

## SHANGHAI SUMMIT

## China and Russia counterweigh US influence in Eurasia

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SHANGHAI Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is an extension of "Shanghai Five", set up in 1996 comprising of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Its objective was to resolve border disputes and terrorism. In June 2001 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was established with the inclusion of Uzbekistan. Its member states take up 60 percent of Eurasia and a quarter of the world's population.

The SCO's mandate appears to be a firewall to the growing US influence in the Middle East, Central Asia and Eurasia. The fifth summit of the SCO held on June 15, where Russia and China sought to strengthen the SCO as a counterweight to Washington and a means to assert their strategic and economic interests.

Moscow and Beijing formed the SCO to counter US influence in resource rich and strategically sensitive Central Asia and justify the suppression of separatist movements in Chechnya and China's Xinjiang province. Washington has exploited its "war on terrorism" to occupy Afghanistan, establish US military bases in Central Asia, subjugate Iraq and menace Iran.

The SCO summit took place in the backdrop of the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Washington in April this year and public rumpus between US Vice President Dick Cheney and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Last month US Vice President Cheney used a visit to former Soviet republics to accuse Russia of using energy as a tool of "intimidation and blackmail," prodding a thinly obscure attack by Putin on the predatory character of US policies and a call for increased Russian defence spending.

The latest summit made clear that Russia and China have ambitious plans to wield a broader regional influence, using China's economic power and the large oil and gas reserves in Russia and Central Asia as levers. Iran, which has the second largest reserves of gas and fourth largest reserves of oil, would only add to the SCO's energy clout. Chinese officials described the summit as the most important diplomatic event of the year.

Chinese and Russian leaders welcomed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad even as the Bush administration was pushing for tough UN measures against Tehran

over its alleged nuclear weapons programs. Iran, along with India, Pakistan, and Mongolia attended as observer. Afghanistan was invited as a "guest".

Ahmadinejad appealed for mutual political and military support. He urged the SCO to become a strong institution able to "block threats and unlawful strong-armed interference from various countries. Russia and

Interestingly, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who is completely reliant on Washington for financial and military support, attended the summit and is seeking closer ties to the Shanghai grouping. Before leaving for China, he declared that Afghanistan "belongs to the region where SCO also lies. Afghanistan has no other ways, and can't be outside the region." After the summit, he

natural gas. On the other hand, China, currently the world's second largest oil importer, has huge and growing demands for energy.

SCO secretary-general Zhang Deguang said the organisation would not become a military alliance. He told RIA Novosti, the organisation, "Is not an eastern equivalent of NATO. It will never become a military grouping because its charter envisages no

states that would preclude member states from engaging in activities that undermine the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of others. Such a treaty could be used to block Washington's activities aimed at fomenting so-called colour revolutions to install pro-US regimes in Central Asia.

It is, however, the SCO's economic weapons that immediately concern Washington. The Bush administration has been seeking to forge a close strategic and economic alliance with India, as part of its broader plans to contain China. The prospect of obtaining guaranteed energy supplies as part of the SCO is also attractive to New Delhi, which has now attended consecutive summits as an observer.

Not surprisingly, the SCO summit provoked disquiet in Washington. In a comment on June 15, the Wall Street Journal declared that the group's "aggressive anti-American bent and growing political clout" was "cause for concern". The article's main preoccupation was not with the SCO's potential as a military threat. It noted that an Eastern version of NATO was feasible, but would take time.

"It's the SCO's growing political weight that currently worries us. The grouping clearly has grand pretensions. Russian President Vladimir Putin dubbed it and influential regional organisation' in an article this week. The United Nations inaugurated an SCO secretariat in 2004, and SCO representatives have reached out to the [European] OSCE and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations," the newspaper stated.

The article went on to question why "democratic" countries would join this "authoritarian" club. "Beyond energy interests - which admittedly are large - it's hard to see why New Delhi or Kabul would itch for closer political ties to the SCO, a grouping that, for instance, Belarussian dictator Alexander Lukashenko is itching to join." In a parting warning shot to New Delhi, it added: "That's one more point for the US Congress to examine as it considers the recently negotiated US-India nuclear deal."

The tones of the comment make clear that the US ruling class will not sit by and watch the growth of a Russian-Chinese bloc on the Eurasian, but will respond aggressively to break it up.

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China, however, are seeking to avoid an open confrontation with the US over Iran.

The US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld voiced Washington's displeasure at these developments of the Shanghai summit, declaring that the SCO should not have invited "one of the leading terrorist nations in the world" to a summit about fighting terrorism.

travelled to Beijing and signed a "friendship" treaty with China to cooperate on the "war on terror".

At the summit, Russian President Putin proposed the formation of "an SCO energy club," cutting directly across US plans for dominance in the Middle East and Central Asia. He noted that SCO members and observers together hold over one fifth of the world's oil reserves and half its

such status." Putin also told journalists there was no comparison between the SCO and the former Soviet-led Warsaw bloc during the Cold War. Nevertheless, Russia and China support closer military and political, as well as economic, cooperation.

Chinese President Hu proposed negotiations toward a non-aggression treaty among the SCO

## Taliban's comeback in Afghanistan

ANIL KAMBOJ

THE Taliban is making a comeback in Afghanistan, increasing its attacks on US forces and on the Afghanistan government operations. After more than 100 persons were killed in two days of fighting between the Taliban fighters and the coalition forces in the southern Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai blamed Pakistan for destabilising his country through the Taliban. Doubts are turning into fact, that the Taliban is staging a comeback in Afghanistan. The hardliners in Pakistan have been instigating the sentiments of Taliban fighters and asking them to fight against Western forces that carried out attacks in Iraq.

Musa Qala in Southern Province of Helmand was the epicentre of fierce combat on 17-18 May since the Taliban's ouster by US-led forces in 2001 and raised new fears about deteriorating security in south Afghanistan. Religious hardliners in Pakistan were sending recruits from madarssas to fight the holy war in Afghanistan, where vast swathes of territory are ruled by the tribes. In madarssas, these young recruits are being told to burn schools and clinics. Some of the clinics and hospitals where Indian doctors are working have already received threats asking them to leave. The militants have destroyed about 150 schools, most of them newly constructed. They say that these schools are non-Islamic and are symbols of western intervention in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban's rule, education was restricted to the teaching of Quran and girls could not go to school.

The Taliban is on the offensive against all that is perceived to be pro-US and pro-Karzai elements, like UN employees, Indian workers and Muslims who refuse to conform to its religious teachings. These young men affiliated with or influenced by the Taliban are linked to Afghan warlords who seek to topple the government of President Karzai.

The Afghan President has gone to the extent of accusing Pakistan of arming these insurgents with weapons and logistics, imparting training and sending them into southern Afghanistan. Karzai even accused the Taliban leadership of coordinating its campaign from western Pakistani city of Quetta. It is even alleged that the Taliban is using Pakistan as its headquarters for launching its offensive on western forces. However, it has been denied by Pakistan. They have asked the allied forces to provide actionable intelligence so that they can take necessary action. The question is: Does Pakistan not know what is happening in their territory?

A large number of Taliban fighters had crossed from Afghanistan into Pakistan's tribal areas after the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001. Taliban leaders were living

comfortably in border towns of Quetta and Peshawar and remained in touch with each other through satellite telephones. The top leaders have never been arrested.

NATO is preparing to assume command of southern Afghanistan from the US on 31 July 2006. With the knowledge that NATO may take on more 'peacekeeping' role than offensive operations, the Taliban appear to be moving their insurgency into a new phase, flooding the rural areas of the south with weapons and men. This has given a boost to the insurgents and increased fears in the minds of Afghans.

Large Taliban groups have been seen moving in Zabul, Ghazni, Paktika, Uruzgan, Helmand and Kandahar provinces. They have been intimidating villagers and ambushing vehicles. They have also increased ambushes on Kabul-Kandahar highway and are trying to dominate that road. Kandahar has suffered the worst upheaval, much of it apparently aimed at unbalancing the NATO mission before it can settle down in southern Afghanistan. NATO is planning to increase its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to about 1,600 soldiers in 2006. These troops would probably be dispatched to southern and southwest provinces of Afghanistan.

There have been a string of suicide attacks and roadside bomb blasts. The forces are vulnerable to suicide bombs, which has a severe psychological impact. Afghans believe that suicide is a cowardly act, but the Taliban believes otherwise. Earlier, it was believed that those who had carried out suicide attacks in Afghanistan were all foreigners, but recently such bombers were found to be both Afghan and Taliban.

The probable reasons why Pakistan may have instigated the Taliban to go on the offensive in Afghanistan are as follows: First, Taliban does not want Afghanistan to develop and would like it to remain under its grip; secondly, Pakistan is sensitive to India's presence in Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sherif, Herat and Jalalabad - where India has opened its consulates; thirdly, Pakistan may not like India to develop an alternate route to Central Asia through Iran-Afghanistan; and fourthly, to keep the Taliban occupied as otherwise they could pose problems for President Musharraf. He had recently acknowledged that "Taliban culture" was spreading in northwest province and that the Taliban was involved in spreading extremism in tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. Karzai and the NATO forces need to urgently develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with this Taliban resurgence if peace is to come to the country.

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## Secularism in India

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SECULARISM in India has very different meaning and implications. India is a country where religion is very central to the life of people. India's age-old philosophy as expounded in Hindu scriptures called Upanishad is sarva dharma samabhava, which means equal respect for all religions. The reason behind this approach is the fact that India has never been a mono-religious country. Even before the Aryan invasion India was not a mono-religious country.

There existed before Aryan invasion numerous tribal cults from north-western India to Kanya Kumari most of whom happened to be Dravidians. Aryans brought new religion based on Vedas and Brahmins dominated intellectual life of north India.

Christianity and Islam added more religious traditions to existing Indian traditions. Thus it would be correct to say that India is bewilderingly diverse country in every respect - religious, cultural, ethnic and caste.

India is one country where caste rigidity and concept of untouchability evolved and still plays a major role in religious, social and cultural matters. Caste dynamics in Indian life, even in Christian and Islamic societies, plays larger than life role. Since most of the conversions to Christianity and Islam took place from lower caste Hindus, these two world religions also developed caste structure. There are lower caste churches and mosques in several places.

Under feudal system there was no competition between different religious traditions as authority resided in sword and generally there were no inter-religious tensions among the people of different religions. They co-existed in peace and harmony though at times inter-religious controversies

did arise. However, there never took place bloodshed in the name of religion.

There was also tradition of tolerance between religions due to state policies of Ashoka and Akbar. Also, India had Sufi and Bhakti traditions in Islam and Hinduism respectively. The poorer and lower caste Hindus and Muslims were greatly influenced by these traditions.

Differences between Hindu and Muslim elite began to emerge for various reasons - socio-cultural, economic and political. The British rulers adopted the policy of divide and rule, distorted medieval Indian history to make Muslim rulers appear as tyrants to the Hindu elite. Also there developed economic and political competition between Hindu and Muslim elite leading to communal tensions. The Muslim ruling elite resisted new secular education system and also could not take to commerce and industry. The orthodox Ulama, however, vehemently opposed modern secular education and declared Syed Ahmad Khan as kafir (unbeliever) as he was supporting modern secular education.

Initially Hindu and Muslim elite cooperated with each other and Syed Ahmad Khan always emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity but the competitive nature of political and economic power drove wedge between the two elites and communal tensions began to emerge. When Indian National Congress was formed in 1885, it adopted secularism as its anchor sheet in view of the multi-religious nature of Indian society.

India could not head towards Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) as India was not merely a Hindu country. Muslim elite felt less secure and they hitched their wagon with the British rulers. The Indian National Congress adopted secularism, not as this worldly philosophy but more as a political arrangement between different



religious communities. As power-sharing arrangement could not be satisfactorily worked out between the Hindu and Muslim elite the country was divided into two independent states of India and Pakistan, Muslim majority areas of North-West going to Pakistan.

After independence and partition a large body of Muslims were left in India and hence the leaders like Gandhi and Nehru preferred to keep India secular in the sense that Indian state will have no religion though people of India will be free both in individual

and corporate sense to follow any religion of their birth or adoption. Thus India remained politically secular but otherwise its people continued to be deeply religious.

In India, right from the British period, the main contradiction was not between the religious and the secular but between the secular and the communal. In the western world the main struggle was between the church and the state and the church and civil society, but in India neither Hinduism nor Islam had any church-like structure and hence there never

was any such struggle between secular and religious power structure.

The main struggle was between secularism and communalism. The communal forces from among Hindus and Muslims mainly fought for share in power though they used their respective religions for their struggle for power.

Even after partition communal problems did not die. The RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), which is the mainspring of the Hindu right remained in existence and at its instance a new

political outfit, which was communal in nature came into existence called Jan Sangh. In independent India the Jan Sangh was the mainspring of the communal problem and it kept on denouncing secularism as a western concept alien to the Indian ethos.

Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, was a great champion of secularism and secular politics. Theoretically speaking the Congress Party was also committed to secularism. However, the Congress Party

consisted of several members and leaders whose secularism was in doubt. Secularism in India, as pointed out before, meant equal respect for all religions and cultures and non-interference of religion in the government affairs. Similarly all citizens of India irrespective of ones religion, caste or gender have right to vote. According to them there should be Hindu Rashtra (Hindu Nation) in India and Muslims and Sikhs should be secondary citizens without any political right.

Since the BJP is a political party it cannot say so openly and publicly. It also describes the Congress and other secular parties as indulging in 'pseudo-secularism.'

The RSS and BJP, also known as the Sangh Parivar, not only reject secularism but provoke violence against minorities. Since independence several major communal riots have taken place in India. The first such riot took place in Jabalpur in Central India and last major riot took place in Gujarat in 2002 in which more than 2000 Muslims were killed and several women were raped. The BJP was directly involved in high pitch propaganda against the historic mosque called Babri Mosque and ultimately demolished it claiming it to be a birth-place of Lord Ram.

## SECULAR AND UNSECULAR PEOPLE

Now question arises how many Indian people are secular and how many unsecular? On the contrary, in the Indian context what it means is how many people are against people of minority religions like Islam and Christianity and how many people respect them.

In fact in India an overwhelming majority of people are religious but tolerant and respect other religions and are thus 'secular' in the Indian context. Even Sufis and Bhakti saints are considered quite secular

in that sense. India has remained secular and democratic for its entire post-independence period (more than 58 years).

There is no doubt India has witnessed much communal violence but only due to involvement of RSS and BJP and occasionally the Congress in some places. Communal forces are actively working spreading communal poison round the year whereas secular forces become active only after communal violence and once peace is established they become nonchalant. It is their nonchalance which benefits communal forces.

The communal forces thus came to power through false propaganda but were exposed during their five-year rule and were voted out of power, as they were perceived to be behind communal carnage in Gujarat in 2002. This confession on the part of ex-Prime Minister of BJP itself clearly establishes that people of India are by and large secular and do not like killing of others just because they are not Hindus. The BJP is today being deserted by its former allies as they realised that the people of India does not approve association with communal dispensation.

Tolerance in India among people of all religions is widely prevalent. As the ancient Hindu doctrine leads to inclusiveness and peaceful coexistence so does the Sufi doctrine. Sufism left deep influence on Hindu masses as much as on Muslim masses.

Thus the real spirit of secularism in India is all inclusiveness, religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence. However, it is politics, and not religion, which proved to be divisive. In a multi-religious society, if politics is not based on issues but on identities, it can prove highly divisive. The medieval society in India was thus more religiously tolerant as it was non-competitive.

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