

Policy Watch: Eyeing the Shanghai group

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The annual summit of the presidents of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will take place this coming August in Kyrgyzstan. The SCO groups together Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The U.S. government has reacted warily to the SCO for several reasons.

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

Second, the 2005 SCO summit's call for the United States and other coalition partners (which had been granted military facilities in Central Asia to fight the Taliban after 9/11) to set a timetable for withdrawal -- combined with Uzbekistan's expulsion of U.S. 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 United States from Central Asia.

Third, the presence of Iranian President Ahmadinejad at the 2006 SCO summit aroused fears 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.

Despite these misgivings, however, developments in 2007 suggest that the SCO is not so threatening to American and Western interests.

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 it disapproves of.

Second, while Moscow may seek to end the U.S. 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 the United States and NATO. Although there was concern in Washington that the United States 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 remarkable deterioration that has occurred in Russian-Iranian relations during 2007 (including their payment dispute over the nuclear reactor Russia is building for Iran, and Iran's negative reaction to Russian President Vladimir Putin's offering U.S. President George Bush use of the Russian radar facility in Azerbaijan to resolve the U.S.-Russian dispute over American ballistic missile defense deployment plans) has served to reassure Washington that Moscow is also concerned about the possibility that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons.

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) has led many in the West to not only view the SCO as non-threatening, but to dismiss it as meaningless. This view, though, is as mistaken as seeing the SCO as a threat.

The United States and the SCO do have some common interests that they could work on together. Both the U.S. and the SCO oppose Islamic extremism and terrorism. Indeed, while the 2005 SCO summit declaration described U.S.-led coalition military operations in Afghanistan as being nearly completed, there is now increased recognition in Moscow and other SCO capitals 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. In addition, 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 U.S. and other Western states 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.

The United States and the SCO, then, definitely have common interests that they can work on. While neither the SCO nor the United States want America to become a full or even an observer member of the SCO, a dialogue between the United States on the one hand and the SCO on the other would be beneficial to both. A dialogue between the United States (as well as the European Union 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.

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