joint SCO-Afghan operations in combating terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime, emphasising coordination and cooperation between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours.[36] While a step forward, these outcomes reiterate past SCO concerns with illegal drug trafficking and border control, while avoiding the issue of committing material support to the fight against the Afghan insurgency. Even so, the SCO did demonstrate its willingness to expand cooperation with the US and NATO in Afghanistan, albeit short of sending troops.[37]

A NATO-SCO Partnership and a Role for Australia[38]

The SCO's goal of becoming an economic, political and security bloc with global influence can be realised by it partnering with NATO to stabilise Afghanistan. However Russia's inability or unwillingness to engage NATO more openly on Afghanistan risks granting China de-facto leadership of the Central Asian states on such deliberations. Moscow remains haunted by its own Afghan experience, with domestic concerns complicating its ability to lead substantive SCO initiatives on Afghanistan. A NATO-SCO partnership in Afghanistan provides China with the opportunity to take what Australia acknowledges as 'its place as a leading stakeholder in the development and stability of the global economic and political system'.[39] A stable and secure Afghanistan also serves SCO interests in giving the U.S. little reason for future military basing requirements in Central Asia. It is therefore in Beijing's interests to adopt policies on Afghanistan congruent to US and NATO objectives.

For its part, the US can make better use of multilateral alliances outside of NATO. It must actively engage the SCO on Afghanistan, and not just focus its diplomatic effort on NATO, western nations and Pakistan. Long term stability for Afghanistan can not be achieved by western-NATO solutions alone. The recent SCO conference is

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[35] Bolat Nurgaliev, *Speech of the Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization at the Special Conference on Afghanistan*, 27 March 2009, available at: <http://www.sectsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=55>, accessed 26 April 2009.

[36] The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, *Declaration of the Special Conference on Afghanistan Convened under the Auspices of The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Moscow, 27 March 2009, p.1, available at: <http://en.sco2009.ru/docs/documents/afghanistan_declaration.html>, accessed 26 April 2009.

[37] Eric Walberg, 'Eurasian "Diplomacy"'.

[38] Lee also suggests that Australia should develop a 'policy towards the SCO [that is] one of engagement'. See John Lee, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: An Australian Response', ASPI Policy Analysis 21, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 6 March 2008, p. 7.

[39] Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030, (Defence White Paper)*, Australian Government, May 2009, p. 34.

therefore 'an opportunity for the U.S. to try to turn what are ostensibly common interests [in Afghanistan] into complementary policies'.[40]

A key benefit of this western-Eurasian security partnership is the SCO's ability to court another important neighbour of Afghanistan–Iran. Iran is often ignored as a regional actor that can contribute positively to the security and stability of Afghanistan. Despite recent overtures from the Obama administration, Tehran has largely been kept out of international negotiations because of US opposition to the regime.[41] Cooperation with SCO offers the US and NATO an acceptable forum through which to bring Iran into the dialogue.[42]

Notwithstanding US reluctance to accept a key role for the SCO in stabilising Afghanistan, as well as Beijing and Moscow's past reluctance to engage NATO in security cooperation, it is evident that the national interests of NATO and SCO members are not mutually exclusive. The question is therefore not whether there should be a NATO-SCO partnership for stabilising Afghanistan, but what shape should it take.

Australia is well positioned to facilitate engagement between SCO and NATO for a number of reasons. Australia has the benefit of being a major non-NATO contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Australia's interests in Afghanistan's stability are complementary to all parties and do not threaten the SCO nations' political, economic or energy security interests. Yet Central Asia's importance does not go unrecognised by the Australian government. The recently released Australian Defence White Paper includes Central Asia among key regions that, for the foreseeable future, would likely have the most concentrated presence of terrorist groups and activity.[43] The White Paper states the requirement for the Australian Defence Force to contribute to military contingencies in support of global security, including in Central Asia.[44] It further highlights that China is central to the development of a cooperative security community in the Asia-Pacific region, and Australia needs to develop a defence relationship with China as a priority.[45] The 'crucial' relationship in the region, however, is that between the US and China.[46] Using Afghanistan as the catalyst to shape western engagement with the SCO will strengthen US-Chinese cooperation on a range of security issues. This may well lead to improved security dialogue on a range of other issues in the Asia-Pacific.

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[40] Evan Fiegenbaum, former U.S. State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia, in Eric Walberg, 'Eurasian "Diplomacy"'.

[41] Fabrizio Vielmini, 'The SCO at the Test of the Afghani Challenge', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst*, 23 July 2008, p. 3, available at:
< http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4912/print>, accessed 26 March 2009.

[42] Eric Walberg, 'Eurasian "Diplomacy"'.

[43] Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper*, pp. 37-38.

[44] Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper*, p. 56.

[45] Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper*, p. 95.

[46] Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper*, p. 34.

Defining a strategy for such an approach may not be a comfortable exercise for Canberra policy makers, but it is an avenue that should not be ignored in the absence of other Australian government initiatives on Afghanistan. Solving the Afghanistan conflict is far more complex than this paper allows discussion for, however serious engagement of SCO is currently a missing link in US and NATO strategies.

Conclusion

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is a key stakeholder and important enabler of Afghan and Central Asian stability. Achieving a stable and prosperous Central Asia will rest on the success of this important regional security forum to engage with other interested parties beyond the borders of its member nations.

To advance security and stability in Afghanistan, NATO-SCO cooperation will be necessary. China can lead the SCO in this endeavour, demonstrating its responsible stakeholder credentials while remaining careful not to overstep its position vis-à-vis Russia's traditional purview over its former Central Asian states.

Australia's security interests are also undoubtedly served by this potential arrangement. However, the lack of a coherent Australian strategy for engagement with the SCO is a vulnerability to our military commitment in the region. This must be addressed. Notwithstanding, Australia is uniquely placed to act as a pivot in the relationship between Washington and Beijing. By facilitating NATO-SCO security cooperation in Afghanistan, Australia will contribute to the longer term stability of Central Asia and may even facilitate improved security dialogue in the wider Asia-Pacific.

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