

Checkmate in the Great Game

Written by Nicholas J.S. Davies | Palm Beach Progressive Post
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The two day summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Astana in Kazakhstan in June completed the negotiations for an historic expansion that incorporates half the human race. India and Pakistan are joining China, Russia and the Central Asian republics as full SCO members, Afghanistan will join Iran and Mongolia as SCO "observers".

The SCO combines some of the aspects of an alliance like NATO with the benefits of an economic community like the European Union or UNASUR in South America, but its public statements are careful to play down the military component. Xinhua's report on this year's summit expressed the contradiction with classic Chinese tact, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is not and will not develop into a military alliance. However, maintaining regional security has been one of its important missions." The United States applied for "observer" status in the SCO in 2005, but its application was rejected.

The emergence and growth of the SCO as a "security" grouping and an economic community have been driven by a common need to respond to U.S. aggression and military expansion as well as by the economic rise of Asia. Without directly challenging the U.S. and NATO, the SCO can simply make them irrelevant in the region, as retired Indian diplomat M. K. Bhadrakumar wrote in Asia Times after the summit.

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Afghan Foreign Minister Rassoul met with Chinese officials for four days in Beijing before Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov announced the planned expansion in May. As the summit opened, President Nazarbayev wrote in the *Moscow Times*, “We believe that the prosperity of Central Asia and the surrounding states can only be achieved through a strong, independent and stable Afghanistan... It is possible that the SCO will assume responsibility for many issues in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014.”

Bhadrakumar noted that the SCO expansion turns U.S. policy in Central Asia on its head. American policy-makers hoped to turn Afghanistan into a “hub” from which the US could control the strategic space and trade routes between Russia, China, Iran, India and Pakistan. Instead the SCO can restore Afghanistan’s traditional role as the hub of an overland trade and pipeline network that will permit them to develop their mutual relations free from American interference.

President Obama’s election raised hopes of a U.S. recommitment to peace and international law. Instead, Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan; attacked Libya; expanded “special forces” operations to at least 75 countries and drone operations to 60 bases around the world; and maintained an unprecedented \$700 billion military budget to keep building new carrier battle groups and military bases. SCO members see their best hope for the future in a position of unity and mutual support as they confront a declining but dangerous world power that is wedded to an aggressive and illegal doctrine of military force. The Astana summit also issued a strong condemnation of U.S. efforts to surround Russia and China with ABM batteries.

They are here for their own purposes, for their own goals, and are using our soil for that,” he declared, as he welcomed Iran’s Defense Minister, Ahmad Vahidi, to Kabul. Vahidi publicly told Karzai, “Ensuring regional stability will be possible only by the collective efforts of regional countries and the withdrawal of foreign forces.”

Since the SCO summit, U.S. relations with Pakistan have deteriorated further, while relations between Pakistan, Iran, China and India have improved. India and Afghanistan have issued strong statements opposing U.S. military action against Pakistan, and Karzai suggested that Afghanistan would fight on Pakistan’s side. India voted for Pakistan to represent the region in the U.N. Security Council, and made positive new statements on Kashmir. India and China are meeting to resolve long-standing border disputes. For decades, the U.S. has retained influence in India and Pakistan by exploiting the animosity between them and fear of China, but its dangerous game has backfired.

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Relations between Pakistan and Iran are also moving forward. While Pakistan quietly supports attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Iran has thanked Pakistan for completely halting attacks across its border by the CIA--backed Jundullah group in Balochistan since the end of 2010.

President Karzai convened a loya jirga of 2,030 Afghan leaders on November 16th to debate the future of U.S. forces in their country. But, whether the U.S. gets out of Afghanistan in 2011, in 2014 or in 2024, the SCO and its members will be waiting in the wings to pick up the pieces. The U.S. and NATO will become part of Afghanistan's history, not part of its future.

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