

2000-07-17

# Shanghai forum calls for institutionalized efforts against terrorism, extremism and crime

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**BEHIND THE BREAKING NEWS**  
**Volume 2, Number 2 (July 17, 2000)**

**Shanghai Forum Calls for Institutionalized Efforts  
against Terrorism, Extremism and Crime**

By Najam Abbas

The declaration issued following the Shanghai-5 summit in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe on 5 July indicates a change in focus from border issues to an institutionalized struggle against menaces which states cannot tackle individually. The "Shanghai Five" -- the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and China -- vowed to co-operate more closely to deal with the threats they perceive to their security: religious extremism, separatism, international terrorism and drug trafficking.

The state media in Russia and Central Asia habitually claim that all these menaces are interlinked. The Shanghai-5's loud denunciations of these partially genuine but largely exaggerated threats are meant to justify their (present and future) oppressive policies against domestic political opponents. With the participation of all the Central Asian states except -- notably -- Turkmenistan, it appears as if, under the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Central Asian states may choose to remain under Moscow's security umbrella and shift the region's balance of security further in Russia's favor.

The summit participants devoted most of their energies to the acceptance of existing Russian and Chinese policies. By all accounts, Russia successfully used the Shanghai-5 to gain the endorsement of its Central Asian allies and China for its heavy-handed policy in Chechnya (justified as countering "terrorism") as well as to neutralize American influence in the region. In the resultant Dushanbe Declaration, the signatories opposed "intervention into the internal affairs of other

states, including under the pretext of humanitarian intervention' and 'human rights protection'," apparent references to the US campaign in Kosovo last year and Western criticism of Russia's and China's human rights records.

The declaration attempts to cater to the diverse interests of its participants. While Russia seeks acceptance of its policy in Chechnya, China is anxious to stop separatists in its western province of Xinjiang who are gaining support from fellow Muslims in Central Asia. Thus, the declaration backed both Russia's actions in Chechnya, and China's policies in Xinjiang.

For their part, the Central Asian leaders blamed Taliban-ruled Afghanistan -- which shares a 2,000-km border with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan -- for the spread of religious extremism, weapons and drugs across their territory. Indeed, the bogeyman of Islamic extremism was brought out time and again. Putin pushed for a united front against the mutually perceived danger of Islamic extremists, alleging that they support the Chechens against Russia and provide opposition elements in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with financial assistance and training facilities on Afghan territory. These claims enjoy popular currency in the Russian and Central Asia media, despite a shortage of any concrete and convincing evidence.

The group expressed deep concern about "the situation in Afghanistan, which threatened regional and international security." The Dushanbe authorities are especially sensitive to the drawn-out crisis in neighboring Afghanistan given the fragile nature of their own country's peace agreement. Tajikistan's official media has referred to the Shanghai-5 forum as a "vital mechanism for ensuring stability in the region."

In practical terms, however, the forum had little to show by way of proposed solutions to the situation. Whereas in May Sergei Yastrezhembzsky revealed that Russia was considering bombing targets in Afghanistan, the recent line from

Moscow has been comparatively mild. On the eve of the summit Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said that Central Asia suffered as a result of threats "arising from the territory of Afghanistan...." "We should also think about how to ensure our (mutual) security ...," he added. Russian representatives clearly moderated their approach, probably taking heed of the concerns of China and the Central Asian states which would bear the brunt of any Taliban reprisals.

For his part, PRC Chairman Jiang Zemin told journalists in Dushanbe that "China believes that use of force will not help settle the Afghan problem." He said that "the Afghan problem must be settled by the Afghan people themselves by means of peace talks and without any external interference." "The conflicting Afghan sides must proceed from national and state interests, must stop the bloodshed and must restore national peace by forming a coalition government, acceptable to all the sides concerned," he stressed.

President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, attending the summit for the first time, albeit as an observer, proposed that the forum declare Central Asia a nuclear-free zone, take note of the destabilization caused by the Afghan situation and expand the Shanghai-5 framework into a regional forum for multidimensional cooperation, addressing not only border security and regional stability but also trade, communication and economic matters. Karimov emphasized that the presence of two nuclear powers in the Shanghai forum was a guarantee for peace and stability in the region, and he urged the two countries to coordinate measures to extend their support to the whole region. Uzbekistan's participation in the forum and Karimov's rhetorical flourishes suggest that Russia and Uzbekistan are pursuing a mutually coordinated policy to fight against common foes.

These developments indicate a shift in the goals and functions of the Shanghai-5 which was formed four years ago. Although established with the lofty goals of building confidence and guaranteeing security for the five member countries, it

has focused on the relatively technical issues of resolving a decades-old dispute over the 7,000-km border between the former Soviet Union and China. Once a point of conflict, the boundary has been changed into "a zone of trust" declared Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev.

Kyrgyzstan's president, Askar Akaev, was even more optimistic. He believes that the Shanghai-5 Forum might be able to guarantee peace for the Eurasian continent. He said that the manner in which the issue of demarcating the 858-km border between China and Kyrgyzstan was solved -- amicably through mutual respect, understanding and accommodation -- could serve as a model for others. (An agreement on the 414-km border between Tajikistan and China remains to be finalized.)

The major practical result of the forum was the endorsement of Akaev's initiative to set up a regional antiterrorist structure which will be located in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. This is particularly convenient since southern Kyrgyzstan has lately become a center for religious extremism. The Shanghai-5 members also instructed the competent bodies in their countries to draw up specific suggestions and to continue consultations on the establishment of the antiterrorist center.

Despite such regional cooperation, the participants apparently never lost sight of the international community at large. The three Central Asian countries, joined by the two permanent members of the UN's Security Council, did call for the strengthening of the UN "as the main mechanism in maintaining international peace and stability." According to Putin, an understanding has been reached between Russia and China to ask the UN to create special bodies to combat cross-border terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.

#### **What does the future hold for summit participants?**

- The Central Asian members of the forum stated their primary objective was to address the issue of regional security and secondarily to improve

their economic standing. Thus, by catering to the security concerns of its Central Asian partners, Russia serves its own geopolitical objectives and strengthens its presence in the Central Asian region.

- Through their participation in Shanghai-5 and other such fora, Russia and China will continue their attempts to deflect the criticism concerning their poor compliance with (if not outright disregard of) international human rights standards.
- Russia will boost efforts to carve out a strategic partnership with China "for forming a multipolar peace and creating a new justified and rational international political and economic order" along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.
- Moscow and Peking will also strive for a coordinated response amid concerns about how a proposed US missile defense system could upset the global balance of power.

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