

Putin's visit to China signals sharpening global tensions

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The state visit to China this week by Russian President Vladimir Putin, followed by a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Beijing, has underscored a developing strategic partnership between China and Russia.

Putin, who recently resumed the Russian presidency, snubbed last month's G8 meeting in the US amid disagreements with American plans for a missile defence system in Europe. Instead, his initial visits have been to Germany and France, followed by China.

In Beijing, Russian and Chinese leaders publicly stated their opposition to the drive by the US and its allies towards military intervention in Syria. In a joint statement, Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao declared: "Russia and China are decisively against attempts to regulate the Syrian crisis with outside military intervention, as well as imposing... a policy of regime change."

Writing in the official *People's Daily*, Putin declared: "Without the participation of Russia and China, without considering Russia and China's interests, no international matter or issue can be discussed and implemented." Russia and China have blocked UN resolutions for sanctions against Syria.

Both Russia and China have a great deal at stake in opposing US machinations in the Middle East. Russia has longstanding ties with Syria. Moreover Putin and Hu are well aware that the drive for regime change is also directly against Syria's main ally, Iran, that is confronting threats of war from the US and its allies. China and Russia have significant economic interests in Iran.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was formed in 2001, just prior to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, to counter the growing American intervention in Central Asia. It includes Russia, China and four Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia have observer status. The latest SCO summit has accepted Afghanistan as a new observer.

The SCO declaration warned against any attempt to resolve the confrontation over Iran's nuclear program through military means. "Any such attempt will produce unpredictable and serious consequences, threatening the stability and security of the region and even the world," it declared.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was given a platform in Peking University to deliver a speech criticising "a country"—without naming the US—for creating "disturbances"

and “hatred” in the international community.

Crippling US and European sanctions against Iranian oil exports are due to come into effect on July 1, even though Russia and China have resisted such measures. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared in Beijing: “Additional sanctions are completely counter-productive. They are already adopted not only by the [UN] Security Council, but by some states, which we think undermines our collective actions.”

The other major issue bringing Russia and China together is Afghanistan. While NATO has declared its forces will leave by 2014, Beijing and Moscow are concerned that the US will maintain a military presence and access to military bases in Afghanistan, which is on the doorstep of Central Asia. The US is also encouraging India, its strategic partner, to play a greater long-term role in Afghanistan, including to equip and train Afghan security forces.

Hu told the *People’s Daily*: “We will continue to follow the concept that regional affairs should be managed by countries in the region, that we should guard against shocks from turbulence outside the region, and that [the SCO] should play a bigger role in Afghanistan’s peaceful reconstruction.”

However, the US, which economically, politically and militarily dominates Afghanistan and its puppet government, is a major obstacle to the SCO playing a “bigger role.” Both Russia and China have ruled out a direct security role in Afghanistan.

The SCO is holding a joint military exercise “Peace Mission 2012” in Tajikistan, which borders Afghanistan, following its summit in Beijing. Even as the Chinese foreign ministry again publicly denied that the SCO will evolve into a military-political bloc, relentless US pressure on a range of issues is forcing Russia and China in this direction.

While Putin was being welcomed in China, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was visiting Georgia, which provoked a short war with Russia in 2008. Clinton announced new military aid to Georgia and denounced “Russia’s occupation and militarisation of Georgia’s territory”—the two provinces broke away from Georgia in the 2008 war.

China and Russia are both concerned that the US development of missile defence shields in Europe and Asia are directed at neutralising their nuclear arsenals. Putin secured China’s support to state in the SCO declaration that the “strengthening of missile defence by a country or a group of countries in a unilateral and unrestrained manner in disregard of the legitimate interests of other countries will cause harm to international security and global strategic stability.”

At his meeting with China’s next president Xi Jinping, Putin emphasised Russia’s military ties with China, pointing to their first joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea in April. In an earlier statement, Putin declared: “We assign an important role to the joint initiative on strengthening security in the Asia-Pacific region and in this context we will maintain the relationship between our militaries.”

Putin’s remarks were directly against the US military build up in Asia and its aggressive diplomatic moves to undermine Chinese influence in the region. At last weekend’s Asian security dialogue in Singapore, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta announced the US would deploy 60 percent of its warships to the Pacific by 2020. China’s Defence Minister Liang Guanglie, who had attended last year’s summit, stayed away from the meeting.

Putin's visit to China is a clear indication that what is at stake in Syria and Iran is connected to broader geo-strategic tensions and rivalries between the world's capitalist states. The US war drive in the Middle East, like its "pivot to Asia", is threatening to unleash a chain of events that could ultimately lead to military conflict involving China and Russia, with devastating consequences for humanity.

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