

Unclassified
January 2007
No. 90



Canadian Security
Intelligence Service

Commentary

Russia's Drive to the East

(“Drang nach Osten”)

Commentary reflects the personal view of the author(s) and does not imply CSIS authentication or endorsement.

Introduction

The territory governed directly from Moscow during the days of the USSR made up one-seventh of the landmass of the world, straddling what was generally termed “East” and “West” in 20th century geopolitics. The Kremlin’s political outreach held sway over a much larger area than that, for it encompassed the countries of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (Warsaw Pact), other scattered small countries (e.g., Cuba, Vietnam), and the members of over 90 communist parties throughout the world.

This vast ‘sphere of influence’ disappeared between 1985 and 1991, leaving the Soviet Union’s official successor, the Russian Federation, suddenly alone and strategically naked in the world. Without allies, surrounded by unstable and potentially hostile equally ‘new’ neighbours, minus its traditional buffer zone and naval ports, saddled with large but internally confused and apparently inept armed forces, faced with economic and political chaos, the Federation was left virtually defenceless except for its nuclear arsenal. Moreover, the newly minted Russian Federation had no economic, political, strategic, or military blueprints to guide it out of its near desperate circumstance.

Order and clarity were introduced into the Russian mess, offering some chance at stability, only by the early 21st century and the advent of Vladimir Putin as president. That story would be a long and complex one; however this report is limited to one dimension of Russia’s search for stability and order in its international strategic niche; that is, the re-establishment of Russia as the leading player in Eurasia generally, and in former Soviet Central Asia in particular.

Background

The tale begins with an essay prepared by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1997 for *Foreign Affairs* (“A Geostrategy for Eurasia,” 76: 5 [Sept/Oct]).¹ Among other things, he appeared to be calling for a greatly weakened Russia and a vastly raised US and NATO presence in former Soviet Central Asia. At that time, the piece was taken seriously only by academics in the West as an interesting theoretical exercise, and angrily denounced by Russian analysts across the board. After 9/11, the principles for which Brzezinski stood four years earlier, if not his specific suggestions, were taken seriously by strategic and military planners in Washington, and much feared by their counterparts in Moscow.

For the next three years, the US presence in Central Asia grew exponentially, especially after the onset of US-led coalition action in Afghanistan. The Pentagon opened up military bases in Kyrgyzstan (Manas) and Uzbekistan (Karshi-Khanabad), built an airbase for refueling purposes near Dushanbe in Tajikistan, and purchased contingency access to an airfield in Almaty, Kazakhstan. These military projects were facilitated by huge sums of money, covering the costs of construction, leasing, and other forms of financial compensation to local governments. Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov was especially supportive of US presence in the region. Regional leaders began to talk of upgrading their participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace programs and looking westward for security and other forms of assistance.²

Nevertheless, over the last two years, this process has been completely reversed and the blossoming US presence has been all but erased by a spate of Russian bilateral and multilateral agreements designed to restore its predominance in the region. Although it was abetted by two unforeseen incidents (see below), this trend was not sudden. The process of reintegrating Russia and Central Asia was initiated, tentatively, under Yeltsin in the mid-1990s. It was Putin, however, who gave the drive to the east priority status.

Putin

Putin dealt the 'Asia Card' very early in his career as an international player. In July-September 2000, he toured the Russian Far East, Central Asia and Asia on his way to Okinawa, Japan, for the G-8 where he would meet US President Clinton. On the way, he talked with the Shanghai Five (now ShCO, see "Central Asian Formal Institutions..." below) leaders in Dushanbe, sat down again with the president of China a few days later in Beijing, and with the North Korean leader in Pyongyang, showing up in Okinawa with the full support of Central Asian and China's leaders in hand. The Shanghai Five heads of state reconvened soon afterwards in New York, during the millennium session of the United Nations General Assembly. Subsequently, whenever possible, Putin made a point of traveling to the West via the East, arriving several times for meetings with President Bush with full support on international issues from members of the ShCO, including China and India.

While acquiescing with American expansion into Central Asia, or at least not complaining publicly about it, Putin's foreign and defence ministries gradually wove together a string of organizations and institutions that guaranteed the region's ultimate reliance on Moscow for political, economic, and military leadership. Their success was ensured when Moscow took advantage of unrest in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2005.

A sudden and successful political uprising in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan ("the Tulip Revolution"), in March 2005, caused the government of Askar Akaev to fall, and its leader fled to Moscow. Still, surprisingly on the face of it, the new president of that country, Kurmanbek Bakiev, sought support in Moscow as well, which he was given in April. In Bakiev's case, the turn to Russia was facilitated by political recognition and substantial assistance to Kyrgyzstan's struggling agricultural sector. Recent demonstrations in Bishkek and attempts by the parliament to limit presidential powers (e.g. 2, 3, 8 Nov. 2006) suggest that further dramatic upheaval in that republic may be forthcoming. There were even rumours of an impending Russian intervention (Interfax, 7 November 2006).

In May, Uzbekistan also moved quickly into the Russian camp. Western outrage when Uzbek military forces opened fired on a crowd of protesters in Andijan put an end to Karimov's flirting with Washington, and left only Moscow for him to turn to. A ShCO summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, in July 2005, signaled the complete turnaround of Russia's fortunes in Central Asia. With the presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan leading the way, the summit demanded that members of the "antiterrorist coalition," meaning the US and NATO, "set a time frame for the end of their temporary use of the infrastructure facilities and of the presence of military contingents on the territory of ShCO countries" (Izvestia, 6 July 2005). That same summit had welcomed envoys from Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia as official observers. Not surprisingly, president after president spoke of the potential of the ShCO as the voice of Central Asia in the world: whimsical

thinking, perhaps, but heady if one considers that the organization and its official observers encompass half of the world's population, i.e., about 3 billion people. Their combined territory also holds about 20% of the world's energy resources, and China is one the world's top energy consumers.

Subsequently, in October 2005, the same leaders agreed with Putin that the struggle against terrorism and the question of security should be the ShCO's highest priority. As this particular meeting, in Moscow, was followed only a few weeks later by Russia-China and Russia-India military exercises, and was attended by high-level observer representatives (the vice-president of Iran, the prime ministers of Pakistan and Mongolia, and the foreign minister of India), it generated further talk inside and outside Russia about the ShCO as a "NATO of the East." Given that Russia already sits as a partner of NATO on the NATO-Russia Council, Moscow's interest in pushing such an impression is clear.

There are caveats to bear in mind: Karimov certainly had made no commitment to introduce democratic practices to Uzbekistan, so the incident at Andijan served mainly to highlight known conditions and speed up the inevitable US rejection of his overtures. And the observers at the ShCO are not scheduled to be actual members any time soon, if at all. But they are at the table, and China is the biggest consumer of Iranian energy---meaning also that if pressure is to be put on Iran, the ShCO may be a useful vehicle for it.

How Had this Happened?

There was no dark plot here. By the end March 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq had drawn Western attention away from Afghanistan, even if only briefly. Russia raised its profile in Central Asian security matters almost immediately.

The public side of a new Russian diplomatic offensive in Central Asia began in October 2003 when Putin attended the official opening of a Russian airbase at Kant, near Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and only about 100 km from the US base. The opening was conducted with great fanfare. A 15-year lease agreement was signed, with the right to renew every five years after that. It was claimed at the time that Kant would serve as an operational base for the ShCO's planned rapid deployment force.

Central Asia's renewed reliance on Moscow was underscored in 2005 when Uzbekistan and Russia conducted their first joint military maneuver (called an "anti-terrorist exercise") from 19-24 September of that year. Shortly thereafter, 10-13 October 2005, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice toured Central Asia and pointedly skipped over Uzbekistan. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov followed in her wake a week later and picked up the pieces. Not only did he go to Tashkent and close important deals with the Uzbek leader, he traveled to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, and carried on lengthy talks with leaders of that "neutral" state, mostly on energy issues, with unusual success. He was even able to persuade Saparmurat Niiazov, despotic head of that theocratic republic, to attend a forthcoming ShCO summit and, for the first time in several years, the subsequent CIS gathering of heads of state³. Among other things, Moscow eventually was able to utilize an existing long-term (25 year) gas deal with Turkmenistan to help resolve Russia's controversial gas arrangements with Ukraine.

The fact is, Russian forces had long since made it plain that they would support local government in internal political conflicts –US forces clearly would not. Karimov and Niiazov, former CPSU First Secretaries, are naturally skeptical of the West and know exactly where they stand with Russia.

Russia already has integrated parts of its armed forces separately with Armenia and Belarus, so there is precedence for it doing the same thing in Central Asia. For some years now, 14-17,000 Russian troops (201st Motorized Rifle Div.) have been based in Tajikistan along the border with Afghanistan. Legal documents for the Russian base to be made permanent were signed last year.⁴ The new and expanding airbase at Kant, a soon-to-be formed Rapid Deployment Force for the Collective Security Treaty Organization CSTO (see next section), makes the Russian military presence in Central Asia far more permanent-looking than anything the West has to offer, and provides the CSTO members with Russia-backed defences on all sides.

Central Asian Formal Institutions and their Links with Russia⁵

Note how some of the titles coincide, quite purposely, with that of NATO and the EU's predecessor, the European Economic Community.

1) The Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS]—12 former Soviet Republics, created in December 1991, with Russia as the dominant power—includes all four Central Asian states and Kazakhstan.⁶

2) The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) began as a Collective Security Pact within the CIS in 1994 (three states withdrew in 1999), and took its present name in May 2002. Its membership then included Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan applied to re-join the CSTO in August 2005. On 11 October 2005, CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha said that a “large group of forces” would be created from member-states to defend Central Asia. That hasn't happened yet, but estimates of numbers, resources and types of formations have been clarified in 2006.

3) The Eurasian Economic Community [EurEC] began as a Customs Union in 1995, and grew to include Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan applied to join in the first week of October 2005, and Moldova's status is pending; India is a regular but unofficial invited observer. In October 2005 the EurEC was merged with the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), at Almaty, which brought Uzbekistan to the EurEC table. Uzbekistan officially became a member in January 2006. As of 2006, about 90% of the EurEC import-export duties have been harmonized, and a customs union is taking shape.

4) The Shanghai Cooperation Organization [ShCO] began in 1996 as the Shanghai Five, i.e., Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In June 2001, Uzbekistan joined and it became known as the Shanghai Forum. With the adoption of a formal Charter in 2003, it took on its current name and was recognized as a regional organization by the United Nations. The ShCO opened a

permanent Secretariat in Beijing in January 2004, and at the same time a Regional Anti-Terrorist Centre in Tashkent, which has effectively replaced the CIS and/or CSTO defence ministry regular meetings for Central Asia.

At a meeting in Astana in July 2005, India, Pakistan, and Iran were granted official observer status. Mongolia has been an observer since 2004. In 2006 Belarus applied for observer status, which, if granted, would bring the ShCO to NATO's frontier.

In October 2005, rumours began to circulate that the ShCO could become the basis of a military alliance (Interfax, 26 Oct 05), mainly to serve as a stabilizing force in the increasingly volatile region. Although such an alliance is improbable, the ShCO's publicly stated purpose insofar as military matters are concerned is to provide stability for existing governments in the region and, though left unsaid, to forestall the US and NATO from attempting to do so.

In March 2006, when Russia and China ratcheted up their strategic partnership, a joint declaration noted that the ShCO would serve as their main liaison mechanism—though the wide cross-section of RF-PRC bilateral agreements and associations would remain active as well.

The first formal meeting of the ShCO defence ministers was conducted in Beijing in April 2006. In the rush of press statements released before and after that meeting, the central themes were that “terrorism, separatism and extremism” were threats to the entire world, and that the ShCO Secretariat should integrate its work with the Regional Anti-Terrorist Centre, to help combat these three “evils.” The RF foreign ministry used the term “synchronize watches” in this connection.

ShCO summits in June (Shanghai) and September (Dushanbe), 2006, saw general agreement reached on the creation of an ShCO energy club, and discussion opened on an Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, with the involvement of Russia's vast Gazprom complex. A declaration signed in June confirmed the group's commitment to war against the “three evil forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism.” In addition to representatives from member and observer countries, the most recent of these summits (of prime ministers, in Dushanbe, 15 September 2006), was attended by the vice-president of Afghanistan and the secretary general of the EurEC. Although details for the collective energy initiatives remain to be worked out, their concept has obvious implications for the world's energy cartels (e.g. OPEC) and individual producers (e.g. Canada), and equally significant political and strategic connotations for the world arena.⁷

In addition to its official link with the UN, the ShCO has formal ties with the CIS and the ASEAN, and has a special Afghanistan working group.

5) The idea of a formal Moscow-New Delhi-Beijing Axis was put forward by Evgenii Primakov, RF foreign minister and, briefly, prime minister, in the 1990s. It was raised subsequently by Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov (2000), Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (2002), and several times by Ivanov's successor, Sergei Lavrov. Since January 2005, Lavrov has worked openly to give this strategy a semi-formal character.

A timetable for regular meetings between heads of the three states, and also between their foreign and defence ministers, has been negotiated. In March 2006, the three foreign ministers met in Moscow for the express purpose of coordinating their stances in international affairs. Regional security was at the top of their agenda. The catchword used again by RF foreign ministry officials, in describing the trilateral talks was “synchronizing watches.”

By mid-2005, mechanisms for the close interaction of border agencies, law enforcement agencies and the special forces of the member states of the CSTO, the EurEC and the ShCO were said to be in place (RF MID, *Daily News Bulletin*, 8 and 23 June 2005).

A picture of Russia’s growing influence in Central Asia was brought into clearer focus in August 2006, in Sochi at a summit of EurEC heads of state. A number of long-discussed projects finally took some kind of formal shape:

Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed the legal basis for a customs union. A common energy market was agreed upon. The EurEC and the CSTO gathered at the same venue, and promised greater communications between each other and the ShCO. Among other things, this meant that the Armenian President, Robert Kocharyan, was present and spoke to the EurEC leaders on behalf of the CSTO. Uzbekistan was formally welcomed to the CSTO, which it had left in 1999.

By August 2006, therefore, Brzezinski’s geo-strategy for Central Asia was dead and Russia was once again the clear dominant force in the region.

The Russian Edge in Central Asia

These, and many other related events, make it clear that in any ‘Great Game’ in Central Asia, for the present at least, Russia has a clear advantage over the United States, NATO or the EU. Its edge is determined by a number of factors, most of them obvious:

- Proximity;
- Former CPSU First Secretaries are still in charge in most of Central Asia;
- The continued chaos in Afghanistan still poses a threat to Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and both the RF & China represent more reliable help against religious extremism and separatism than the US or NATO either can or would want to be;
- Language and cultural links: Russian-language TV is still the most watched in the region, and Russian often serves as a lingua franca at administrative and cultural levels in inter-Central Asia affairs;
- The religion of Central Asia, Islam, is the second-largest one in Russia, where it may total up to 28 million adherents in a population of 142 million;⁸
- Trade/ transportation/ transit links, relics from the integrated Soviet economy, are still essential for

economic survival; large-scale investments in hydroelectric projects, irrigation projects, and transportation infrastructure also keep the Russian presence strong;

- Common visions of stability, usually voiced in anti-terrorist rhetoric against Islamic extremism (termed Wahabbism), and separatism, which all the Central Asian states, plus Russia, China, and India equate with terrorism. This is partly a correct analogy, because most manifestations of separatism in Central Asia and surrounding countries begin with acts of violence, rather than culminate in them. Religious extremism and separatism are greater threats to Central Asian governments than any ‘coloured’ revolution, though there also is a widely held suspicion that the Western world may be fomenting ‘democratic’ revolutions in the region. Russia and the Central Asian states hold similar views on terrorism, coordinate their counter-terrorist activities closely, and generally lump all forms of extremism under the label “Wahabbism” so as to focus their resources against a single target.

Recent Upgrades

The tightening up trend continues: on 28 September 2006 the heads of Russia’s Federal Security Service and Uzbekistan’s National Security Service met in Moscow and signed a number of cooperative accords. On the same day, what was termed a “strategic dialogue mechanism” held its first forum in Beijing. Some fifty highly-placed ‘experts’ from Chinese and Russian NGOs, think-tanks, and strategic planning agencies gathered to deliberate ways and means for further cooperation in the domestic and international arenas. Two days prior to that, the CSCE (Helsinki Commission) held a congressional hearing in Washington to investigate the importance of the ShCO for the United States. Among the testifiers was US Asst. Sec. of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher, who concluded that US policy was to treat with each Central Asian state separately, and “with the multilateral organizations that share our goals in Central Asia.” His take on the ShCO was left vague, but he made it plain that he did not want to give the ShCO too much legitimacy by dealing with it directly, and added that it needed watching closely.⁹

That is precisely the approach taken almost a year ago by Robert Simmons, then NATO envoy to the South Caucasus and Central Asia, who rejected a proposal from Lavrov that NATO cooperate with the CSTO as a collective partner. Russia presumed to represent the CSTO at the NATO-Russia Council. Instead, Simmons said, NATO would prefer to deal with each CSTO member-state separately (Interfax, 2 November 2005).

Conclusion

Bearing in mind that Russia generally, and Vladimir Putin particularly, would always prefer to be accepted as an integral part of the Western concert of nations:

- 1) Putin’s extension of Russia’s influence throughout Central Asia is multi-faceted, and far more extensive than at least the public perception: it is institutionalized, via the multilateral agencies noted above; b) economic, via the EurEC and a variety of other bilateral, multilateral and organizational trade and long-term investment agreements—energy pipelines provide the lattice-work for this economic structure; c) military, via the CSTO and extensive bilateral arms deals (with

special rates) and military exercises; d) cultural, via the Russian language and the presence of a large Russian diaspora; e) political/ideological, via the continued presence of former Soviet CPSU first secretaries and other senior officials in Central Asian governments and bureaucracies; and f) security-driven, for obvious reasons.

2) The China factor may eventually overwhelm Russia's current ambitions in the Central Asian area; that is, the 'Great Game' may well be played out between Russia as an Asian power and China, rather than between Russia and the West. In light of Canada's extensive links with both China and Russia, especially on our west coast, this possibility means that we must monitor the situation very closely for our own sake. Russia should be a better conduit for information and cooperation on terrorism, drug-trafficking and organized crime than China ever will be.

3) For now, Russia also has to take great care not to regard most Central Asian governments as much more than 'client' states. In spite of their many common interests, Moscow cannot afford to prop up states as they become increasingly despotic, for the risk of breakdown and consequent ripple effects are too dangerous. Only if the aforementioned organizations take on truly permanent, constructive and modifying roles can Russia's safety in the east be guaranteed.

4) The approach endorsed by Robert Simmons and Richard Boucher may represent the classic "too little, too late."

It may prove wiser now to broaden our direct links with the CSTO and ShCO—via Russia—for the express purposes of combatting terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. In light of the somewhat tense relationship between Moscow and the current administration in Washington, and the fact that the RF and the EU already have a special partnership,¹⁰ Canada may be the country best positioned to initiate deeper and, more importantly, open recognition of the ShCO, CSTO, and also the EurEC, as important regional organizations.

Canada and its allies could themselves benefit from—and perhaps even help shape—evolving mechanisms for combatting terrorism, drug-trafficking, and organized crime in the region under discussion; that is, going directly to the source of such phenomena. Moreover, the prospects of these organizations serving as a collective Russia-dominated platform for the vast Eurasian and Central Asian energy industry make it incumbent upon Canada to investigate carefully the implications such a development might have for its own energy sector.

Postword

Some forces in Russia are calling for the renewal of the old Soviet Empire, and some nationalists clamour for a return to the forceful domination of Central Asia in the old Soviet manner. These include general movements such as the Eurasianists, a few political parties (Zhirinovskii's Liberal Democratic Party, and to a certain extent the Communist Party), and scattered old Cold Warriors. But they persuade neither the majority of Russians nor the Russian government. Putin's focus on Central Asia is shaped by concern for what the chair of the RF Council for Foreign and Defence Policy Sergei Karaganov calls the destabilization of "our entire soft southern underbelly" (Rossiiskaia Gazeta, 21 Dec 2005). Natural and historic strategic interests are by far the most most

powerful, and logical, engines driving Russia's *Drang nach Osten*. It would be well for us to recognize this strategic reality as a given, and to 'get on with it.'

The influential Karaganov has suggested as well that it would be a good idea to offer the United States a seat as an observer to the ShCO.¹¹ This is unlikely to happen in the near future. On the other hand, Canada's long-standing and somewhat unique relationships with Russia, China and India; our mutual interests in curbing drug-trafficking, organized crime and international terrorism; and our own status as an emerging energy power, could make Canada an interesting choice for one of those seats.

¹ The essay was adopted from Brzezinski's then still unpublished *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997). For a somewhat wild but interesting review in which Brzezinski's writing is linked to later events, see Michael C. Ruppert, "A War in the Planning for Four Years," *From the Wilderness Paper* (2001). Ruppert is a former German Defence and NATO official. Brzezinski was national security adviser to Jimmy Carter, 1977-81, and a member of Ronald Reagan's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board

² See, e.g., Annual Partnership Work Programmes. NATO Partnership for Peace Documents. www.NATO.Int

³ Niiazov, who terms himself the Turkmenbashi, leader of all ethnic Turkmen, and is president for life, had unilaterally downgraded Turkmenistan's status in the CIS in August, only two months before the Lavrov visit.

⁴ Temporary NATO bases located at Termez, in Uzbekistan, Kulob and another near Dushanbe in Tajikistan, are used by German, Dutch and French forces.

⁵ Russia also is deeply involved in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with which the first Russia-ASEAN Summit was held in December 2005; the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), which it joined in April 2005; and, as of October 2003, the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

⁶ During Soviet days, Kazakhstan was not counted as a Central Asia state, though for the most part it is now.

⁷ The Dushanbe meeting in September 2006 was the 5th meeting of ShCO prime ministers. The group planned for the Baikal Economic Forum scheduled for Irkutsk at the end of the month, and asked Kazakhstan and Russia to prepare a feasibility study for the proposed energy club. Further integration with the EurEC was agreed as well.

⁸ Numbers vary wildly. The US State Department data for 2005 sets the number of followers of Islam in Russia at 15-20%, or 25-28 million. It is the size of this population that made it possible for Russia to join the Organization of the Islamic Conference, in 2003.

⁹ Richard Boucher Testimony to U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing, 26 September 2006, on "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Is It Undermining U.S. Interests in Central Asia?," summarized by Heather Maher for Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (27 September 2006).

¹⁰ The 10-year Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (CPA) between Russia and the EU is due for renewal, revision, or abrogation in December 2007.

¹¹ Rossiiskaia Gazeta (21 Dec 2005). This is a Russian government paper. One writer has claimed that the US did apply for observer status in the ShCO and was turned down, but I cannot find a specific record of this. See Shaun Walker, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Reaches a Milestone," *Russia Profile* Vol. 3: No. 8 (Oct 2006), p. 23.

J. Larry Black, Professor Emeritus, Director, Centre for Research on Canadian-Russian Relations, Institute for University Partnerships and Advanced Studies, Georgian College, Barrie, Ontario.