

# Shanghai Cooperation Organization outflanking U.S. in Mideast, Central Asia regions

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Closer to home, Moscow fears that Obama is preparing to reactivate plans to deploy missile defense shields in Poland and Romania and to establish a long-term military presence in these two countries.

The U.S. government suffered a major diplomatic setback in the Central Asian region when Zalmay Rasoul, the Afghan Foreign Minister, traveled to Beijing to discuss proposals for tightening Afghan relations with the Chinese government despite prior American warnings that it should not do so.

Rasoul's recent four day trip (May 9-12) was particularly irksome as it came at a time in which the United States has been particularly active in the region and because it reflects the growing confidence of China that it can undermine U.S. ambitions in Central Asia by establishing diplomatic ties with various neighbors.

Moreover, the move was so swift and effective that the Americans seem to have caught on the wrong foot. It has most certainly made U.S. and NATO efforts to secure a long-term military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia more strenuous than they already were.

The primary mover behind such diplomacy has been the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which has enabled China and Russia to cooperate more closely in their dealings with the Central Asia and the Middle East than in any other region. China has been given a platform to expand interests in the region without inciting Russian ire and at the same time Russia now has a means for indirectly but actively participating in Chinese policy.

The SCO has presented itself to the region as an alternative provider of security to NATO even as China and Russia publicly profess interest in supporting Western security efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Thus, since the SCO already contains China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as members and is now cozying up to Afghanistan, it seriously threatens the USA's exclusive right to secure military bases in Afghanistan and other parts of the area.

China has other potential allies in its sights too, one of these being India, which has made it

clear that it prefers to pursue an independent regional policy rather than simply toe the U.S. line.

Both India and China share an interest in stabilizing Afghanistan and Pakistan but neither wants the United States to use either the war against terrorism or the conflict in Afghanistan to further its "Great Central Asia" strategy. The SCO provides an ideal framework for cooperation on regional security issues.

Of all the countries in the region, however, Pakistan is the one whose confidence in American intentions and ambitions has been most keenly shaken.

Relations between Islamabad and Washington have never been easy but they were seriously affected by the operation to kill Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad. The U.S. government made it clear that it was willing to act inside Pakistan's territory without concern for Pakistan's sovereignty or sensitivities. Moreover, Obama has warned Pakistan it would not hesitate to repeat such an operation and that Pakistani public opinion takes second place to American security as Washington's concerns about Pakistan's attitude to terrorism seem confirmed.

This has severely damaged the Pakistan government's self confidence, and weakened its faith in Washington's interest in real cooperation. It has been embarrassed by the impression it cannot secure its own territorial integrity.

SCO membership would seem to come at an ideal juncture as Islamabad seeks alternative allies to help it provide for its own security.

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Closer to home, Moscow fears that Obama is preparing to reactivate plans to deploy missile defense shields in Poland and Romania and to establish a long-term military presence in these two countries. This would challenge Moscow's traditional hegemony over the Black Sea. Russia's efforts to be a part of discussions concerning the U.S.'s and the European Union's missile defense program have failed.

All of these developments and the obvious distaste in both the Middle East and Central Asia for prolonged U.S. and NATO military presence in the two regions have encouraged all participants to speed up their diplomatic efforts.

Thus, while Rasoul was courting Beijing, Pakistani President Zardari was visiting Russia and Indian Prime Minister Singh was undertaking an extraordinary two-day visit to Kabul.

These shifting power balances have been provided an ideal shelter, namely the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

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