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Setting up SCO as a counter to NATO

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is flexing its military muscles like never before. On August 17 the leaders of the SCO watched in Siberia the final stage of the largest yet war games of the grouping. About 6,000 soldiers, more than 1,000 combat vehicles, and scores of aircraft practised combat skills in 'Peace Mission-2007,' a week-long anti-terror drill staged in the Chelyabinsk region of Russia.

The Siberian military manoeuvres were significant in several ways. It was for the first time that the SCO leaders attended the war games. It was also for the first time that the militaries of all the SCO members took part in the drill. Finally, it was for the first time that China dispatched its troops to train abroad.

The Presidents of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan travelled to the West Siberian town of Chebarkul after meeting for an annual summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on Thursday (August 16). By timing the war games to coincide with the summit, the SCO sought to demonstrate its growing regional clout and focus on security and counterterrorism.

The SCO leaders have repeatedly denied any plans to transform their group into a defence alliance, but the security component of the organisation has been expanding at breathtaking pace. Three years ago the SCO set up a modest Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS) for information exchange and joint training of national security services. Two years later cooperation between the Defence Ministries was institutionalised through the establishment of a Defence Ministers Council, and earlier this year Russia circulated a draft agreement to formalise closer military ties among the SCO states.

Beijing has now backed Moscow's proposal to establish a partnership between the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a defence pact of former Soviet states, even though earlier it was reluctant to have ties with a strictly military alliance and rejected Moscow's initiative to make 'Peace Mission-2007' a joint exercise of the SCO and CSTO. "I think the SCO and the CSTO can and must cooperate," Chinese Ambassador to Russia Liu Guchang said in the run-up to the Bishkek summit. CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha had earlier announced that the two organisations would shortly sign a protocol on cooperation and might hold joint military training in future.

China is the only member of the SCO that does not participate in the CSTO, described as Warsaw Pact-2, and a formalised partnership between

the two organisations would lay the basis for a defence alliance between Russia and China in Central Asia and turn the SCO into an effective counterweight to the U.S. and NATO in the region.

In Bishkek, the SCO leaders signed a treaty of "long-term good neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation." The pact will serve to further thwart the U.S. plan to create a "Greater Central Asia" that would be off bounds to Russia and China.

A political declaration adopted in Bishkek bluntly stated that regional security was the responsibility of the SCO and no one else. "The heads of state think that stability and security in Central Asia can be ensured primarily through the efforts taken by the nations of the region on the basis of existing regional organisations," the declaration said.

The declaration was a reminder to the U.S. that the SCO's two-year-old demand to Washington to set a deadline for the withdrawal of its military forces from Central Asia was still on the table. The reminder sounded particularly loud as the SCO leaders met in Bishkek several kilometres away from a U.S. airbase at the Kyrgyz main airport Manas. It is the only remaining U.S. base in Central Asia after Uzbekistan closed down another airbase the Pentagon had set up to support its anti-Taliban operation in Afghanistan.

The Russian and Chinese leaders both called in Bishkek for closer security cooperation within the SCO. President Vladimir Putin said the 'Peace Mission-2007' war games were part of "a joint system of rapid reaction to regional threats" that is being set up "to enhance the SCO potential in the sphere of security." Intriguingly, the scenario for 'Peace Mission-2007' - freeing a town captured by terrorists - was reportedly based on the 2005 armed revolt in Uzbekistan, when radical Islamists for several hours seized control of the provincial capital Andijan. Mr. Putin called for holding war games on a regular basis in different countries of the SCO.

Chinese President Hu Jintao also emphasised the need "to advance security cooperation in order to ensure regional security by their own forces."

The security agenda of the SCO appears to be extending beyond the problems of Central Asia. Both Russia and China feel threatened by U.S. plans to build a global missile shield to gain ultimate strategic supremacy. The issue did not come up in public speeches in Bishkek, except for a blistering attack from Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who slammed the U.S. plan as "threatening not just one country, but much of the Asian continent and SCO members." However, the U.S. anti-missile plans were discussed at ministerial-level meetings in Bishkek ahead of the summit.

Russia's Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov said "the deployment of elements of the U.S. global missile shield in Europe destroys the strategic military balance," while Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that the U.S. plan "is bound to impact on this region, bearing in mind the list of members and observers of the SCO."

The SCO's security concerns are also prompted by a looming U.S. defeat in Iraq and the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. "The situation in the region and neighbouring countries remains unstable," Gen. Baluyevsky was quoted as telling SCO military chiefs in Chinese Urumqi ahead of the Bishkek summit. "It would be premature to speak about its improvement. Moreover, the worst-case scenario cannot be ruled out. In particular, it is quite possible that the situation in Afghanistan may deteriorate even further."

Russian strategists fear that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq may trigger a NATO fiasco in Afghanistan. If international efforts fail to stabilise Afghanistan, violence may spread to Central Asia. "If we [SCO and CSTO] ignore the situation in Afghanistan, we will get problems in Central Asia for many years to come," CSTO head Bordyuzha warned. "Therefore we are planning to exert efforts to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan."

In Bishkek the SCO leaders resolved to play a higher-profile role in Afghanistan, whose President Hamid Karzai attended the summit as a special guest. They agreed to convene an international conference next year on post-conflict rehabilitation of Afghanistan and energise the work of the SCO contact group for Afghanistan. President Putin called for the creation of "counter-narcotics security belts" around Afghanistan and for "belts of financial security" to disrupt financing of the drug trade in Afghanistan.

The increased focus on security issues in the SCO has met with controversial responses from SCO observer states. While Iran is stepping up its bid to gain full membership in the SCO, with President Ahmadinejad attending a second SCO summit in Bishkek, India has sought to distance itself from the SCO political agenda. Official sources in Delhi told TheHindu last week that "India would like to steer clear of aligning with this six-nation grouping in military, strategic and political terms," but "wants to be a hands-on participant, especially in improving trade, economic and cultural linkages."

Reaching out to India's concerns, Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov called for "intensifying work with the observers who are unhappy that their participation [in the SCO] is confined to ceremonial presence at selected meetings."

"The observer status should not be an obstacle to full-fledged involvement in practical SCO projects, for example in energy and transport," Mr. Lavrov said, specifically mentioning the proposal to

form a SCO Energy Club. The Energy Club plan gained momentum in Bishkek, with the SCO instituting regular meetings of the group's Energy Ministers. "I am convinced that the unfolding energy dialogue, integration of our national energy concepts, and the creation of the Energy Club will set out priorities for further cooperation," Mr. Putin said in his speech in Bishkek.

Apart from the SCO members, the Energy Club is bound to include Iran and Turkmenistan. President Ahmadinejad offered to host a conference of SCO Energy Ministers in Iran, while Turkmenistan, whose President Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov attended the SCO summit for the first time, has recently signed agreements to build new pipelines to Russia and China.

India emphasised its interest in energy cooperation with the SCO by dispatching Petroleum Minister Murli Deora to Bishkek. At the same time India should take note of one more signal the Bishkek summit has sent out : the economic and security agendas have the same priority for the SCO, and those who wish to have full-fledged cooperation with the organisation, should go for both.