

The Andijan Effect: The Danger of an Anti-American Central Asia

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Uzbek President Islam Karimov's bloody crackdown against dissenters in Andijan has opened a diplomatic rift between the United States and Uzbekistan that could reshape the geopolitical balance in Central Asia in favor of a growing China-Russia axis. After the May 13 deadly shootings in the Andijan province of Uzbekistan (which locals have dubbed "Bloody Friday"), the US and the international community responded with outrage and demands for inquiries into the atrocities.

Many in the US Congress are now calling for a reassessment of the United States' relationship with the undemocratic Central Asian ally. Recently, Congress succeeded in blocking a scheduled \$11 million in aid until an outside investigation of the incident can be administered. In retaliation, the Uzbek government has banned nighttime flights at the base in Karshi-Khanabad, a strategic hub for US forces in the war on terror. (However the Uzbeks maintain that restrictions were imposed before the Andijan incident for technical reasons).

Contrast the deteriorating American-Uzbek alliance with the actions of China and Russia who, in the wake of Bloody Friday, have not reproached Karimov and have forged even greater ties with Central Asia's strongest military power. In fact, Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed his total support for Karimov's actions in Andijan while opposing US and international criticism of the atrocities. A Karimov visit to Beijing in May resulted in the signing of a \$600 million oil deal between the two nations and a new treaty that China says will lead

Forum Points

- The fallout over recent events in Uzbekistan could be the tipping point that permanently alters the geopolitical balance in Central Asia.
- Central Asia is moving away from the United States towards a growing China-Russia axis.
- China and Russia want to build a new world order in which the US is not dominant.
- If the Russia and Central Asia continue to feel threatened by the US, they will ally more closely with China in the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO).
- The danger exists of an anti-American SCO emerging that could challenge US interests in Central Asia and possibly on a global scale.

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to the next stage in their strategic partnership. Russia too has pushed forward its relations with Uzbekistan after Andijan, referring to the massacre as an “internal matter” and signing a strategic partnership treaty on June 16.ⁱⁱ On July 5 the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO)—which is comprised of China, Russia, Uzbekistan and several other Central Asian states—called for US and coalition forces to set a timetable for withdrawal of forces from Central Asia; an unambiguous sign of their desire to see the US depart from the region.

These developments illustrate the growing challenges that the US faces in Central Asia. In addition to balancing the competing aims of spreading democratic values and fighting terrorism, the US must also consider the growing influence of China and Russia, who would like to see nothing more than a diminished US presence in Central Asia. The increasingly allied and anti-American duo has been gaining power in the region bilaterally through strategic partnerships and multilaterally through the 2001-established Shanghai Cooperative Organization. Washington’s recent fallout with Tashkent will likely lead to a strengthened alliance between the Communist autocracy in China, the increasingly authoritarian regime in Russia, and the strategic former Soviet states of Central Asia. This union could emerge as a critical counterweight to US influence in the region and possibly across the globe.

The Great Game: The US versus the China-Russia axis in Central Asia

Before the September 11 attacks, Central Asia was not a major focus of American foreign policy. China and Russia took advantage of this initial disinterest by expanding their influence in the region with intensified political, economic and security ties. In June 2001, Beijing initiated the formation of the Shanghai Cooperative Organization to bolster cooperation between China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Although set up to deal primarily with a range of economic and security issues, China and Russia left no doubt that the SCO (also known as the Shanghai Pact) was also a military cooperation organization openly seeking to promote global “multi-polarity”—thinly veiled diplomatic speak for opposing US global domination, which Moscow and Beijing see as “uni-polar.”ⁱⁱⁱ

After the September 11 attacks, Washington cozied up to Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbors, gaining their political and logistical support for the war on terror. Many in Beijing and Moscow were disturbed by the United States’ ability to quickly and effectively project power in a region that both see as their backyard. Both feared that a US presence in Central Asia was intended to “encircle” their regimes (US forces via NATO are seen as threatening Russian security in the west, and US alliances with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are seen as threatening Chinese security in the east).^{iv}

A May 2002 article in *Liaowang* (a publication tied to the Chinese ruling elite) called US actions in Central Asia part of a “US Grand Strategy for global domination” which intended among other things to “contain the rise of China.”^v Following the arrival of US forces at bases in Central Asia, both Russia and China scrambled to establish bases of their own to counter US power in the region. In this context, the recent decision by Tashkent to disallow US nighttime flights is an open drift away from Washington towards the China-Russia axis.

The ‘Great Game’ that emerges from these events is a battle for influence in Central Asia with the US pitted on one side, and China and Russia allied on the other. Washington needs Central Asia’s help in the war on terror but also wants to see the region democratize through people-powered revolutions much as Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia have done. China’s objectives in the region are to secure vital energy resources and defuse the threat of Muslim separatism in its western provinces. A re-emergent Russian empire under Putin wants to ensure that Russia will have a strong voice in the affairs of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Both China and Russia are united by their common desire to see the US out of the region.

In the middle of this power struggle are the states of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. All but Kyrgyzstan remain in the hands of authoritarian regimes that took power when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991. Most of these rulers are former communists. Until now, the regimes of Central Asia have developed good relations with each of the competing great powers in order to milk the many financial, political and military rewards intended to court their favor.

But US criticism of the events in Andijan and praise for the recent democratic revolutions in the

former Soviet periphery have Central Asian dictators worried that the US might support those seeking to overthrow their own illegitimate regimes. This suspicion of US intentions has caused a tilt in Kazak, Uzbek and Tajik foreign policies away from Washington towards Beijing and Moscow. This fear is likely behind the recent SCO call for a timetable for removal of US forces from Central Asia. The recent American-Uzbek fallout over Andijan could be the impetus that permanently tips the geopolitical balance in Central Asia in favor of the China-Russia axis (while a relatively minor energy interest, Uzbekistan boasts Central Asia's strongest military and is widely considered to be the key strategic player in the region).

The Gathering Threat: An anti-American SCO led by China and Russia?

Over the past decade relations between China and Russia have improved to a level that some analysts say rivals the Stalin-Mao pact of 1950. Throughout the 1990s the Russians and Chinese moved closer together diplomatically and militarily, with Moscow selling Beijing a number of advanced weapon systems in exchange for desperately needed hard currency from China's trade surpluses.

In 1999 the two stood firmly against the US-led NATO operation to stop the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, vigorously objecting to the argument that the international community has a right to intervene if a regime commits massive human-rights abuses against its own citizens. Both China and Russia were concerned that Kosovo would set a precedent that could lead to international intervention against separatist crackdowns on their own soil (Chechnya for Russia, and Tibet and Xinjiang for China).^{vi} The two major nuclear powers also united in opposition to the Bush administration's decision to pursue a national missile defense system in 2001 (some analysts believe that the SCO was formed specifically to counter the US missile defense threat).

Diplomatically, Chinese and Russian foreign policies have been converging with a stated opposition to the US. In July 2001, China and Russia signed the Good-Neighborly Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Although Beijing and Moscow maintain that the treaty is not aimed at any third party, language from both capitals indicates that they see the US and its alliances in Asia and Europe as the main threat to

their national securities. In fact, agreement between China and Russia has gone beyond their initial stated opposition to "hegemonism" and "uni-polarism," to the shared view that a "new international political and economic order must be established."^{vii} This implies that Beijing and Moscow are working together with the goal of opposing and weakening the power of the United States on a global scale.^{viii} It would not be surprising if Beijing and Moscow were covertly lobbying Karimov and other Central Asian regimes to send US forces in the region packing.

Militarily, this growing China-Russia axis is cause for alarm. In February 2001 the Russian military held war games that simulated a mock nuclear conflict between China and the US over Taiwan. According to US intelligence reports, Russian efforts to support the Chinese in the mock battle included preparations to use nuclear weapons on US forces in South Korea and Japan.^{ix} Three Russian strategic nuclear missiles were fired during the exercises from land-based mobile launchers and from a submarine.^x Later this year China and Russia plan to carry out their first-ever joint war games in which the use of strategic nuclear forces has not been ruled out. While China and Russia publicly maintain that the exercises aim to show a joint effort to combat international terrorism, US officials familiar with intelligence reports say the real target of the war games is the US.^{xi}

If China and Russia are able to draw the members of the SCO into their worldview, the US could face a truly powerful anti-American bloc covering about three-fifths of Eurasia with a population about a quarter of the world's total. The US risks losing serious influence in the region, thereby impeding US efforts to fight terrorism, secure new energy supplies, promote democracy and human rights, and establish bases capable of rapidly projecting US power in Asia.

Furthermore, if Beijing sparks a war with the US by invading Taiwan, members of the SCO would likely support the Chinese against the US. As mentioned earlier, Russia has threatened strategic nuclear involvement against the US in war games and could follow through if a conflict were to arise. At the very least Central Asia will continue to supply China with energy and deny the US access to Central Asian bases during a war over Taiwan. At the most—though unlikely—Central Asia will send troops to fight under the SCO's security clause, which asks members to consult when confronted with regional and international crises.^{xii}

Additionally, members of an increasingly anti-American SCO may oppose US initiatives globally through their voices in the United Nations. A “multi-polar” world with the China-led SCO emerging as a regional hegemon in Asia is not in the interest of the US and could significantly add to global instability.

The Future: A New World Order?

It is yet to be seen whether the Shanghai Cooperative Organization will develop into a strong security alliance similar to the Warsaw Pact or a relatively benign trading bloc like the ASEAN. What we do know is that the framework and the motivation for the former exist. Beijing especially has poured heavy resources into maintaining the SCO and is pushing others along in its efforts to develop the group into a major regional alliance. Beijing is also the most likely to push the SCO towards a stronger anti-American alignment (China has repeatedly referred to the US as its “main enemy”)^{xiii}.

Over the next decade the SCO, following Chinese leadership, will likely increase cooperation on economic, diplomatic and military matters. As the recent summit in the Kazak capital of Astana indicates, the SCO will surely expand trade and economic support among its members. Foreign policies will also likely align, as common economic and security interests draw member nations closer together. For the near future at least, any military collaboration among states will be focused on combating Islamic terrorism and separatist movements. While this seemingly harmless cooperation does not pose an immediate danger to the US, the possibility of growing anti-Americanism in the SCO is cause for concern.

How the SCO develops will largely be a consequence of how its members perceive US intentions in the region. If Russia continues to feel threatened by NATO forces in its rapidly shrinking sphere of influence and if Central Asian regimes continue to fear US support for popular revolutions, they will continue to turn eastward to a rising China that is determined to establish a “new international political and economic order.” If those fears are minimized, then the momentum for a strong anti-American alliance will be diminished.

As it stands now, the SCO faces a number of obstacles to a stronger anti-American alignment. First, the states of Central Asia do not necessarily trust Russia and China any more than they trust the United

States. Central Asian nations have benefited from the “multi-vector” approach to foreign policy, which has achieved a delicate geopolitical balance that allows the states to act freely without relying heavily on any one regional power.^{xiv} In April, Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbayev made it clear that Kazakhstan valued its independence. In his state-of-the-nation address he said:

“Today we are witnessing superpower rivalry for economic dominance in our region. We have to address correctly this global and geo-economics challenge. We have a choice between remaining the supplier of raw materials to the global markets and wait [ing] patiently for the emergence of the next imperial master or to pursue genuine economic integration of the Central Asian region. I chose the latter.”^{xv}

If Central Asia were to move decidedly away from the United States and towards the China-Russia axis, it would be abandoning a winning strategy and jeopardizing its current independence. But a false impression that the US is attempting to overthrow regimes in Central Asia has the ability to change the balance. Officials in Moscow and Astana believe that the Ukrainian revolution was “stage-managed” from abroad by the United States to install a pro-American ruler in Kiev.^{xvi} Grave concerns over US intentions to foment popular revolutions could cause the ruling regimes to rethink their multi-vector approach.

Another obstacle to a rising anti-American bloc in Eurasia is the direction of Russia’s foreign policy. Moscow is currently torn between two possible futures. On one hand, it aspires to join the Western world. On the other, it dreams of restoring its status as a great power, dominating states within its sphere of influence. If Russia chooses the former path, its foreign policy will soften as it orients itself toward possible admission into the E.U. If Russia chooses to follow the latter path, it will seek to identify itself in opposition to the West (particularly the US) much as the former Soviet Union once did. This would bring it undoubtedly closer to its eastern allies in Beijing. An empire-driven Russia will seek to expand its influence through the multilateral organizations it established since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Shanghai Cooperative Organization would be a key tool for this goal in Central Asia.

Although the SCO says it has no plans to expand in the near future, it has invited Mongolia,

Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Iran to attend SCO meetings as observer members. An expanded SCO would likely weaken the institution by making its decision-making process harder. A larger SCO would also find it harder to develop a strong anti-American orientation (Afghanistan and Pakistan both depend on vital alliances with US). A strong SCO in opposition to the US would be unlikely if the organization expands too rapidly.

While its future is not certain at this point, the SCO emerging as a powerful bloc in opposition to the US remains a distinct possibility, especially given current developments in Central Asia. As the US praises democratic revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgystan, a growing suspicion of US intentions pushes the regimes of Central Asia ever closer to a stronger alliance with China and Russia. As the US projects its power throughout the globe in places like Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, Moscow and Beijing huddle ever closer in the shared goal of a “new international political and economic order.” Washington’s recent fallout with Uzbekistan over the Andijan massacre may be the tipping point that decidedly alters the geopolitical balance in Central Asia away from the US and in favor of the growing China-Russia axis. The result could very well be a strengthened SCO that acts as a counterweight to US power on both a regional and global scale.

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Endnotes

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