

Policy Watch: Putin's potemkin alliance

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Russian President Vladimir Putin places great store by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 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 the 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 U.S. 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 controlled under Putin, it is highly likely that these sentiments reflect fears that are also present in the Kremlin. 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 U.S. 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 U.S.

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 U.S.

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.

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 U.S., 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.

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