

RUSSIA TRIES TO EXPAND THE SCO'S MEMBERSHIP

By Stephen Blank (03/05/2008 issue of the CACI Analyst)

On December 27 2007, the same day as former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov suggested that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) expand its membership to include Iran and Pakistan. This new turn by Moscow cries out for explanation. Losyukov conspicuously omitted Russia's closest Asian partner for many years, India, and supported China's candidate and India's rival, Pakistan. While possibly a concession to China, which supports Pakistan's membership and opposes India's, admitting two new members might also in the long run dilute China's weight in the organization, particularly as Russia and Iran have been the loudest exponents of an energy club in the SCO which would be a form of a cartel that sets prices.

BACKGROUND: Membership issues provide a difficult dilemma for the SCO. In 2006-07 Russian analysts advocated Iranian membership and the members' Foreign Ministers seriously discussed this possibility in 2006. At the time, Iranian membership was a bridge too far because of the current delicate stage of the negotiations over Iranian nuclearization. Russia and China ultimately refrained from supporting Iran despite their support for its negotiating position, so as not to confront Washington directly on this subject at a particularly delicate time in the negotiations. As Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said, the SCO would not bring Iran into membership if that meant defending it against Washington for its nuclear proliferation, a proposition that he called moronic. Also, members like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan publicly opposed such membership and Iran's nuclear program. They fully realize that either the success of Iran's nuclear program or an American attack on Iran would entail new threats to regional security and potential disturbances that they prefer not to confront. Furthermore, under the SCO charter, members might be asked to defend Iran if America attacks it, even though such attacks hardly are due to terrorism, separatism, or extremism, the three *casus belli* in that charter. The Central Asian states also opposed membership because adding new members outside Central Asia could dilute their weight in the organization, and involve them in other countries' agendas, something decidedly not to their taste. They opposed it also because they knew that inviting Iran represented a deliberate and serious affront to America with whom they must interact and trade and whom they see no reason in gratuitously insulting. Kazakhstan in particular opposes adding new members because its rising influence would then be eclipsed by that of Iran, Pakistan, and/or India, the logical candidates for future membership.

Therefore, the issue was temporarily shelved despite Iran's hopes for membership and clear signs of Moscow's and Beijing's inclination to favor this if it could be done at no cost. Meanwhile, India and Pakistan also applied for membership in the SCO. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf emphasized Pakistan's location as the bridge to the Indian Ocean as a justification for membership. But Pakistan's continuing tolerance of Taliban and al-Qaeda incitement precluded its being trusted in Central Asia or Moscow, not to mention New Delhi. Furthermore, Pakistan's membership without Indian membership immediately would prejudice the organization in dangerous ways, e.g. by obliging members to protect it against the three kinds of attack cited above and which could involve choosing sides in an Indo-Pakistani war. Clearly, nobody wishes to be tied to one country in South Asia or to Iran, should a war break out in those areas.

IMPLICATIONS: These issues revealed considerable divisions among the SCO membership. Russia championed India's observer status and China Pakistan's status, thereby indicating their own diverging approaches to South Asia and the question of membership in the SCO for those two states. These differences also reveal some of the

signs of Russo-Chinese rivalry in Central Asia. And despite Indo-Chinese rapprochement and talk of a strategic triangle including Russia, China, and India, China is not eager to see India play a major role in Central Asia. After all, it is busy trying to expand its ties to Iran and Pakistan as well as Central Asia in both energy and strategic affairs, e.g. help for constructing the Pakistani port at Gwadar. Its strategic aims are still tied to supporting Pakistan in order to confine India and Indian power to the subcontinent while simultaneously pursuing a detente with India.

At the same time, the open anti-Americanism of the SCO's declarations clearly contradicts India's partnership with America. India also cannot afford to be seen in public with Iran even though it could usefully emphasize to Iran the risks that Tehran is running by its program of nuclearization. So while it is prepared to cooperate with Russia and China on energy and direct security issues affecting the three of them, India will not and cannot be part of the grand design for the SCO now being hatched in Moscow and Beijing. The presence of its energy minister and his speech at the Shanghai summit in 2006 suggests that its principal interest in the SCO is access to energy and broader trade with Central Asia, not anti-American gestures.

Nevertheless the membership issue and its implications have been shelved, not discarded. In 2006-07 Russian and Indian defense institutes conducted an extensive dialogue across the entire agenda of security questions and issues in Central Asia in order to discover the most effective way to foster bilateral defense and security cooperation between Moscow and new Delhi. According to one Russian commentator, "perhaps the answers to most of the above questions could be found not only through bilateral cooperation, but also during our two countries' interaction with SCO member states."

None of these arguments against expansion of membership have been invalidated since 2006-07. Neither are Moscow's motives clear. Pakistan's exceptional domestic turmoil that was already at a high level before Bhutto's death, as well as its inability to deal with homegrown terrorists, makes it a awkward choice for membership, especially given the reservations its policies have inspired among Russian, Central Asian, and even Chinese officials. The implicit threat to exclude India may have been part of a Russian campaign to bring pressure upon it in Central Asia. In that case, this move would correlate with its abusive treatment of Indian officials in late 2007 and efforts to threaten its position in Tajikistan lest it incline too closely to America. Still, it seems excessive even in view of that temporary goal.

Likewise, the situation around Iran remains extremely tense, even if the U.S. National intelligence Estimate (NIE) of December 3 stated that Iran was not making nuclear weapons anymore. Although Moscow has been promoting Iran as a fit partner for discussions on Middle Eastern, Gulf, and even Black Sea Security, it is unclear if China still supports Iran as a member of the SCO and the attitude of other Central Asian states does not appear to have changed either. At the same time Losyukov's initiative clearly represents a concession to China's viewpoint on Pakistan and may be a quid pro quo in return for signs of China's greater willingness to entertain ideas about the SCO assuming a more military and hard security cast as Russia desires. Hitherto, Chinese official statements, including those by President Hu Jintao at the SCO summits in 2006-07 as well as those by the SCO's former Secretary-General Zhang Deguang, have stressed that the SCO should stress regional economic cooperation in trade and development as its main priorities. The exercises or "peace mission" of 2007 might signify a looming change in Beijing's attitude.

CONCLUSIONS: For now it is impossible to be exactly sure why Losyukov spoke when he did, and what Russia's objectives are. But it seems safe to assume that it portends another

series of moves within and around the SCO and its members' interaction with each other. One of the SCO's chief distinguishing features is its protean and evolving character as it moves from being one kind of security organization to becoming another type. Losyukov's gambit suggests that this process is by no means finished and that the nature, purpose, and membership of the SCO, as well as the relations among its members, all remain an unfinished work in progress.

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