

Eurasian “Diplomacy”: Russia and China confront the US and NATO over Afghanistan

NATO, SCO or PATO?

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Conferences and suggestions about what to do in Afghanistan are chock-a-block, but the reality speaks for itself,

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s Special Conference on Afghanistan, held in Moscow on 27 March, marks a new stage in the international community’s relations with this beleaguered country. It reflected the growing clout of Russia and China, the founders of the SCO, which includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and four observers — India, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia.

In attendance for the first time were top US and NATO officials, including US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Patrick Moon and NATO Deputy Secretary General Martin Howard, as well as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Secretary General of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe Mark Perrin de Brichambaut. Among the 36 countries participating were representatives from the G8, the European Union and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. The unanimously adopted Joint Action Plan underlined the SCO’s importance “for practical interaction between Afghanistan and its neighbouring states in combating terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime.”

The Moscow Declaration upstaged the UN Conference on Afghanistan held four days later, coming down hard on Pakistan with a call for more effective means to combat terrorism, including denying sanctuaries to the resistance. Coming just over a month after Kyrgyzstan announced the closing of the US airbase on its territory, the conference reiterated the SCO’s position that it is opposed to the expansion of US military interests in Central Asia, but is willing to expand cooperation with the US and NATO in Afghanistan, short of sending troops. Interestingly, Obama announced a shift in US policy emphasis on the same day as the SCO summit, promising greater consultation with Afghanistan ’s neighbours.

It also declared support for the efforts of the Karzai government, which is openly criticised as weak and corrupt by US officials. Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin warned against creating a power vacuum in Afghanistan in the run-up to the presidential elections later this year. Russia also came out against negotiating with the Taliban.

The Russians believe that Afghan drug trafficking is the most serious threat to the security of Russia and Central Asia. Russia’s anti-drug chief Viktor Ivanov last week called the coalition’s anti-drug policy a fiasco, nothing that opium production in Afghanistan had

soared since the deployment of US and NATO troops in the country. Afghan narcotics, he said, kill 30,000 people in Russia every year, twice as many as the Soviet Union lost during its decade-long military intervention in Afghanistan. The Action Plan calls for joint SCO-Afghan operations in combating drug trafficking and organised crime, including training of drug agencies, combating laundering of drug money and improving border controls.

The Plan reads like a roadmap for bringing Afghanistan into the SCO fold, a move which India's envoy approved of. The idea of Afghanistan joining the SCO would clearly be anathema to the US, however, and Obama's proposal to create a NATO-dominated Contact Group with Afghanistan is clearly a way to contain the growing influence of the SCO. But with NATO allies reluctant to back Obama's surge strategy, major concessions will have to be made, affecting virtually all US foreign policy.

Russia has approved rail transit of non-military supplies to Afghanistan, and suggested this could include military cargo as well, though such approval is surely conditional on US actions affecting Russia, primarily its plans for missile bases in Eastern Europe and its campaign against Iran. Russian analyst Alexander Lukin says cooperation with the SCO offers the US and NATO an acceptable format to bring Iran into the dialogue. Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Akhundzadeh sat across the table from the US envoy at the Moscow Conference.

Iran is a dilemma for the SCO. Just as Georgia is being put on hold in NATO, Iran's application to join the SCO was put off again. "The admission of new members to the SCO should strengthen the organisation, but not cause new problems," SCO Secretary General Bolat Nurgaliyev said last month. Full membership would provide Tehran with a mutual assistance guarantee similar to that provided NATO members. Just as NATO's expansion plans brought the world perilously close to war last summer over Georgia, so would a US-Israeli attack on Iran if it were a full member. This will be addressed at the next SCO summit which will be held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in June.

In 2003, Iran indicated to the Bush administration that it was no friend of the Taliban and was willing to cooperate in stabilising the situation in Afghanistan, but its overtures were spurned and the invasion of Iraq put paid to any such plans. The hysterical campaign against Iran since has only made the US/NATO occupation of Afghanistan harder — there are reports that Iran may even be burying the hatchet with the Taliban. But its enthusiasm for the SCO and continued support from China and Russia in its stand-off with the West make this possibility unlikely.

Iran is also suffering from the exploding drug trafficking from Afghanistan that the US invasion facilitated, plus a surge of Afghan refugees. Russia in no doubt delighted with the Iranian police chief Esmaeel Ahmadi-Moghadam's announcement last week that Iran was ready to train Afghan police. The Germans have botched this and the Iranians could hardly do worse. If the US were serious about containing the huge heroin problem it created, it would take their offer seriously.

But Obama will be unlikely to capture this moment, given his timidity so far in dealing with the mess he was bequeathed. He needs to build a new coalition and endgame strategy that would avoid the humiliation the US suffered in Vietnam, and fast. There are many adjustments to be made — nixing the Bush-Brzezinski strategy of surrounding Russia with NATO members for starters. And winding down the campaign against Iran, which will include

reining in Israel. US policymakers who want to reverse the reckless sabre-rattling of the Bush years can actually take solace in the rise of the SCO, which was founded in 2001 and whose growing prominence is a direct result of the Bush years. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and NATO's self-proclaimed status as world policeman in the past two decades, Russia and China were more or less forced to form their own "NATO". After all, nature abhors a vacuum.

Ironically, as the attempt to surround Russia sputters, it is Afghanistan that is now surrounded by SCO members and observers, notably Iran, anxious to contain drug trafficking. In this context, US-Israel threats to attack Iran are more and more like the boy who cried "Wolf!" The Bush Afghanistan/Iran policies in shambles and there is little indication so far that much is being done to improve the situation.

Can NATO and the SCO become allies in Afghanistan, or are they fated to be enemies? Council for Foreign Relations analyst Evan Feigenbaum, until recently the State Department's deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, says the SCO conference "offers an opportunity for the US to try to turn what are ostensibly common interests [in Afghanistan] into complementary policies," but he's not optimistic. He pointed to the SCO call in 2005 for a timeline for a US withdrawal from military bases in Central Asia, which "attracted a lot of notoriety," and asks just what the SCO could actually do in Afghanistan. Good question. How can Chinese and Russian support save the totally discredited Karzai regime? How would their "help" be greeted by Afghans? Clearly some accommodation with, if not total surrender to the Taliban is the deadend the US has reached, and SCO involvement can change this.

Feigenbaum makes another telling observation: "We really don't understand what the SCO is ... Is it a security group? Is it a trade bloc? Is it a group of non-democratic countries that have created a kind of safe zone where the US and Europeans don't talk to them about human rights and democracy?" Indeed, there is little uniting the suspicious and uneasy SCO members other than fear and perhaps loathing of the US and Taliban, and a desire to staunch the drug smuggling which the US is failing so spectacularly to deal with. If NATO were to disband or at least retract its claws, the SCO might well collapse. Expanding it to include, say, Iran, let alone Pakistan and India, would paralyse it.

The most likely cooperation would be in containing the drug flow, if the US is indeed serious about this and not part of the problem, as some analysts — in the first place Russian — contend. The prospects of establishing a stable, popular political regime opposed to the Taliban is a fantasy apparently shared by both NATO and the SCO. But Russia and China are hardly going to have more success in destroying the Taliban than the US. Any attempt by either Russia or China to contribute to the slaughter now taking place will only backfire among their own restive Muslim minorities, which all SCO members have.

It appears that Russia genuinely wants the US to succeed in bringing Afghanistan to heel. Russia's Ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin said recently, "We want to prevent the virus of extremism from crossing the borders of Afghanistan and take over other states in the region such as Pakistan. If NATO failed, it would be Russia and her partners that would have to fight against the extremists in Afghanistan." Rogozin proposes using the NATO-Russia Council to establish a security order stretching "from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Perhaps NATO could develop into PATO, a Pacific-Atlantic alliance."

Whether this is merely Rogozin being flippant is not clear. Surely such an organisation

belongs as part of the UN, which is perhaps what he meant. In any case, Rogozin is back on the warpath, or rather the peace path, calling NATO's month-long war games in Georgia scheduled for 7 May a "provocation" and calling for them to be cancelled. If they go ahead, Russia will "take appropriate measures", one of which already has been taken with the cancellation of a meeting of Russian and NATO general staff commanders this week. There are lots more aces up the Russian sleeve, including SCO and Afghan ones. If Obama persists in Bush-era belligerence, it will only make resolving the many problems he faces all the more difficult.

Even if he can keep the SCO onside, it is no lifejacket for NATO in Afghanistan. The best the two "security" organisations can do is to let it go its own way, "containing" it until it recovers from the trauma of all the "help" it has been force-fed over the past three decades.

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