

Russia and China create their own orbit

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While interacting with a select gathering of “Russia hands” from Western academia, media and think tanks recently, President Vladimir Putin ventured onto the topic of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in terms, as he put it, that would be a “revelation ... something probably I have never said to anyone before”.

Putin, known for his reticence and choice of words, revealed that the Kremlin did not “plan” for the SCO’s present standing, but had only set its sights on the organization’s potential to resolve the “utilitarian question of settling borders” between China and its post-Soviet neighbors. SCO includes China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

He continued, “After all, to be honest, I know that somewhere within the depths of various governments and intelligence services there are people thinking that Russians and Chinese are up to something here, that they have got some kind of secret mechanism and are planning something.”

Putin summed up explaining SCO’s raison d’etre. “It’s simply that after the collapse of the bipolar world, there was a real need for the emergence of centers of influence and power. This is simply an objective reality.”

Curiously, Putin was speaking just ahead of the sensational “revelation” in Moscow last week that the first-ever joint military exercise of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO – Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and the SCO would be held next year.

Code-named Peace Mission Rubezh, the CSTO-SCO exercise will be staged in Chebarkul in Russia’s Volga-Urals area. Significantly, the heads of state of the participating countries – Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus and Armenia – are expected to witness the exercise. Russian commentators have speculated that the attendance of SCO observer countries (Iran, Pakistan and India) cannot be ruled out.

In essence, this becomes a military exercise involving Russia and its select band of close Commonwealth of Independent States allies plus China. Equally, this will also be the SCO’s first full-scale exercise involving all its member countries. China is expected to display, for the first time abroad, its latest battle tank, as well as its latest FC-1 multi-role fighters powered by Russian AL-31FN/FNM1 engines. Both China and Russia are expected to participate at battalion strength.

The exercises are ostensibly aimed at countering “terrorist and extremist networks in this world of ours” (to quote a Russian commentator) and are not targeted at any country – “definitely not NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] or the United States or any other

bona fide entity”.

But speculation is bound to arise as during the exercises the chiefs of staff of the participating countries will gather in Urumchi, the capital of China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

Without doubt, there is much political symbolism in the forthcoming event. The announcement in Moscow on November 3 was itself just about 25 days ahead of the NATO summit scheduled to take place in the Latvian capital of Riga, which of course will be the first time that the trans-Atlantic Alliance holds its annual summit meeting on the territory of a former Soviet republic. The Riga summit is expected to be a landmark event that may well end up formalizing NATO’s transformation in the post-Cold War era into a security organization with global reach – something that Washington has been assiduously seeking.

Furthermore, the summit may take up the next round of NATO expansion plans in the Eurasian region. To be sure, Russia is greatly perturbed about NATO’s intentions. On the one hand, Moscow is far from convinced that NATO’s continued profession of good intentions toward Russia and its interest in developing cooperative sinews with Russia is to be taken at face value. On the other hand, Moscow is taking note that a possibility still exists, remote though, that through such steady enlargement, NATO may become unwieldy to a point that it may well end up as a hot air balloon.

Certainly, Moscow continues to cherish a vague hope that the manifest reluctance of the countries of “Old Europe” to fit into the US straitjacket of global security may yet come in the way of defining NATO’s role as an aggressive bloc. The great hope has always been that somehow NATO may meander into a conceptual impasse as it steps out of its traditional European periphery.

Meanwhile, not a trace remains, even by way of a residue, of the categorical assurance held out by the Ronald Reagan administration to Mikhail Gorbachev in the dying days of the Cold War that NATO wouldn’t advance eastward from its existing European borders (“not an inch”, as then-secretary of state James Baker would have said). All that Moscow had to do was convince East Germany’s Erich Honecker about the unification of the two Germanys – which Gorbachev duly did, and thereafter proceeded to disband the Warsaw Pact unilaterally.

Having said that, there is great uneasiness in Moscow about the specter of Russia having to share borders with NATO member countries. With the NATO countries’ refusal to ratify the treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, the ground reality is that Russia is at a serious disadvantage with regard to the strength of its conventional forces, and with each passing day it widens. Russia is eager for ratification of the treaty to extend its applicability to the territories of the Baltic states, which are not covered by the existing treaty’s ceilings on force deployments.

Russian deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov has repeatedly voiced Russian concerns. “During the first wave of NATO expansion [in the mid-1990s], we [Boris Yeltsin’s Russia] were given solemn assurances that there would be no NATO military infrastructure in the new members’ territory. We were simply duped,” Ivanov said on November 1 while on a visit to Norway, a key NATO power.

He asked: “We don’t see why NATO’s military infrastructure is getting closer to our borders.

Do we pose a threat to anyone?" Ivanov reiterated that nonetheless, Russia would take at face value the potentials of developing a cooperative relationship within the framework of the Russia-NATO Council. But a spate of Russian statements in recent months indicates that the two sides' interests are diverging to a point of extensive disagreements. As Fedor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of Russia in Global Affairs, wrote recently, "After a decade and a half of pretensions, Russian politicians are once again reaching for their pistols when they hear the word 'NATO'."

The former head of Russian intelligence, General Leonid Ivashov, told Radio Russia recently that the US and NATO "helped to mastermind the provocative measure" involving a recent Russian-Georgian spy scandal since they needed a "new platform in the North Caucasus, which is an extremely important strategic corridor for them". He said the intention was to create an "arc of insecurity" around Russia, by involving the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia.

Ivanov also alleged that some NATO countries were supplying arms to Georgia. Moscow has no doubt taken note that it was right in the middle of Russia's spy scandal with Georgia that the US Congress took the decision to provide financial assistance to Tbilisi for upgrading Georgia's military capability to a level that speeded up its NATO accession.

Watchful eye on NATO

NATO's enlargement is increasingly becoming a matter of shared concern for Russia and China. In a commentary in mid-June, the People's Daily noted that "with its tentacles stretching further and further ... NATO's forces are exceeding the 'defensive mode' and are going hand-in-hand with the US global strategy ... NATO's great ambition draws concern."

In another commentary in September, the People's Daily was more specific. It noted, "The emergence of NATO troops in Afghanistan and the rapid expansion in the scope of its moves have shown a new trend in the process of its hastening shift toward globalization, and this has drawn extensive concern of people worldwide."

The commentary added, "NATO has intensified its interference in the affairs of major 'hot-spot' regions in recent years ... The frequent appearance of NATO troops in the 'hot-spot' areas is closely related to its strategic functions ... Equipping itself with such a raid deployment force, NATO will naturally step up its efforts to expand its domain and the scope of its moves ... It is the US that provides the biggest driving force behind NATO's worldwide overreach."

Most significantly, the commentary took note of NATO's imminent appearance in the Asia-Pacific region. It said NATO "plans to propose at the [Riga] summit in November a plan for global partnership, which is aimed at enhancing its cooperation with Japan, Australia and New Zealand, while seeking an expansion of the parameters of its cooperation with such 'democratic nations' as Brazil, India, South Africa and the Republic of Korea".

Without doubt, both Moscow and Beijing will be keenly watching the US's ambitious plans to deploy a network of anti-missile systems across the world, ostensibly to safeguard against threats from "rogue states" such as Iran and North Korea, but which Moscow and Beijing see as a direct challenge to their security. As Russian Defense Minister Ivanov said, "The announced purpose is the interception of Iranian inter-continental ballistic missiles, which do not exist and will not exist in the near future. I think everyone understands against whom

they [anti-ballistic missile defense systems] can be used.”

Ivanov could have been echoing China’s concerns, too, when he criticized that the US deployment constituted a “destabilizing element and an attempt to shift the strategic balance”.

The point is, by December a new threshold is fast approaching for both Russia and China. The US has scheduled full-scale tests of its interceptor missiles in that month, and if they prove successful, that leads to the deployment of ground and space-based elements of the missile defense program in full.

Russia is planning an “asymmetric response” to the deployment of an American missile defense system in the NATO countries bordering Russia. On the one hand Russia is developing its Topol-M (SS-27) and Bulava missile systems with a uniquely short boost phase, which helps the missiles avoid interception when their engines are firing.

For example, whereas the boost phase at present lasts five minutes (which is sufficient time for a missile launch to be spotted from space), the new systems aim at cutting down the burning time to 130 seconds, which provides hardly any lead time for kinetic interceptors to hit the missile. Besides, Russia is resorting to such other “asymmetric responses” like coating missile surfaces with reflecting materials or generating radio noise to confuse the interceptors or deploying interceptor killers near the Russian border.

But China faces a far more daunting challenge. The US missile system threatens to simply wipe out the Chinese strategic capability. China will be virtually left with no alternative but to build up its nuclear forces by massive deployments of multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles.

That is to say, both Moscow and Beijing realize by now that the US is provoking a potential full-scale nuclear arms race. In a statement on October 3, the Russian Foreign Ministry underlined the gravity of the situation. It warned, “We regard negatively the US plans to deploy an anti-missile defense system in Europe, and we believe that with the possible deployment of the European NATO missile defense system, it would have a negative impact on strategic stability, regional security and inter-governmental relations.”

Last week, Russian Air Force commander-in-chief General Vladimir Mikhailov further warned that the potential of external threats to Russia was increasing in the nature of the improvement and acquisition of more strategic and tactical cruise missiles by NATO countries. “Not only are NATO countries buying large quantities of missiles, such as the Storm Shadow, KEPD-350, JASSM and SLAM-ER, for their air forces, but they are also energetically promoting their export, including to Russia’s next-door neighbors,” he said.

Again, in the medium term, the majority of NATO aircraft will be in the category that are difficult to detect by air defense systems. NATO countries may also acquire hyper-sound air-to-surface missiles. Mikhailov revealed that during the war in the former Yugoslavia and Iraq, the combat use of the range of NATO’s new arsenals of high-precision, difficult-to-detect armaments was tried out. “An analysis of exercises in the West shows that plans for such strikes [as in Yugoslavia and Iraq] are being actively developed. And the amount of air attack forces and the means available to NATO makes us believe that the purpose of their use under certain circumstances may be strategic disarmament of the enemy or the destruction of the enemy’s command system,” he said.

Putin himself drew attention to the growing threat perception last week in a major speech at the Russian military intelligence headquarters in Moscow. Putin said the potential for conflict was on the increase and Russian military intelligence must remain vigilant. Without naming the US, he singled out “stagnation in disarmament”, “threat of the emergence of destabilizing weapons such as low-charge nuclear weapons and strategic missiles equipped with non-nuclear warheads”, placement of nuclear weapons in space, and development of offensive weapons systems as the contentious issues.

“The international community finds itself in a situation in which factors of force are dominating in international relations, a situation where relations are being undermined by unilateral actions ... and by attempts by some countries to unceremoniously impose their positions without taking into account at all the legitimate interests of other partners,” Putin said.

Keeping pace with the incipient trends in this direction, however, starting in 2005, the Kremlin has begun initiating steps aimed at building up the CSTO alliance - which embraces Russia’s most reliable allies - on the international arena. Thus, CSTO has gained observer status in the United Nations and it has been “recognized” by the SCO.

At a meeting of the CSTO collective security council in Moscow in June last year it was decided to create a military component to the organization. A plan to develop an integrated air defense system for the member countries was also discussed. Putin listed that CSTO’s priorities would include cooperation in air defense, manufacturing of weapons, preparation of military personnel and peacekeeping activities. (CSTO’s air defense system presently comprises 20 command control units and 80 combat units.)

From Washington’s point of view, the worst-case scenario would be if an alignment were to formally take shape between CSTO and the SCO, which could become a mission analogous to NATO as a security organization. In the words of Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation, “The inter-operability of the Russian and Chinese forces would constitute a great force multiplier in the event of a major military confrontation, and the possibility of a coordinated action is viewed by the Pentagon with great suspicion. Such inter-operable forces do not threaten the US presence in the Far East - yet. However, the Russian units outnumber American forces deployed in Central Asia. Military cooperation between Russia and China, under the guise of counter-terrorism in Central Asia, has the potential to set off alarms in the planning rooms of NATO and the Pentagon.”

This is why Washington sees the SCO as detrimental to US geopolitical interests in Central Asia. But the American strategy toward the SCO is highly nuanced. On the one hand, Washington strives to gain observer status in the organization so as to be in a position to modulate its orientations from within SCO forums. On the other hand, taking advantage of the huge upswing in its relations with India, Washington recently come up with a “Great Central Asia” strategy that aims at drawing the region toward South Asia - away from Russia and China. This is predicated on the assumption that New Delhi and Islamabad (and Kabul) will cooperate to become engaging partners for land-locked Central Asian countries.

Meanwhile, Washington will continue to harbor the hope that there is scope to encourage the Central Asian countries to play Russia against China within the SCO forum itself. Of late, American strategic analysts have attempted to persuade Beijing that Moscow is attempting to drag it into an anti-American bloc, which would be harmful to China’s long-term economic interests.

Washington also hopes to use the oil price issue as a wedge between Russia and China. Some American analysts have taken pains to explain that the geopolitical interests of the US and China do not necessarily clash in the Central Asian region. Conceivably, Washington's priority at the present stage will be to isolate Russia (being the only power on earth with the thermonuclear capability to destroy the United States within 30 minutes) and leave it to a future date to deal with China, once the Russian "pretender" has been sorted out.

All indications are that Moscow and Beijing have seen through the arrogance and cultural insensitivity underlying Washington's miscalculation on this score. The role of the SCO as a significant geopolitical player; the shift in the terminus of Russia's Eastern Siberian oil and gas export pipeline from the Pacific coast to China; the expanding coordination between Russia and China at the UN; accelerating Chinese investments in Russia; Russia's increased readiness to transfer state-of-the-art weapon systems to China; the two countries' growing energy cooperation - all these signal that Washington's stratagem to "divide and rule" Central Asia has not worked.

Putin recently said, "Our relations with China today are better than at any other point in our history ... Our relations are not dictated by opportunism but by the political balance in the world and global development trends, and these trends are such, in my view, that they will make it imperative to maintain a high level and quality of relations for a long time to come. We have common political interests and we also have common economic interests."

The announcement regarding the CSTO-SCO joint military exercise, therefore, signifies that the Sino-Russian alliance is advancing to a qualitatively new level. Admittedly, for both Russia and China, their respective relationship with the US will remain a matter of crucial importance, But the growing Sino-Russian alliance is no longer to be regarded as their bargaining chip or a scarecrow vis-a-vis Washington to be flaunted selectively when the going gets tough in their partnership with the US.

The Sino-Russian alliance is becoming a vital component of the policies of the two great powers, based on substantive strategic, diplomatic and economic considerations. Russian diplomatic and economic policy that has been traditionally anchored in the West is unmistakably turning east, though the primary direction still remains European. It is as much a challenge to European diplomacy as to Russian diplomacy whether Russia's Asian alliance incrementally supplants or merely complements Russia's European alignment.

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