

Central Asia Battle Lines Being Drawn

by Ramtanu Maitra

Buried in the news of the July 7 London bombings, and a tepid G-8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, was another summit that took place in Astana, Kazakhstan, on July 5-6. Heads of state representing six nations—Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), drew the battle lines in Central Asia urging the United States to announce a timeframe to fold up its military bases in Central Asia.

The U.S. bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were set up in the Winter of 2001 as support bases to invade Afghanistan and oust the Taliban. SCO members pointed out in the two-day summit, that since the United States is reporting a decline in fighting in Afghanistan, the United States must now set a timeframe to remove its forces from the bases in member states Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

In order not to sound too harsh, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Sergei Prikhodko, pointed out that the appeal is not meant to pressure the United States to pull its troops out immediately. But the statement is a sign of growing uneasiness with the U.S. ongoing presence in Central Asia, the backyard of both Russia and China.

It was apparent that the SCO member states have asserted their opposition to outside interference in internal affairs, especially regarding the recent political unrest in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to the wording of the SCO appeal, global peace and security will not be found, if one nation is allowed to dominate international affairs.

A Strong Statement

The statement issued by the SCO was forthright and forceful. Vyacheslav Nikonov, president of the Moscow-based think-tank known as "Politika," pointed out to the Voice of America on July 12 that the moves show the organization's intent to strengthen its role in world affairs.

The Bush Administration, not quite on its toes on these developments, took time to respond. But when it came, the response was in the form of a confused denial. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, whose hands are full with the forthcoming six-nation talks on North Korean nuclear weapons, issued a statement from Beijing on July 10, rejecting calls for a deadline for U.S. forces to pull out of bases in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Although the SCO did not urge the United States to withdraw its bases from Afghanistan—at least, as of now—on the last day of her visit to China Secretary Rice said: "The one country that said that the United States should stay in Afghanistan was Afghanistan."

Response also came from the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, Alexander Vershbow. At a press conference in Moscow on July 12, he said that the United States plans to hold bilateral negotiations with Central Asian governments to discuss the presence of U.S. bases in that region.

In a clever move ignoring the growing authority of the SCO in the region, Ambassador Vershbow held on to the importance of bilateral agreements during the press conference saying, "The government of each country where bases are stationed should express their concerns individually."

Ignoring the SCO

Ambassador Vershbow, a career diplomat, had served as the U.S. Ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from January 1998 until July 2001. As U.S. Representative on the North Atlantic Council, Vershbow was centrally involved in transforming NATO to meet the challenges of the post-cold war era, including the admission of new members and the development of relations with Russia through the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. Earlier, in 1991, he was posted to NATO as U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative and Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Mission. It is evident that he played a major role in getting these bases set up in Central Asia, in the process of expansion of the NATO outside of Europe.

It is evident that Ambassador Vershbow is not willing to indulge in swordplay with the SCO, which contains powerful nations such as Russia and China. He would prefer to exert pressure on small and weaker nations such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, citing bilateral arrangements. Unfortunately for Vershbow, that, too, may run into a dead end.

In Kyrgyzstan, where the U.S. government-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) played a stellar role in bringing down President Askar Akayev through a "street uprising against nepotism and corruption," the beneficiary of the uprising, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who won a landslide victory in the Presidential election on July 11, also called for the United States to start reducing its military presence in the country, saying that the situation in Afghanistan had stabilized.

What is more disturbing for the United States is the souring of its relations with Uzbekistan, where the United States has another military base. Uzbek President Islam Karimov, who had been lured by Washington's alleged financial strength and generosity, was moving away from Russia to forge a strong partnership with the Bush Administration. But his relationship with Washington came under strain when the United States called for an international probe into a military crackdown in May in the town of Andijan, in which many

people were killed.

After the U.S. criticism, Uzbek President Islam Karimov quickly reinforced his authority and placed limits on flights in and out of the U.S. airbase at Karshi-Khanabad in southern Uzbekistan.

At the SCO summit, Karimov pointedly thanked Russia and China for their support in the aftermath of the Andijan upheaval, and complained that outside forces were threatening to “hijack stability and impose their model of development” on Central Asia. According to one observer—and Ambassador Vershbow should note—Karimov had essentially called on his SCO partners to make a choice between siding with the United States “or with our neighbors in Russia and China.”

Is the Cold War Back?

The growing uneasiness in Central Asia about the United States’ missionary zeal of establishing democracy and human rights, coupled with use of its military might to keep domination over the world, which resulted in the SCO declaration, has been noticed by the old cold warriors and the American geo-politicians.

Dr. Michael Weinstein, writing for the *Power and Interest News Report*, said the overall strategic aim of the alliance for Beijing and Moscow is curbing Washington’s influence in Central Asia in order to establish a joint sphere of influence there. For Beijing, the most important goal is to get a lock on the considerable energy resources of the region, but it also seeks markets for its goods, outlets for investment, and collaboration against Islamist movements. Moscow has leagued with Beijing in order to restore some of its influence over its “near abroad,” Weinstein said.

On July 12, the *Washington Post* carried a front-page article, “Cold War Rivalry Reviving in Central Asia,” which made clear that the United States will lean heavily on Uzbek President Islam Karimov, to keep its presence in Central Asia. The article said the stakes are high, since the United States has relied on the Uzbek base at Karshi-Khanabad, known as K-2, for military and humanitarian missions in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, which was one of the first republics to ask Russian troops to leave after the Soviet Union collapsed, reflects new U.S. influence in Central Asia.

What also bothers the Bush Administration hawks is that the SCO declaration for the closure of U.S. military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, that now support Washington’s operations in Afghanistan, will also put a monkey-wrench in the Pentagon’s strategy of creating a permanent arc of bases spanning East Africa and East Asia.

With so much to lose, the *Washington Post* article indicated, the Bush Administration is now completing plans for an overture to President Islam Karimov, possibly beginning with a Cabinet-level emissary going to Tashkent to be followed by a telephone call from Bush—if Karimov is open to an international inquiry into the May 13 unrest in Andijan.

The article, quoting Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, noted that at the SCO summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for increased regional security cooperation. “Russia is trying to take advantage of the situation that the Bush Administration’s democracy policy has opened for them—to increase the reliance of Central Asian states on Russia,” Olcott said.

It has also been reported in the *Washington Post* that Beijing has called on Washington to honor the request for U.S. troops to withdraw from Central Asia. “It’s China going on record and using Russia’s shared frustration in Central Asia to say that the U.S. global agenda is one that China is not willing to sign onto,” Olcott added.

What the American geopoliticians have assiduously avoided so far is the Indian interest in what the SCO has announced. India, along with Pakistan and Iran, sought and was granted observer status in the SCO at the summit. Indian External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh was quite busy meeting heads of state in Astana. The presence of India in Astana is an acknowledgment of the organization’s growing geo-strategic importance.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov undertook a three-day trip to New Delhi, April 4-6, to conduct negotiations with the Indian government and to sign 12 agreements with India. These accords ranged over such diverse fields as defense, education, trade, industry, tourism, and the struggle against terrorism. But undoubtedly the defense, anti-terrorism, and economic agreements were the most important results of this trip. Interestingly, this was Karimov’s third visit to India, and the latest trip was Karimov’s recognition of India’s growing interest in, and capabilities toward, Central Asia.

The Indian Factor

India has made no bones of its interest in Central Asia and is keen to expand its influence and presence there. It perceives the region as a major source of its energy needs, not to mention other raw materials. Therefore, since 2000, India’s governments have steadily expanded contacts with Central Asian regimes and vigorously pursued New Delhi’s interests in access to trade, energy, and even military bases, as in Tajikistan’s case. India has won Karimov’s assent to participate in the exploration of oil and gas reserves in Uzbekistan. Both sides also agreed on the importance of quickly realizing an international transport corridor through Afghanistan so that goods could move more quickly between their states.

A senior Indian diplomat, K. Gajendra Singh, former Indian Ambassador to Turkey, pointed out recently that the SCO, originally established to counter Islamic terrorism, is composed of militarily powerful states like Russia, China, and India. He observed that “the galloping Chinese and Indian economies, the energy-based economic recovery in Russia with its immense reserves, and in other SCO members

and observers, could develop into an economic challenge to a U.S. economy addicted to reckless deficits at home and in external trade, and a stagnant and confused European Union.”

However, it would be naive to believe that the Bush Administration, which has a proclivity to be reckless and overtly confrontational, will let the SCO have its way. Besides using the lure of financial grants and cheap credit, Washington will use a number of weapons it has in its arsenal.

U.S. Retaliation

On July 14, U.S. Rep. Christopher Smith (R-N.J.), said that the Central Asia Democracy and Human Rights Act (CADHRA) of 2005 would link the provision of any non-humanitarian aid to a certification from the U.S. President that a country was making “substantial, sustained, and demonstrable progress toward democratization and full respect for human rights.”

“After almost 15 years of independence, the five countries of Central Asia are still struggling in their transition to democracy,” Smith said.

For every year that certification was not granted, aid would be reduced by one-third, he said. In the third year, aid would be completely cut off unless the President made an exception and restored one-third on national security grounds. Under the proposed bill, a country would be able to requalify for assistance once it received certification, while withheld aid would be reallocated to nongovernmental organizations and other entities that support democracy.

The United States, in association with Britain, also has an immense capability to destabilize the Central Asian region using “Islamic terrorism.” Afghanistan is expected to produce billions of dollars worth of opium in the coming years, providing a substantial war chest to the rebels. In addition, it is no secret that non-Arab Islamic militants are thriving in Afghanistan. As long they do not go after the American troops, they will remain protected.

Ambassador Gajendra Singh pointed out that both China and Russia, although suspicious, went along with the United States in their own fight with Muslim radical movements for independence in Chechnya and a similar movement by the ethnic Turkic Uyghur-populated Xinjiang province of China. It is widely known among the intelligence circles that al-Qaeda and other militant organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan were training Islamic groups from Central Asian countries. A majority of these Islamic radicals were trained in Afghanistan and are now lodged in the difficult terrains of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

In addition, Britain protects the largest Islamic radical group in Central Asia, the Hizb ut-Tahrir. During the May 13 uprising in Andijan, Uzbek authorities alleged that Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) cadres were in touch with their leaders in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan. Of course HT spokesmen in London routinely denied the charges.