

The Anti-Terrorist Coalition: A “New World Order” Redux?

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Just as the post-cold war transition to a new international system seemed to be ending, the terrorist acts of September 11 and the U.S. responses have re-opened the question of Central Asia’s strategic orientation and, through that, the structure of the entire international system.

Does the universal international endorsement of Washington’s war on terrorism signify the rebirth of the “new world order” heralded in U.S. policy ten years ago? In particular, does it render irrelevant the Sino-Russian entente that has evolved over the past decade, including economic and military cooperation, and diplomatic coordination?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to look further into the past than September 11. Even so, it is not necessary to look farther than a few months. The two most notable events of the summer in Asian international relations were the June founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), bringing China and Russia together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (and which occurred two days before the first Bush-Putin meeting in Ljubljana, Slovenia); and the July signature by China and Russia of a bilateral Treaty on Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, the first such treaty in half a century.

In the run-up to the June SCO conference, Chinese domestic press reports stressed the organization’s fight against the “three evil forces,” a codephrase referring to separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism, or in other words the presence of Uyghurs in their native Xinjiang province. (For consumption by Western media, China’s official Xinhua News Agency euphemistically referred to this as “law-

enforcement cooperation.”) Russia closes its eyes to China’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang (and Tibet), and China returns the favor regarding Chechnya.

At an August 1999 summit of the “Shanghai-5” grouping (the SCO’s precursor institution), the countries involved agreed to set up an “anti-terrorist center” in the Kyrgyzstan capital of Bishkek. The proposed creation of a joint rapid deployment force at such a center raised in some eyes the specter of Chinese and Russian troops eventually stationed together in Central Asia at the core of a military and political bloc. As fantastic as that vision may seem, it is necessary to recognize that the bilateral treaty signed this year—while not a formal alliance because it does not require one side to come to the defense of the other in case of attack—nevertheless deepens the “strategic relationship” first announced at the 1996 Sino-Russian summit between Presidents Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin, which also took place in Shanghai.

The new Sino-Russian treaty only codifies bilateral relations that have been developing for over five years. It includes provisions not only for combating Islamic militancy in Central Asia, but also for increasing Russian arms sales to China, including advanced technology transfers, and the exchange of military training (up to 2,000 Chinese officers to attend Russian military schools yearly). In fact, before the treaty in the early 1990s, Russian arms sales to China averaged one billion dollars per year. This figure more than doubled before the decade ended. China is following the old Soviet strategy of importing (or stealing) foreign technology to create “pockets of excellence” in its own weapons development programs.

This has important consequences for China's ability to impose its own political will on Asia. Indeed, China's strategic weapons development and deployment program uncannily resembles the Soviet strategy in the late 1970s that led to the dangerous tactic of putting medium-range SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe. These were not able to reach the U.S. but they were capable of striking West European capitals in a matter of minutes. The purpose was to sow fear among West European elites and terror among their publics, paralyzing the political will to oppose Moscow's political, diplomatic, and military moves in Europe or elsewhere.

Both the June founding of the SCO and the July bilateral treaty allowed Russia and China to demonstrate their agreement on fundamental issues of international politics, particularly the question of relations with United States. Foreign-affairs coverage in the Chinese media emphasized that they would promote "multipolarization" in world politics and the foundation of what Beijing calls a "new world order" based on "democratic, fair, and rational" principles.

In this connection, it is relevant to note that not long after the SCO's June meeting this year, and despite the border-delimitation and demilitarization treaties of 1996 and 1997, China unceremoniously seized over 150 square miles of Kazakhstani territory, giving it control of the watershed of the Black Irtysh River. Even before that bald and unapologetic landgrab, Beijing had begun to build canals for diversion of the river's waters.

Such a vision recognizes and is driven by a recognition of economic, demographic, and geographic fundamentals that are more basic to international affairs than Washington's current rhetoric about a "global anti-terrorist coalition" or its decade-old rhetoric about a "new world order." In fact, in an Orwellian twist, Beijing has begun to use the phrase "new world order" in its own propaganda, with a meaning exactly the opposite of the one offered by Washington a decade ago: in China's usage, this means, rather, opposition to "American hegemonism" and "U.S. power politics," a label Beijing uses to include criticism of China's human-

rights abuses and continuing condemnation of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacres.

So, has the global anti-terrorist coalition formed by American diplomacy in the wake of September 11 rendered obsolete and meaningless the Sino-Russian rapprochement marked by the creation of the SCO and the bilateral treaty signed earlier this year? Hardly. In honest objectivity, it is necessary to recognize that this rapprochement is oriented not only against Washington's best intentions (not to speak of its "interests") but also against the interests of people living in Asia. It favors only the interests of the Russian and Chinese military-industrial elites and their representatives in the national political executives. No U.S.-sponsored "war on terrorism" will change this hard fact.

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