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NATO & SCO in Afghanistan

Nivedita Das Kundu*

The NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) is increasingly engaged in Afghanistan. NATOôs main role in Afghanistan is to assist the Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance. NATO does this predominantly through its UN mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Since NATO took the command of ISAF in 2003, the Alliance has gradually expanded the reach of its mission, originally limited to Kabul, to cover Afghanistanôs whole territory. The number of ISAF troops has grown accordingly from the initial 5,000 to around 50.000 troops, coming from 42 countries, including all 28 NATO members.

Recently, the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) has entered into Afghanistan. The SCO consists of member states of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and observer states of India, Pakistan, Mongolia, and Iran. It is a bloc of energy producers, consumers, and transit countries, with four nuclear powers. On 27 March 2009, the SCO for the first time hosted a Moscow conference on óAfghanistanô that included representatives from NATO, the U.S., the EU and ministers from thirty-six countries. This meeting was held in one of the SCO member states of Central Asia, namely Kyrgyzstan. The summit resulted in a óSCO-Afghanistan Action Planô, which called for closer SCO involvement in Afghanistan and wide collaboration in fighting terrorism and drug trafficking in the region. SCO members and observers surround Afghanistan; hence the action plan appears to be a roadmap to eventually draw Afghanistan into the SCO fold. This poses a question if

NATO and SCO can become allies in Afghanistan or are they fated to be enemies even in Afghanistan.

The changed attitude of Russia and the Central Asian regimes created a situation, which provided an opportunity to SCO for a new geopolitical role in the region. In July 2005 (during the Astana Summit) the SCO member states called the US to set a deadline for withdrawing its military presence in the region. As a result, the US had to close down its air base in Uzbekistan in November 2005. In June 2006, the SCO summit took place against the backdrop of the crisis over Iranôs nuclear programme and both Iran and Pakistan sought full membership in the organisation. The Bishkek Summit in 2007 was important, where leaders from SCOôs full member states pledged to work more closely to develop energy resources and boost security efforts within the SCO framework. The Dushanbe summit in 2008 was held against the backdrop of the Georgian crisis and speculations about the start of a ónew cold warô between Russia and the US. Recently SCO member state Kyrgyzstan has told U.S. to withdraw its presence from the Manas Air Base, a crucial supply route for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Due to the SCO statesô geographical proximity to Afghanistan and the threats of conflict spillover, the SCO members are naturally concerned about the security meltdown in Afghanistan. As a result, it is not far-fetched to anticipate SCOôs involvement in Afghanistan and both SCO-NATO presence in Afghanistan at the same time.

As SCO, unlike NATO or Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), lacks the identity of a military bloc, till date, it did not seem to have plan for any military involvement in Afghanistan. However, now SCO might be amenable to the idea of a co-security partnership with NATO. This could begin with the security concerns related to drugs trafficking and arms smuggling.

It seems US-Russia policy in the Eurasian region is bound to be reset, but needs to see whether it is going to be more of a confrontation or cooperation? Russia and the United States will continue to bicker over the post-Soviet space. Russia which is seeking to find a new place in the global architecture has pursued an increasingly assertive foreign policy towards its near abroad states in Eurasia. Russia's new foreign policy principles were intended to send clear signals to multiple

audiences and the message to the world was that, Eurasia which mainly consists of former soviet states is a "zone of influenceò for Russia. Though Russia and the U.S. can benefit if they work together in Eurasia to address their national interests, the question will remain whether they will be involved in a zero-sum game, a win-lose game, or a win-win game? Regional countries have greater stakes in Afghanistan because of their vested security interests. The current situation in Afghanistan is a concern for India. India being an observer state in SCO has shown its willingness to work together with SCO in Afghanistan. However, there is a need to observe the Russiaï US and the NATO-SCO relations in the region which will determine the future developments of the geopolitical situation in Eurasia.

** Nivedita Das Kundu, Research Fellow, at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi-110001*

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