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# The China-India-Russia alliance

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As U.S. unilateralism has asserted the role of the United States as the sole global superpower, the rest of the world is exploring a variety of ways of pushing back. One is the creation of several new regional security consortiums which are independent of the U.S. One of the most important is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a security alliance led by Russia and China, with several non-voting members including India. Its rising economic, political and military profile this year can serve as a useful lens through which to view this geopolitical pushback. It is based on promoting a multipolar world, distributing power along multiple poles in the international system, such as the United States, Europe, Asia-Eurasia and the Middle East,<sup>1</sup> while also promoting the multilateralism of international cooperation.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, Russia and China have stepped up their advocacy for a multipolar-multilateral alternative.

## **Multipolarity**

Russia is promoting its vision of a multipolar world hinging on the consensus-based decision making that it wants steered through global institutions such as the United Nations. Chinese President Hu Jintao has outlined a similar vision. At a caucus of the leaders of Brazil, India, Mexico and South Africa in Berlin, Germany in June of 2007 he said: "Developing countries should strengthen cooperation and consolidate solidarity to promote the establishment of a multipolar world and a democratic international relationship."<sup>3</sup>

India, however, treads cautiously between the competing visions of a world with multiple poles of power. As such, it makes a refined distinction between multipolarity and multilateralism, and strongly advocates for the latter. India rejects multipolarity that seeks to challenge U.S. military power[why? India's independent line is mentioned here and then sort of drops out of the piece], while espousing the need for cooperation in governing international relations. In 2003, India's External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha outlined the contours of multilateralism: "If globalization is the trend, then multilateralism is its life-sustaining mechanism, for no process will survive without a genuine spirit of multilateralism underlined by the belief that global problems require global solutions globally arrived at. Otherwise, the world faces the risk of repeating the mistakes of the past."<sup>4</sup> He emphatically rejected unilateralism, and pointed out that "Iraq attests to the limits of unilateralism."<sup>5</sup> In October this year, Sonia Gandhi, leader of the ruling Congress Party in India, while on a landmark visit to Beijing, offered her formulation of a world order on which her country agrees with China: "Both China and India seek an open and inclusive world order based on the principles of 'Panchsheel' that were founded together by (then Chinese Prime Minister) Zhou Enlai and (India's founding father) Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954."<sup>6</sup> Later, Panchsheel became the founding charter of the Non-Aligned

Movement (NAM) that had claimed to be the third pole of power in the bipolar world.

A substantial outcome of this advocacy came about in February this year when Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao signed the Declaration on the World Order in the 21st Century.<sup>7</sup> The Declaration called for peaceful coexistence, a just and rational world order, abandonment of unilateralism, and embrace of multilateralism. In its own words, the Declaration stated: "It is necessary to solve differences and disputes in a peaceful way, avoid unilateral action (and) not to resort to the policy of diktat, the threat or use of force...Every country has the right to manage its affairs in a sovereign way and international issues should be resolved through dialogue and consultations on the basis of multilateral collective approaches."<sup>8</sup> Similarly India, in its bilateral relations with China and Russia, boldly spells out its vision of a world of shared governance.

### **Trilateral Dialogue: China, India and Russia**

The growing convergence in the worldview of China, India and Russia brought them into a trilateral dialogue, which in Chinese President Jintao's words would see "the three nations work together for further communication and coordination in major international and regional issues and promote the solution of disputes and differences through dialogue."<sup>9</sup> Russian President Putin, while speaking at the first trilateral summit between China, India and Russia in St. Petersburg, Russia, in July 2006 echoed Hu: "...that discussions held in the trilateral meeting would promote mutual trust not only between India, Russia and China individually, but also at regional and global levels."<sup>10</sup> Beijing and New Delhi accepted Russia's proposal to hold trilateral summit because "it was beneficial to boosting the cooperation among the three countries as well as maintaining multipolarity ... in the world."<sup>11</sup> Former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov was the first leader to propose the trilateral relationship between China, India, and Russia during his visit to New Delhi in 1998. The first trilateral summit was followed by a meeting of the foreign ministers of three countries in New Delhi on February 14, 2007. In a joint communiqué, the foreign ministers "expressed their conviction that democratization of international relations is the key to building an increasingly multipolar world order."<sup>12</sup>

During his recent visit to New Delhi on January 25-26, 2007, as the guest of honor on India's Republic Day, President Putin further discussed trilateral cooperation with Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh. Later, standing shoulder to shoulder with Singh, he told a news conference in New Delhi: "We want to resolve regional problems in a way acceptable to all sides. We therefore think that there are good prospects for working together in a trilateral format."<sup>13</sup> Indians who have long been beholden to Russia seems to embrace Putin's trilateral initiative, while remaining skeptical of the Indo-U.S. alliance that is currently in the works. K. Subrahmanyam, India's foremost observer of strategic affairs, gratefully speaks of Indian pull towards Moscow: "Russia has seen India as a key to Asian stability for the past 50 years, some four decades before George W. Bush's team reached that conclusion."<sup>14</sup> The formation of trilateral dialogue has already been institutionalized. As part of this dialogue, Chinese, Indian and Russian foreign ministers held their first meeting in June 2005 in Vladivostok, Russia. As noted above, they met again in New Delhi in February 2007. Similarly, the leaders of three countries have been holding trilateral summits on the sidelines of G-8 meetings, of which Russia is a member and at which China and India have been regular invitees since 2006.

## **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)**

Parallel to the trilateral dialogue, China and Russia took the lead to institutionalize their strategic relations into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which India, together with Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan, is a non-voting member. The six-member SCO is widely seen as a collective security organization for nations in South, Central and West Asia. Some observers view the SCO as a counterbalance to the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and its advance into the region. Others believe that "Beijing and Moscow...shared the common aims of...frustrating Washington's agenda to dominate the (Central Asian) region which had been an integral part of the Soviet Union for three generations."<sup>15</sup> The recent SCO summit on August 16, 2007 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, however, emphasized in a joint communiqué that "modern challenges and security threat can only be effectively countered through united efforts of the international community."<sup>16</sup> There is a range of events that signify the SCO's rising economic, political and military profile, but five events stand out in this regard:

- (a) post-Taliban Afghanistan;
- (b) U.S. military presence in central Asia;
- (c) SCO's rapid expansion;
- (d) the Caspian Sea Nations Summit; and,
- (e) "Peace Mission 2007."

### **SCO and post-Taliban Afghanistan**

As the SCO asserts for a role in post-Taliban Afghanistan, it wants to see the U.S.-led forces leave Kabul. At its annual summit in July 2005 in Astana, Kazakhstan, the SCO called on the U.S. to give a timetable for a pullout of its troops from Afghanistan. "As the active military phase in the antiterror operation in Afghanistan is nearing completion, the SCO would like the coalition's members to decide on the deadline for the use of the temporary infrastructure and for their military contingents' presence in those countries."<sup>17</sup> The SCO's demands were based on the assumption that the Taliban has been defeated; hence, there is no need for the continued presence of U.S. and NATO troops in the region. The U.S., however, has since built several military bases across Afghanistan, to fight Taliban's insurgency and al Qaeda's terrorism. The U.S.' expanded military presence further fueled suspicions among SCO member states--especially China and Russia--that the U.S. and NATO are in the region for the long haul.

The SCO has since begun developing its own Afghan policy with the founding of the Afghanistan Contact Group (ACG) to strengthen relationship between the SCO and Kabul. The Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who regularly attends the SCO's annual summits, has positively responded to the SCO's initiative. It is important to note that Karzai's political support base in the ruling Northern Alliance in Afghanistan continues to be beholden to Russia for the latter's critical support against the Taliban long before the 9/11 attacks. To this day, the Northern Alliance government kept up its warm relations with the Kremlin. Similarly, the Alliance's ethnic links with the Central Asian Republics (CARs), especially with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, two member-states of the SCO, also play out in making Afghanistan receptive to the SCO. In return, Afghanistan is showered with economic and military support by China and Russia. In the economic sector, China has become Afghanistan's anchor. In late November 2007, Kabul gave Beijing the largest-ever mining contract in Afghanistan's history. Under this 30-year deal, China would invest \$3b in the development of copper mines, which are likely to go in production in the next five years, in Afghanistan's Logar province. This single-stroke Chinese investment of \$3b comes close to the entire foreign investment in Afghanistan of just \$4b since 2001.<sup>18</sup> Militarily, Moscow has

continued to be Kabul's main supplier of weapons and military hardware since 2001. Thus, Kabul's growing economic and military dependence on China and Russia is further binding it to these nations. That's why Afghanistan is now poised to become a member of the SCO.

### **SCO and U.S. Military Presence**

While gathering Afghanistan into its embrace, the SCO publicly expresses its unease at the U.S.'s military presence in the region. At its Astana summit, the SCO also called for the closing of U.S. bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Months later, Uzbekistan evicted the U.S. from its air base at Karshi-Khanabad, also known as K-2. At this summit Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov "essentially called on his SCO partners to make a choice between siding with the United States or 'with our neighbors in Russia and China.'"19

The United States, however, continues to keep another air base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan, which it has been using for humanitarian and combat operations in Afghanistan. The U.S. has 1,200 troops stationed there. Unsurprisingly, Kyrgyzstan balanced the U.S. military presence on its soil with the hosting of a Russian airbase nearby. As the Russian and U.S. air bases sit only a few miles apart, Russians use this proximity as a strategic vantage point to keep tabs on what goes on at Manas base. There are reports that China also is in talks with Bishkek to open up an airbase of its own in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, Bishkek, which hosted the SCO summit in 2007, has already stopped the U.S. from using Manas base for combat operations. It is now placing additional restrictions on Washington for using the base even for humanitarian relief supplies. Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was elected with U.S. support, "called for the United States to start reducing its military presence in the country" as "situation in Afghanistan had stabilized."20 Bishkek also is under mounting persuasion by Iran to not let its base be used for any hostile action against Tehran.

### **The Expanding SCO**

As the U.S. presence in the region tends to contract, the SCO goes on expanding into an unparalleled Asian-Eurasian Security organization. Its current members include China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Among its members with observer status are included India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan. As noted before, Afghanistan also is now lining up to become a full-fledged member. So are Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan--two staunch U.S. allies and energy-rich nations. In recognition of the SCO's growing significance, even the U.S. applied for its membership.21 The application was, however, denied. Yet the SCO won global recognition with a United Nations Assistant Secretary General in attendance at the Bishkek summit this year. The SCO is now linking arms with the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is seen in the west as a Eurasian military pact, to further help advance mutual interests. Both organizations have signed a cooperation agreement this year. By virtue of this agreement, China has become an unofficial member of the CSTO, which is made up of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Interestingly, all SCO members, except China, are also members of the CSTO. More importantly, Iran, which has applied for SCO membership, has also been invited to join the CSTO. The CSTO also wants a piece of action in Afghanistan, and insists to model the NATO in undertaking global peacekeeping, especially in its "region of responsibility." In parallel, China and Russia are ready to accept India as a voting member, which will be an upgrade on its current status as an observer. It is interesting to note that China, India and Russia all have made a massive investment in Iran's energy production sector, which further binds them together.

Chinese and Indian oil and gas interests in Iran are respectively valued at \$100b and \$40b. Russia, for its part, is helping Tehran to build its flagship \$1b nuclear reactor in Buzher.

### **The Caspian Sea Summit**

In so many ways, Tehran has become a catalyst for the competitive tensions between unipolarists and multipolarists. It can be gauged from the just-concluded second Caspian Sea Summit, which met in Tehran on October 16, 2007. Along the lines of the SCO, Russia is developing an alliance of the Caspian Sea's littoral states that include Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Russia. The alliance is seemingly meant to share the natural wealth of the Caspian Sea, which some observers bill as the new Middle East. The 700 mile-long Caspian, which is the world's largest inland sea, contains six separate hydrocarbon basins. Its proven and potential oil reserves boast 270 billion barrels of oil. In 1994, the Azerbaijan International Oil Consortium sealed an \$8b deal with Baku to develop three Caspian Sea oil fields with reserves of about 3-5 billion barrels of oil. The deal was to extend over 30 years. There have since been occasional skirmishes between Azerbaijan and Iran over the demarcation of their respective coastlines. The five littoral states now seek a framework to replace the 1921 treaty that first divided the Sea between Iran and the former U.S.S.R. to have an agreed-upon share in its natural bounties.

The Tehran summit was meant to achieve this end. The summit was, however, clouded by the worsening standoff between Iran, Europe and the U.S. over Iran's nuclear program. In this tense atmosphere, Tehran wasted no time in claiming the presence of President Putin, who was the first Russian leader to travel to Iran since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, at the summit as a vindication of its position that its nuclear program had all along been for peaceful purposes. On December 3 2007, the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate said: "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its weapons program," and that "Tehran had not restarted its nuclear-weapons program as of mid-2007."<sup>22</sup> The weapons program is defined as relating to weapons design, weaponization work and covert uranium work. Two weeks after the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was released, Russia delivered 80 tons of enriched uranium for Tehran's Buzher nuclear reactor.<sup>23</sup> Putin's visit was, however, widely interpreted as a counterweight to Washington's persistent opposition to Iran's nuclear ambitions.<sup>24</sup> Putin, too, publicly defended Iran's right to peaceful use of nuclear technology. At the summit, he further cheered his Iranian hosts with a call on the summiteers to stand united against outside interference: "We have to build confidence to settle the relevant issues and not even think of resorting to force against each other in the Caspian Sea, or of allowing other countries to avail themselves of our (Caspian) territories."<sup>25</sup>

Iranians believe that the U.S. is setting up Azerbaijan to counterbalance Iran. They are also perturbed by U.S. involvement in helping Kazakhstan to build its navy. So are Russians. As a result, there is growing convergence of views between Iran and Russia on keeping the Caspian Sea demilitarized. To further their cooperation beyond the appropriation of the Caspian Sea's natural wealth, the summit's member states have formed the Caspian Sea Economic Commission, which is scheduled to meet next year in Moscow with Putin in chair. Not only is the revolving door between the SCO, CSTO and Caspian Sea nations strengthening the Russian and Chinese influence in the region, it is deepening their military and security alliance as well.

### **Peace Mission 2007**

The major manifestation of this deepening alliance was the SCO-wide military

maneuvers, dubbed as "Peace Mission 2007." These maneuvers were conducted on August 9-17, 2007 in Chelyabinsk in Russia's Urals region, followed by its final phase carried out in Urumqi, Xinjiang, China. The exercises involved 6,500 troops, 80 aircraft and 500 combat vehicles from China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. China and Russia supplied all of the combat vehicles, as well as 3,700 troops. "For the SCO...the war games mark its most ambitious attempt yet to build an integrated military-security apparatus to complement expanding political and commercial collaboration."<sup>26</sup> Some observers suspect that Peace Mission 2007 "resembles less of an anti-terrorism drill than a full-scale, state-on-state conventional fight."<sup>27</sup> The SCO has never held a full-scale military exercise involving all member states, although China and Russia have held several joint exercises under the auspices of the SCO. In 2005, they held large-scale amphibious landings on China's Yellow Sea Coast, which many observers believed were intended for Chinese separatists in Taiwan.<sup>28</sup> These maneuvers, however, were massive in their scope as they were conducted on land, in air, and at sea in southeast of the Shandong Peninsula in China. The stated goal of each drill--held in 2007 and 2005--was to fight separatism and terrorism. China faces problems of separatism in Tibet and Taiwan, and terrorism in Xinjiang, while Russia is confronted with the twin menace in the wide swath of its northern territories. Similarly, India is battling enduring separatist movements in its west and northeast. Although India, which is an observer at the SCO, sat out of the 2007 drills, it is scheduled to hold joint army exercises with China later this month in its southwestern province of Yunnan.<sup>29</sup> The planned exercises are being billed as "historic" since the two giants have come a long way from active hostilities to strategic partnership. In their luncheon meeting in Singapore on November 21, 2007, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and Indian Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh further signified the import of these exercises by reiterating their commitment "to take their strategic cooperative partnership to a next level."<sup>30</sup> Prime Minister Singh, in his statement, added that "India and China ties are beyond and above bilateral matters. They are related to peace, stability and prosperity in the region and the world beyond...India and China are...friends and partners."<sup>31</sup> The Indian Prime Minister, who has just returned from his state visit to Moscow, is now scheduled to visit China early next year.

## **Conclusion**

The SCO's geopolitical pushback to the unipolar-unilateral makeover of the world is, however, defensive. Both China and Russia are being protective of their turf. Their internal divisions caused by "extremism, splitism, and terrorism" further unnerve them at even a slight hint of U.S. or NATO proximity to their "near-abroad." They have created the SCO and CSTO, and formed the Caspian Sea Alliance to put distance between their respective "spheres of influence" and NATO-US presence. Many argue that this alliance-building is a reaction to U.S. unilateralism. These alliances, however, cannot threaten U.S. security interests in the region. The allied nations have been consistently reassuring the U.S. that their alliances are not directed at "third party." In fact, SCO member states have helped the U.S. to protect its security interests in the region. In the run-up to U.S. military action in Afghanistan in 2001, the Russian President Putin, according to Bob Woodward, stunned the top U.S. policy makers with his unsolicited offer to let U.S. combat jets use the Russian airspace to strike the Taliban government in Kabul.<sup>32</sup> The Bush White House was not even sure if Russians would agree to U.S. airbases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for which it sought Putin's consent. More importantly, China, which shares a long border with Kyrgyzstan and is next door neighbor to Uzbekistan, went along with the U.S. bases in both countries. Besides, and it is noteworthy for American policy makers, the three nations that broke out in spontaneous outpouring of sympathy for 9/11 victims were not Egypt, Jordan or Saudi Arabia, but Russia,

Iran and China--in that order--where hundreds of thousands of marchers held candle-lit vigils and mourned the tragic deaths of 3,000 Americans in terrorist attacks. In strictly strategic sense, the U.S. by itself and together with its allies, especially Australia, Britain and Japan, continues to be the dominant force in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean, which are the key sources and supply routes of energy shipments for China and trade goods for Central Asia. This makes China and the region vulnerable to U.S. retaliation in the event of any perceived or real threat to U.S. security interests.

Yet the Asian-Eurasian regional powers, which are coalescing into the SCO, CSTO and Caspian Alliance, have the potential to entangle U.S. economic interests, especially energy interests. On this score too, the U.S. has been able to circumvent such potential challenges by establishing bilateral relations with the region's energy-rich nations, particularly Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Of these, Kazakhstan is the richest nation, with three-fourths of the region's oil and about half of its gas reserves; Azerbaijan owns one-sixth of the region's oil and 10 percent of gas reserves; and Turkmenistan possesses close to half of the region's gas and 5 percent of oil reserves. In 1993, Chevron concluded a \$20b deal with Kazakhstan to develop its Tengiz oil field, which is estimated to contain recoverable oil reserves of 6-9 billion barrels of oil. An \$8b Azerbaijan International Consortium, led by BP-Amoco-Statoil, is already developing oil fields off the shores of Azerbaijan. Similarly, the U.S. has successfully pushed for a multi-billion dollar Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) gas pipeline as an alternative to the \$10b Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline.

Above all, the U.S. enjoys worldwide economic and military superiority that allows it to force its way through closed doors, if needed. As the world's strongest nation, multilateralists argue, the United States serves its interests best when it works in a multilateral framework on which China, India and Russia all agree. A starting point for multilateralism can be war-torn Afghanistan where the SCO and CSTO both want a piece of action. The U.S. should welcome both to share in counter-insurgency operations for which both China and Russia have a long-standing career. This will free up 25,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, which can be exclusively deployed for counter-terrorism; while NATO forces can undertake reconstruction work that has long remained frozen. If it happens, it will turn Afghanistan into the North Star of multilateralism. To the U.S.' further advantage, India's alliance with China and Russia would privilege multilateralism over multipolarism. The latter, as Indian Foreign Minister Sinha in his 2003 address cautioned, has the potential to reprise the cold war rivalries that could set the world on a dangerous course. Multilateralism, on the other hand, would further strengthen the continuing economic integration worldwide, and thus lay the foundation for political integration as well.

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