

Shanghai Cooperation Organization Comes of Age

by Mary Burdman

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a message to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) meeting in Beijing on Jan. 15, underlined the ambitious role that the high-level group can play in Eurasian cooperation. "I am convinced that the SCO, from an historical point of view, is called upon to become a kind of transcontinental bridge which will organically link the European and Asian continents," he wrote. "Such a role of the SCO stems, first of all, from the unique geopolitical position of the SCO member-states; the philosophy professed by the SCO in respect to a variety of cultures, beliefs, and traditions; openness and orientation for extensive international cooperation."

The Beijing meeting included the Foreign Ministers of the SCO's six members—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It decided to open a permanent Secretariat with a high-level Chinese diplomat, Zhang Deguang, as the first SCO Secretary-General. At the same time in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Agency began operating. These two centers are to carry out the priority policies of the SCO: fighting the terrorism and extremism which threatens regional security; and developing economic cooperation.

These initiatives are useful steps in the direction of the Eurasian Land-Bridge conception that Lyndon LaRouche has advocated.

The SCO "has entered a new phase marked by practical partnership," Zhang Deguang said; he is China's former vice-foreign minister and ambassador to Russia. Its work can now "be conducted in a more efficient way." Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, in China, stated that the SCO now begins work "as a fully-fledged international organization, which has its own working mechanisms, personnel, and budget."

This has happened fast. The group was founded in June 2001, and only last May, SCO government heads pledged at their Moscow summit to have the organization begin functioning in January 2004. President Putin in his message called the group's rapid consolidation "convincing evidence of the correctness of the principles of equality and consensus that were laid down as the basis of our organization; the resolute determination of SCO member-states to turn the organization into an effective mechanism of multi-polar collaboration in the interest of peace, stability, and the welfare of the peoples of our countries."

The dangers posed by the unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan prompted this consolidation. On the other hand, the political and economic changes in Russia—finally turning away from 10 years of "shock therapy" disaster—and China's steady economic growth provide a basis for improving Eurasian security.

Five of the nations began meeting on a regular basis in 1996—Uzbekistan joined them in 2001—to resolve what Chinese call "problems left over from history." A quarter century of tensions between the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China had left long stretches of the world's longest land border undefined, and costly levels of military deployments in border areas. The "Shanghai Five" agreed to establish trust and introduce military cooperation along the borders. There was good reason for this. The "Five" had more serious problems to deal with: the "three forces" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which exploded in Central Eurasia in the wake of the brutal civil war in Afghanistan beginning in 1979. This war—in reality a struggle between the then-superpowers, the United States and Soviet Union—generated tens of thousands of "Afghansi" fighters from all over Muslim Eurasia, sponsored by operations led by former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski into his "arc of crisis." Since the collapse of the U.S.S.R., terrorist groups, funded by organized criminality and widespread drug production and trafficking in the region, have generated turmoil from Chechnya in the Caucasus to Xinjiang in far-western China.

Security Linked to Economic Development

The SCO nations, except Uzbekistan, held their first large-scale joint anti-terrorism military exercise in August 2003; but it is widely recognized that the SCO has to fight terrorism by economic development, and not just military means. Xu Tao, deputy director of Eurasian Studies for China's premier Institute of Contemporary International Relations in Beijing, emphasized to the *China Daily* on Jan. 16 that, despite the U.S. military deployments in Central Asia and the overthrow of the Taliban, the security situation in the region continues to be plagued by terrorist attacks. "This shows that the fight against terrorism is totally different from a traditional war," Xu Tao stated. Wars could overthrow regimes, but not completely eradicate terrorism, he said—an obvious reference to the military quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Military strikes can have a short-term effect, while only comprehensive measures, including economic development and improvement of law enforcement, would eradicate the evil roots" of terrorism. The unending economic crisis in many Central Asian countries is a key reason for extremism, Xu Tao emphasized. Political and security partnership "has provided a wide platform for economic co-operation."

Asian-Pacific security analyst Prof. Su Hao of the China Foreign Affairs University emphasized that the SCO not be

considered only a “security organization,” but as having a “second track” of economic and trade relations. Su Hao called for increased economic development, and restructuring national industries of SCO member countries to increase cohesion among them. The Central Asian nations’ economies had been part of the Soviet-wide economic grid, and they remain inter-dependent for such fundamental requirements as food, water, and power.

The new SCO Secretariat will coordinate economic cooperation, including developing proposals for investment programs, transport projects, and assistance for cultural relations. In 2003, the SCO government heads formed proposals for promoting free flow of commodities, technologies, capital, and services—but slowly, over a 20-year perspective. Energy, transport, agriculture, and communications are targetted cooperative sectors.

Here, enormous work remains to be done. Railroad links remain extremely sparse, considering the vastness of the territory involved: three-fifths of the Eurasian landmass. Such an important project as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad is just in the feasibility-study phase. Water management is also a huge challenge for this region, where the Aral Sea ecological catastrophe could spread further. As Uzbek Foreign Minister Sadik Safaev, told Xinhua news agency in an interview, the SCO should focus on security issues of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, and, on the economic front, revitalize the ancient “Silk Road.”

Eurasian Reach

The SCO nations are looking well beyond their own borders. The Secretariat will maintain relations with the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Islamic Conference Organization. Other nations will become partners, and, eventually, members of the SCO. Mongolian Minister of External Relations Lavrangiyin Erdenechuluun attended the Beijing meeting as a partner nation—an obvious step, given Mongolia’s location.

Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov had visited Ulan Bator, Mongolia, on his way to Beijing. On his return, he stopped off at Novosibirsk, Russia, to open a Foreign Ministry mission. There, Ivanov gave a press conference to emphasize the “vital and special importance” of the Asian direction of Russia’s foreign policy. The Novosibirsk office will focus on developing economic contacts for Siberia and the Russian Far East with the Asia-Pacific region, Ivanov said.

The new Beijing Secretariat is drafting regulations for creating observers and partners for the SCO, as well as, Zhang Deguang said, “the admission of new members to SCO.” New members are not being considered at the moment, but the potential is great. India, with the backing of Russia, has been proposed as a potential member for some time. Pakistan has also been proposed. Now, the rapid growth of ties between China and India, especially in the last half-

year, and improving relations between India and Pakistan, could make the expansion possible soon. On Jan. 12-13, India and China held their second “Special Representative”-level border talks in Beijing; though the results were kept secret, the talks were noted as “friendly and constructive.” One week before, China made a public issue of its refusal to give any shelter to the anti-Indian separatist “United Liberation Front of Asom,” then under full attack by the Bhutanese and Indian military.

Also interesting was the report carried in the Pakistani *Daily Times* on Jan. 17, that China has asked Pakistan to investigate a number of separatist-terrorist organizations operating in Xinjiang—known as “East Turkistan” by the separatists. The *Daily Times* quoted “highly placed” diplomatic sources, that a list compiled by China’s Ministry of Public Security on Dec. 15, of “identified Eastern Turkistan” terrorist organisations tied to “Afghansi” terror and drug-running networks, has been sent to Islamabad. “Pakistan has declared on many occasions that it will not allow its soil to be used to destabilize Xinjiang, the Chinese province that neighbors Pakistan’s Northern Areas,” the sources were quoted.

Pakistan and China, long-term close allies, agreed to concrete measures against terrorism in 2002, and the two sides signed an extradition treaty when Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf visited China in early November 2003. Pakistan’s harboring of terrorist groups—which goes back to its role as a “base” for the U.S.-sponsored Afghansi-*mujahideen* operations into Afghanistan in the 1980s—is a fundamental security issue for India.

Finally, relations among the “Strategic Triangle” of the Eurasian giants Russia, China, and India are moving forward. On the eve of his three-day visit to India Jan. 19-21, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov welcomed the trilateral cooperation: “I would greet Russia-India-China cooperation in the military-technical sphere and in joint development of new weapons. This would promote stability and security in Asia,” Ivanov said. But he cautioned, “Such cooperation can only come as a result of extensive political efforts by our countries. But I will not rule it out altogether. I share James Bond’s principle: ‘Never say never again.’ ”

Ivanov affirmed that Russian defense supplies to China would not threaten India’s security. “Russia strictly adheres to the principle that the weapons it supplies to other countries must not have a destabilizing effect, and be of defensive nature,” he said.

From New Delhi, where former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov first publicly proposed the strategic triangle just five years ago, Ivanov said that, with the improving political climate between India and China, contacts among the Russian, Chinese, and Indian Foreign Ministries, to discuss security issues in the Asia-Pacific region, could be expected this year. Security in the region “will largely depend on our cooperation,” Ivanov said.