

Radicalism in Bangladesh: An environmental perspective

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OUR memory is still filled with the horror of the incident of 17 August 2005 that left sixty three of the sixty four districts of Bangladesh with a coordinated terrorist attack in which bombs were exploded at about four hundred places within a period of thirty minutes. This incident has been followed by the killing of two judges and, later on, several other ordinary people by the first ever suicide bombings in Bangladesh. Though the actual causalities in these incidents have been nominal in comparison to those of New York, Bali or Madrid, these have serious implications for the national life in Bangladesh, which is the fourth largest Muslim nation and also one of the very few countries in the Muslim world where institutional democracy is functional.

Numerous news articles and analyses have been published since the incident. However, no attempt has been made to examine linkages between such radicalism, especially Islamist terrorism, and fast deteriorating ecological regime of Bangladesh. In this context it might be interesting to examine whether the recent incidence of terror in Bangladesh represents a culmination of the social and economic dislocations that have been instrumented by an overwhelming ecological crisis. Specifically, how do we identify the discursive interface at which ecologically-induced vulnerability and extremist ideology get intertwined?

Ecological crisis in Bangladesh is

the combined result of climate change, natural disasters and unsustainable development interventions. While the impact of sea level rise in the South and the melting of the Himalayan snow in the North is yet to be fully felt in this low-lying country, the effects of El-Nino-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) have been causing both abnormal flooding and drought, often occurring simultaneously. The problem of climate change is also represented in the changes in the land cover, atmospheric composition, water availability and quality, climatic variability and biodiversity.

Among the natural disasters occurring annually in Bangladesh are flooding, cyclones and storm surge, erosion, landslide and earthquakes. But the teleology of environmental insecurity induced by climate change and relatively disadvantageous location of the country has been overshadowed by the impact of modernising interventions into the ecological regime of the region. Since the late nineteenth century, the process of ecological decline started through unsustainable expansion of the railway in the highly fluid deltaic landscape, insidious spread of biologically alien water hyacinth and the construction of bridges and embankments by frustrating the natural flow of the river systems. In the post-colonial period, large-scale dams, barrages, highways, multipurpose bridges, appropriation of riverbeds by locally influential people and industrialization have added new dimensions to ecological dislocations. Excessive and mechanical exploitation of

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underground water has left about seventy per cent of drinking and irrigation water contaminated by toxic arsenic, leaving about 40 million people at risk. Rapid globalization has brought about a more drastic change in the environment. The growing export markets for fish, shrimp and leather, for instance, mean depleted stocks, less biodiversity and fewer forests. A particular case in Bangladesh has been the damage of the eco-system due to accidents relating to exploitation of natural gas, which has left a large tract in northeastern Bangladesh infertile and dead of biodiversity. Thus both natural factors and man-made development interventions have contributed to large-scale ecological dislocations.

The decline in the ecological system has numerous direct and indirect consequences for agricultural production, which is the source of sustenance for more than 65 per cent of about 130 million people. Although Bangladesh has almost achieved food self-sufficiency at national level, food provision at sub-regional level remains sub-optimal. Among the visible social indicators are the

growth of unemployment (at the current rate of 30 to 35 per cent), landlessness, impoverishment, rural out-migration, malnutrition and shortage of food supply. A large proportion of day-labouring, land-poor and landless people regularly march towards expanding urban areas for alternative livelihood. But the growth of cities has been specially linked to substandard living and complicated livelihood alternatives for many. Mass movement of refugees and internal displacement of people thus create congenial conditions for social unrest and conflict, resulting in serious problem of governance. A good example of the dual impact of climate change and modernist development interventions is monga or near-famine condition in northern Bangladesh. Every year, due to drought and riverbank erosion and consequent non-availability of work, between late July and early November, a substantial proportion of rural population suffers from lack of employment and food. Among the affected people who make unholy pilgrimage to cities and towns, some live by pulling rickshaws and

some by associating themselves with socially disruptive activities. It is, therefore, no wonder that a majority of the listed terrorists, including the so-called Bangla Bhai, come from this monga-prone area.

Assuming that ecological dislocations caused by climate change and unsustainable development interventions tend to undo the fabric of social life, we should deal with this central query: how do we map the ideo-psychological space at which the environmentally-fuelled existential reality contributes specifically to the emergence and growth of Islamist extremism? In order to seek answers to this question, we need to engage three interrelated issues. First, in what ways the decline in the environment lead to ecologically unequal exchange in the society which acts as catalyst for difference between those who suffer from the impact of this decline and those who do not. The relevant question would be whether the idea of establishing a Sharia-based statecraft originates against the backdrop of a global economic-cultural homogenization that connects a section of the society to the 'global village' at the expense of the rest who remain periphe-

ralised?

The second issue relates to the apparent 'failure' of the apparatus, agencies and programs of the state in addressing this difference. In particular, it is worth examining the terrorist motivation of targeting the judicial system. The general interpretation is that the extremists, by violating the judiciary, want to establish Shariah at the state level. But it is also a fact that approximately 800,000 land-related cases, often triggered by land erosion and act of grabbing of newly formed alluvial lands by politically influential people, are pending in the courts of Bangladesh. There are many cases, which have been going on for the past 35 years or more. One case in the southern district of Khulna was adjourned for 1,266 times! In this context, we need to focus on the institutional limitations of the legislative, judicial and administrative bodies in dealing with environmentally-induced problems that affect the delivery of justice.

The third issue is on the institutional points at which the sense of material vulnerability and resultant injustice are shaped into extremist ideology. One way to look

at the problem is to examine the role of madrasa or traditional Islamic schools which house about 3.5 million teachers and students. Most of these madrasas offer nominal tuition fees and often lodging and food and thus provide excellent opportunities for poverty-stricken parents to enroll their children in these institutions where the dual needs of education and sustenance are met. There are reasons to believe that madrasas can possibly be the place where a sense of difference between the privileged and the deprived, and that of the state's weakness to address this difference, is sharpened. But this claim needs to be examined in the light of internal political dynamics of Bangladesh. Whereas in the Middle East terrorist attacks are made on foreign soldiers and the political systems, which are largely non-democratic, the picture is relatively different in Bangladesh where parliamentary democracy is in place for the past fifteen years. Over these years, moderate and 'constitutional' Islamist polity has gradually made its mark, which has been reflected in the fact that three major Islamic political parties form the current ruling coalition. It is in this context of the rise of 'constitutional' Islamism within the mainframe of power politics that the violent claim for 'Islamization of the state' by the terrorists represents a rare contradiction within the Islamist polity of Bangladesh. It is, therefore, also important to examine how do the terrorists, allegedly recruited from the madrasas, define their ideological boundaries in relation to the

constitution-bound Islam that is already, in a limited way, capable of stimulating 'Islamisation' in the state level?

Environmental debates, since its emergence, have been mainly concerned with the looming ecological crisis on the earth, water regime and biosphere and with the ways to meet such crises. Though the idea of human well being has been attached by default to this environmental discourse, human response to and his/her temporal reading of the various forms of ecological problems have not been adequately documented. Man's place and voice have been minimised in this discourse not because it has tended not to be branded anthropocentric, but because it has been largely informed by an approach that equates man's well being with scientific categorization of nature and its crisis in view of achieving 'sustainable development'. This has led to the emergence of global scientific committees and policy bodies and international NGOs, which in their turn have often failed to appreciate the micro-mechanism of environmental problems that demands local cultural and social dynamics. As a result, many of the global goals of sustainable and equitable development have not been successfully met at the ground level. It is in this context it is absolutely necessary that policy makers reposition ecological issues in a broader social and cultural framework.

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North East India: A volatile tinderbox

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INDIA'S northeast is a geopolitically strategic region. It comprises eight states -- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Sikkim -- and spread over a 262,179 square kilometer. The eight states contain a total population of 39 million. India's northeast connects with five countries-Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, China and Nepal-by a 4,500 kilometer international border; the region, however, connects to India only through a narrow and tenuous land corridor measuring merely 22 kilometers (14 miles).

A fact that exposes mainland India's links with the region is the thriving militancy in most of the northeast states. The demands of the different militant groups range from autonomy within the provisions of the Indian constitution to outright secession. Such militant movements started early with India's independence in 1947. At one point, more than 120 militant groups operated in India's northeast. In recent years, the Indian government has had some success in achieving stability in the region, using tactics from negotiations to military operations to root out militants. Nevertheless, the region remains a potential tinderbox.

Militants in India's northeast once enjoyed vast popular support since they in their formative years, voiced genuine grievances of the people such as poor governance, alienation, lack of development and an apathetic attitude from the central government in New Delhi; in recent years, however, this influence has been reduced. Nevertheless, in most of the states in the northeast, anti-government militants often indulge in successful strikes against government interests.

Nagaland, then part of the larger

state of Assam, was the first to experience militancy. Long before the British left India, Nagas considered independent and petitioned the British to declare them as an independent country. After being snubbed by both the British and the new regime in New Delhi, Nagas, under the leadership of the Naga National Council (N.N.C.), headed by A.Z. Phizo, declared independence. In his declaration, Phizo argued that in a plebiscite held in Nagaland in May 1951, more than 99 percent of voters favored independence.

In Mizoram, which was a part of the state of Assam before it was granted statehood in 1987, experienced militancy after the Union government failed to respond positively to its demand for assistance during the massive "Mautam famine." The Mizo National Front (M.N.F.), led by the legendary leader Laldenga, launched the movement on February 28, 1966 and demanded independence for Mizoram.

In Tripura, the smallest of the northeastern states, migration of Hindus from the British-ruled East Bengal, which subsequently became East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, is said to have been responsible for reducing the indigenous tribal people in the state to minority status; this development sparked a violent backlash among the indigenous people. Starting in 1970, militant groups sprang up in the state demanding the restoration of the tribal rights from the Bengali population, who are accused of dominating the political and economic affairs of Tripura state.

A movement that started demanding the deportation of the illegal migrants also witnessed the birth of the militant outfit the United Liberation Front of Asom (U.L.F.A.) in 1979. Following U.L.F.A.'s example, a number of militant groups, each claiming to represent the aspirations of

different tribal communities in the state, formed. Prominent among these groups are the Bodo Liberation Tigers, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (N.D.F.B.), the United People's Democratic Solidarity (U.P.D.S.) and the Dima Halim Daogah.

In the state of Manipur, militancy originated in protest against the forcible merger of the former Manipur Kingdom with India. In 1964, the United National Liberation Front formed with an objective of ending the discrimination against Manipur, which was accorded statehood only in 1972 nearly 23 years after its merger.

Analysts indicate that most of the militant outfits in the region have been quick to transform themselves into purely terrorist entities, lacking of their original objectives and ideology. Militant groups in certain states also have clashed among themselves.

With small arms being easily available in the region and the neighboring countries, capabilities of even relatively smaller groups to challenge state authority have dramatically grown over the years. As a result, militant groups have successfully transformed themselves into huge abduction and extortion rackets collecting regular contributions from the public, government servants and the business houses. With little protection available from the state government, people have often found it convenient to bribe the militant groups for peace, rather than risk death and abduction.

To contain security force operations using the army, state police forces and the paramilitary forces remain the preferred mode of official response to contain militancy. A strong military presence has been the feature of all the militancy-affected states in the region. The Union government, as a matter of policy, reimburses security-related expenditure incurred by the states. The ratio of

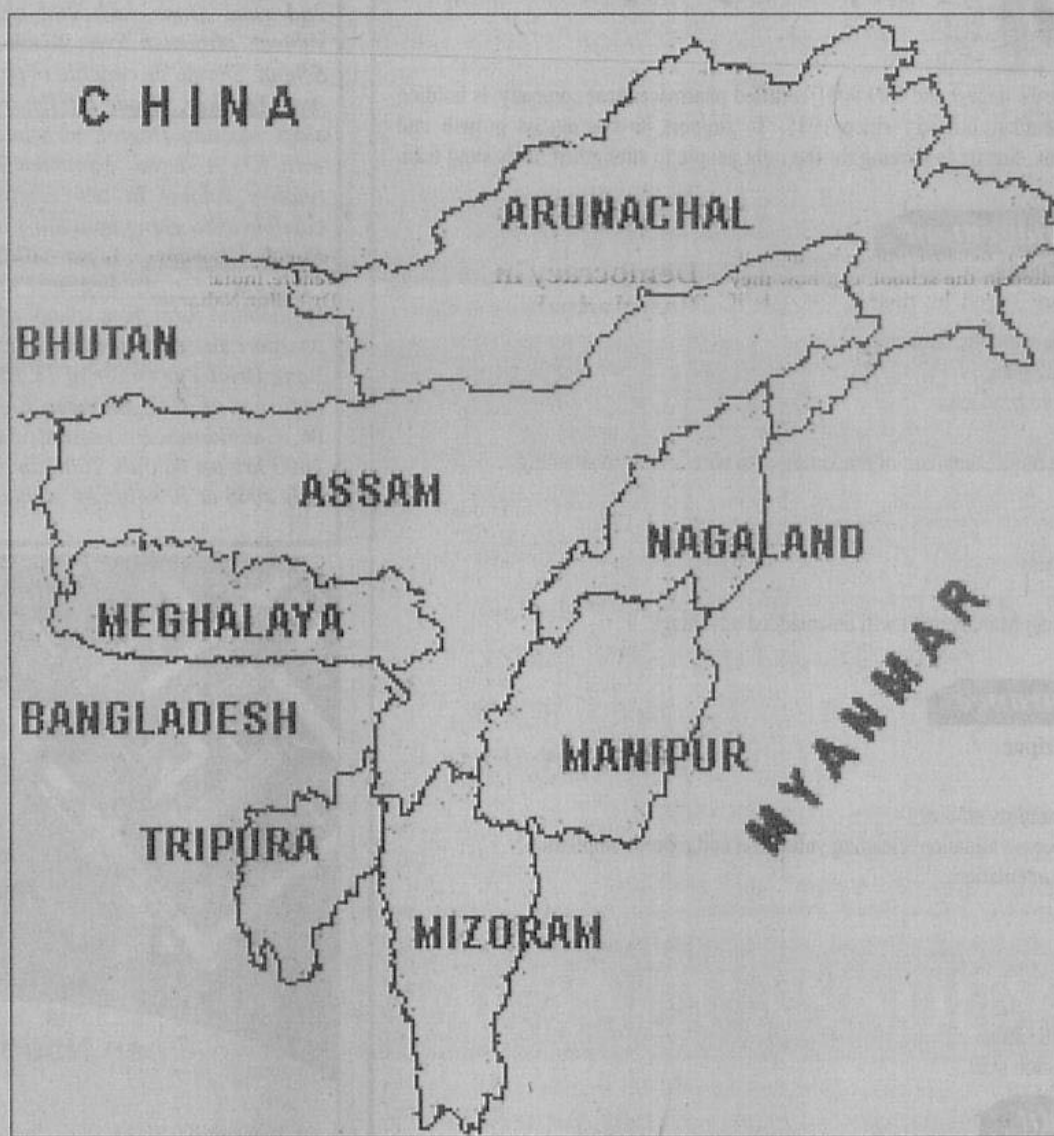
policemen per 10,000 people is far above the national average.

Military operations in Mizoram, where the army reportedly launched air strikes to neutralize the M.N.F. cadres, resulted in several fatalities and displacement among the civilian population. Military operations in Nagaland, too, resulted in civilian fatalities and large-scale displacement. In Assam, in the beginning of the 1990s, two military operations, Operation Rhino and Operation Bajrang, were launched against U.L.F.A. militants. However, such operations have not been able to post conclusive gains against militancy in any of the states. In states like Manipur, militants have been able to carve out vast stretches of "liberated zones" where only their laws and dictates hold sway.

Military operations have achieved only limited results; it is the dialogue for peace with the militant outfits that brought some order to the northeastern region. Dialogue with the M.N.F. remains the only example of the culmination of a successful peace process that ended militancy in Mizoram in 1986. Experiences such as the Mizo Peace Accord, however, have not been replicated elsewhere in the region.

Other peace deals such as the Shillong Accord in 1975 with the N.N.C. in Nagaland, the 1988 agreement with the Tripura National Volunteers in Tripura, the Bodoland Autonomous Council agreement of 1993 with the Bodo militants in Assam have all fallen through as new factions, dissatisfied with the terms of the agreement, have resumed hostilities under new leaderships. At present, the Union government has ongoing ceasefire agreements with six militant groups in different states.

Whereas ceasefire agreements with different groups have led to a reduction in the militancy-related fatalities in their respective states, the Union government has not been able to carve out a road map toward



a situation of permanent agreement. In many cases, the process of dialogue is yet to formally start with the outfits. Militant groups, on the other hand, have taken advantage of the protracted

peace processes and continued with their activities such as extortion and abduction with impunity. In Nagaland, fratricidal clashes between militant groups have remained a major issue of

concern. In Assam, even after its moves for peace, U.L.F.A. continues to indulge in sporadic acts of violence.

No estimates exist regarding the fatalities in militancy-related

violence during the pre-1992 period in the northeast. According to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, between 1992 and 2005 over 15,600 fatalities have been reported from each of these states, though the actual number is believed to be much more. Civilians account for more than 50 percent of the total fatalities.

While the government's military options have achieved only minimal results, lack of development continues to alienate the people of the region further from the mainstream. Achievements by a separate ministry created by the Indian government for the development of the region remain minimal. With the current trend, the region is expected to remain volatile for the future.

Although most militant outfits have originated within their respective states and have operated with relative ease in their home-lands, the Indian government has accused Bangladesh of promoting insurgency in the region. Bangladeshi authorities have refuted Indian claims.

It may be mentioned, the insurgents use the tactic of "hit and run". The contours bordering North East India is a safe heaven and offers an ideal sanctuary for the north east Indian insurgents as it had the Shanti Bahini insurgent for hit and run operation.

Recently, a group of insurgent, supposedly from Mizoram, was gunned down in the inaccessible hills of Rangamati. The raid was carried by BDR and RAB who also hauled a cache of huge quantity of sophisticated arms and ammunition.

Therefore, it is not fair to accuse Bangladesh of promoting insurgency in north east India. Instead of accusing, what India should do is to eliminate the causes in all hue and shades that lead to insurgency.

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Abu Musab Al - Zarqawi: Iraq upshot

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Abu Musab Al - Zarqawi, the Jordanian supreme of Al - Qaeda in Iraq was killed by an air strike on June 7, 2006. The most wanted man in Iraq, carrying a \$25 million bounty was hailed for spiraling violence in Iraq. With reports surfacing about him being the architect of numerous bombings, kidnappings and beheadings in Iraq, analysts are debating the prospects of peace in Iraq following his death. The fact that sectarian violence had emerged prominently due to Zarqawi's Jihad, Iraq is positive that his death would reduce insurgency. However, the hostility amongst Shias and Sunnis was rife early on, since their beliefs collided after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Zarqawi was only a proponent of one the sects and his death is not likely to ease Iraq's woe.

While one has to acknowledge America's strategic success, it's imperative to note that a change in leadership could bring about a change in strategy that the insurgents or Al - Qaeda would pursue in Iraq in the coming days. In the recent past there were reports of a Zarqawi - Al Qaeda divide as a result of Zarqawi's

violence against the Shias. Zarqawi was also accused of diluting Al - Qaeda's principle anti United States line by following an independent agenda of attacking the Shias, which affected Al - Qaeda's coordination with the Shia entities. While his replacement could be a commander who would adhere to Qaeda's mission of attacking the US and its supported regimes, rather than target fellow Muslims, there is no doubt Zarqawi gave Al - Qaeda a new connotation in Iraq. Furthermore, considering Al - Qaeda as more of a movement than an hierarchical corporate body, its not going to be easy for Bin Laden to fill the power vacuum. Although Abu Hamza al-Muhajer has been named as the new leader, its yet to be seen if he can prove to be an equally viable force as Zarqawi.

In the past, the response to the death of crucial commanders has been varied. Khattab's death was a blow to the Chechen rebels, nevertheless the dissension continues. Israel is an another paradigm where continued efforts to decapitate the Hamas or the Hezbollah have so far been thwarted. Once a movement gains initial momentum, there will be no dearth of young leaders ready to

don the mantle. In Zarqawi's case, his death might only change the tactics with insurgents attacking the security forces rather than targeting civilians. This again highlights the main issue of sectarian divisions between the Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish people, which is the real conundrum in Iraq that must be resolved for the nation to achieve freedom and democracy.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki appointed his ministers of interior, defense and national security hours after Zarqawi's death. By doing this al-Maliki may have demonstrated his preference for someone who is hard on security, but to steer his country away from the threat of a civil war between the Shia and the Sunni Muslims will prove to be an Herculean task. Violence in Baghdad is unfolding quickly with hundreds being killed each week, and the crack between the two communities is only becoming wider. Zarqawi's death might only bring in a brief solace, but definitely not an end to the insurgency.

Parallels can be drawn to Saddam's capture wherein such glorious moments fade quickly and violence continues again in a

protracted war. The need in Iraq is an effective government backed by postwar or exit policies by the Bush administration. Zarqawi's group represented only a small percentage of the insurgency, which means Iraq has to look beyond the celebrations of his death and work on incorporating of the Sunni population into the political process. Washington, on the other hand, knows well that its war on terror is far from being over. It might only give Bush, the much-required boost in the opinion polls. Even as the question of bringing the troops home remains unanswered, Washington is holding on to its political victory as well as its attempt to promote democracy in Iraq.

An escalation in violence as a direct response to Zarqawi's death can also be ruled out for the reason that these attacks are usually well planned in advance. On the other hand the road to peace in Iraq depends on the overall resilience of the insurgency in Iraq and the ability of the Iraqi government to undermine this resilience. Until then one can speculate about who gets the \$25 million.

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RUKMANI GUPTA

THE recently concluded Shanghai summit provides some reason to suggest that fears regarding the impact of Shanghai Cooperation organisation (SCO) on NATO generally and the US in particular are plausible, though it has been repeatedly emphasised by member states that the SCO does not target any particular country or regional body. The most important aspect of the SCO summit was the participation of Iran as an observer state. Russia and China have been vocal in their support for resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis through dialogue and have consistently opposed any imposition of UNSC sanctions against Iran. Iran's participation was thus a clear political statement assuring it of continued support in future. The SCO may also evolve a common position on the Iran issue, which will inevitably be shaped by its two prominent members. This poses a serious setback for the US in bringing international pressure to bear upon Iran.

Its unease with the SCO could also be attributed to the perceived

threat from SCO members to US energy interests. During his visit to Moscow in April 2006, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, Mohammadi, spoke of coordinating Russian and Iranian energy production and the creation of a "gas-and-oil arc". This scenario could emerge if Iran gains permanent membership of the SCO. Iran's involvement in SCO's energy projects would also enable it to bypass US sanctions that limit its access to technology.

American foreign policy in Central Asia, geared towards securing access to oil and gas from the region, has not been very successful. It hopes to expand physical control over Kazakhstan oil reserves have not borne fruit at a time when the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has taken over PetroKazakhstan for \$4.2 billion. An oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to China became functional in May 2006. A subsidiary of CNPC has also won the rights for oil and gas exploration in Uzbekistan and plans to spend \$210 million over the next five years. Trans-continental pipelines for oil and gas from Russia to China are in the process of construction. An energy grid seems to be emerging in the region with

formal SCO support, which hopes for greater "cooperation in the oil sector", but could well ensure American exclusion.

As SCO structures in the region are strengthening there appears to be a simultaneous decline in the American strategic presence. The US lost its Karshi-Khanabad base in Uzbekistan late last year, and the future of the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan is uncertain as the Kyrgyz have demanded a hundred per cent increase in rent for continued lease of the base. SCO statements regarding the need to realise "democracy in international relations" echo what Iran has been saying over the last few months about "making the world more fair". The implications of such statements are anyone's guess. It is intriguing that the US thought it prudent to apply for observer status (a request that was refused last June) even though it has maintained a studied nonchalance towards the activities of the SCO. The fact remains that the SCO has become increasingly vocal on strategic and political issues in the region. In the past it has called for NATO withdrawal from Central Asia and, more recently, accused the US of

"double standards" in the fight against terror, while asking for the extradition to China of five ethnic Uyghurs released from the US military prison in Guantanamo Bay. As the US battles to win its war on terror and keep its allies in Central Asia, the extension of full membership to the present observer states of SCO would lead to encirclement of NATO in Afghanistan, seriously curtailing NATO activities.

It is obvious that the SCO presents China and Russia with the opportunity to strengthen their economic and strategic ties in Central Asia, while undermining the US presence in the region. At the same time however, the care that both Russia and China have taken to reassure the US about their intentions, makes it clear that neither country is willing to risk open hostilities with the United States. Nonetheless, the expansion of SCO membership could perceptibly alter the balance of power in the region, and is thus a situation that merits close observation.

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