

Artem V. Malgin,

## **Shanghai Co-operation Organization and security in Central Asia**

"Constructive partnership aimed at the strategic interaction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" – is official formula of nowadays Russia-China relations. At the same time China as a Russian security partner is a phenomenon of the post-bipolar world.

Despite the fact that the USSR and People's Republic of China before the mid-1950s were in close political relations neither Stalin no Khrushchev were inclined to share with China common security, at least as equal partners. The post-war Soviet Union in its foreign policy relied much more on traditional, "imperial", or "Realpolitik" perception of international relations than on ideology, i.e. communist character of China in this case was not so much important.

This was twice true if we talk about the Asian dimension of the Soviet foreign policy. I would not say that we were wrong; at least, our suspicions over China as a reliable security partner had some grounds and justification. China also based its foreign policy not only on the ideological principles, but also on the traditionally and deeply rooted perception of itself a world power. At the same time, China, as a young (in comparison with the "conventional" USSR) communist regime, could afford itself harsh and abrupt actions in its surrounding, it was even ready to confront openly and seriously with the "imperialists" in order to provide security belt around its borders and influence in vital regions. That is to say China was establishing itself as world power, to be put on the equal foot with other world powers, as well as with the Soviet Union. This fact made feel uncomfortable both of the poles of the world system – USSR and USA. The USA were afraid of mainly of the substance of the process, the USSR, first was afraid of mainly by the means – we did not want to be drawn to some additional clashes with the West thanks to China harsh policy in the 1950s-1960s. But when we discovered that China not simply a "younger brother" inclined to misconduct in international relations, we, as well as, USA were afraid of China as a strategic competitor with a very unclear role in the bipolar system. The time has proved that our fears were not groundless.

Soviet-China tensions in the 1960s and than China's "tactical" (as it seemed at that time) shift to the closer relations with the US in the 1970s-early 1980s confused the USSR, provoked additional military spending, narrowed Moscow's political manoeuvre field and through that contributed to the collapse of the bipolar world.

With the bipolar world collapsed, China has found itself in a relatively new situation, the only superpower survived – USA - has managed to strengthen its power, and in such a case, the old time scenario of strategic manoeuvring between two poles was over. From the beginning of the 1990s China has no real and fruitful alternative to co-operation with the USA. Twenty-five years have created a net of mutual interests and interdependence, which ties closely these countries. Any attempt, to tear off or cut this net, is destined to failure.

In 1990s, it was Russia, who, to some extent, tried to follow this scenario in its global policy. China (probably together with India) was seen as counter-balance to the West, led by the USA. And to the greatest extent Russia's readiness to co-operate with China over CIS "southern flank" was seen at the beginning is an evident example of that manoeuvring.

Nowadays, Russian foreign policy seems to overcome this initial vision, and, globally, Putin's policy see co-operation with a specific country, even a larger one, as complimentary to with other countries. Though, on the regional level the "counterbalance approach" could work. The former USSR republics of Central Asia were and are very unstable and liable to any strong influence. This could come not only from the immediate neighbours, but also from the non-regional actors, as USA, for instance, or non-state actors as political Islam in its extremist

forms. Internationally new Central Asia is so unclear and uncertain, but essential in terms of security both for Russia and China. We can admit, that somehow, these powers are competitors over the regional influence, but at the same time they wise enough to exclude from this competition other players or diminish their role. Simply, not to make the regional system too complicated. Competition not necessary presupposes fight, it could be canalised towards finding consensus over regional issues and fruitful co-operation when everyone's interests are taken into account. This factor to the greatest extent contributed to the emergence of Russia-China security interaction in this region and with this region's countries.

As for the regional players, it is also in their interests to counterbalance all-non-regional players with their own hands, since very often monopoly or domination of one non-regional player (Russia, China, USA with NATO, or whatever else) could harm either freedom of international actions or damage some internal aspects of life and power in this or that state. Central Asian republics in the years 1992-2002 have proved that they are strong and pragmatic adherent of multidimensional foreign policy. They are all participants of NATO co-operation initiatives such as Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (before 1997 - NACC) and Partnership for Peace programme, at the same time Kazakhstan, Kyrgistan and Tajikistan are members of the CIS Collective Security Treaty. Uzbekistan before 1999 also made a part of this group, nevertheless it participates (on bilateral basis) in the United Air Defence System together with Russia and other Collective Security Treaty (CST) countries. Kazakhstan hosts the most known Soviet time space launching site – Baikonur and air-defence training fields used by the Russian military, while Tajikistan provides basing for the Russian 201 Infantry division. The Central Asian countries nearly in parallel created within CST Rapid Deployment Forces with dominant Russian participation (summer 2001), welcomed American military units on their territory (autumn) and reinforced co-operation within Shanghai Organisation (June 2002). All these facts show that regional policy is really multidimensional, if not eclectic. And surely, the region is liable for further security “structuring”, but the question - who will head this process? - stays open.

Russia-China-Central Asian countries co-operation, fortunately, has based "technical background" – i.e. border issues, between China and former USSR that were inherited by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirgistan and Tajikistan, that gives them necessary experience of diplomatic interactions. In 1996 this experience resulted into creation of the "Shanghai five" regional forum that was transformed into the Shanghai Co-operation organisation in 2001”, when member-countries welcomed a new participant – Uzbekistan. A new structure – Anti-terrorist centre (with the headquarters in Bishkek) was also created.

This year in Saint-Petersburg organisation started taking more definite shapes by adopting its Charter and Declaration that was issued on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2002 by the heads of member-states. Now it is clear that the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) tends to be a (sub) regional organisation of overreaching character and could resemble OSCE in a future. The choice of this form relies on the Soviet experience Soviet Helsinki process in Europe. In its turn, China has also practised similar efforts for building overreaching stability and security scenario – let us remember the famous "five principles of peaceful co-existence", that appeared in early 1950s and influenced international relations within Third World as well as globally. At the same time a narrower number of participants could afford SCO create more solid legal basis for common actions in spheres of general consensus.

It is instructive to remind that last SCO summit had been preceded (on the 4-5<sup>th</sup> of May 2002) by the first summit of the Conference on co-operation and trust measures in Asia in Almaty. The idea of this conference dates from the 1980s and on practical level it has been revived in 1992. At the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev suggested starting developing a mechanism for dealing with key Asian problems. Russia has immediately supported this initiative (it had a lot in common with old Soviet proposals of Gorbachev's and even Brezhnev's era). It has taken 10 years to transform the

idea into reality. Nowadays the Conference unites 16 states of Asia and North Africa and among them all members of the SCO.

In such a case the SCO could be considered as a kind of solid nuke of the Conference. The analysis of the Almaty Act (founding document of the Conference) shows that the aims and instruments of the Conference are overlapping with those of SCO, but internal integrity of the SCO is higher. Co-existence and interaction of the Conference and the SCO seem to be essential.

All above stated shows that nowadays dynamics of the China-Russia-Central Asian states co-operation is really very positive, but at the same time this fact provokes interest in further prospects for this co-operation.

Challenges and further dimensions of the co-operation could be described as follows.

### ***Challenges and uncertainties:***

- 1) In spite the fact that border issues seem to be solved with the Central Asian republics internal instability could initiate new developments of this problems. Certainly, they won't harm dramatically security and safety of the Chinese frontiers, but however they could poison bilateral relations between China and Central Asian states and harm multilateral co-operation. Unfortunately, local opposition in Kirgystan and Kazakhstan in its criticism widely use this issue. Tajikistan is less liable to this disease, but in case of growing powers of regional elites fighting for the power the border issues could emerge. In all these cases Russia-China relations could be also poisoned since Moscow will face a dilemma whom to support and how.
- 2) As for the security, the Russian side has some exaggerated hopes for common fight with some united efforts against Islamic extremism within SCO, arguing that China has similar problems in Xinjiang. But we have to understand, even if the arguments about Xinjiang are right, China because of its internal character is not ready and is not going to fight its own extremists with international help. At least now. Equally, China is not going to help anyone military to fight against such things abroad. That is to say hopes must not have such a high profile in order not to be met with strong dissatisfaction in the reality. Certainly, China's position towards joint actions against terrorism has dramatically and positively evolved for the last year. But the evolution has started from the very low point. One or two years ago official Beijing and even Chinese academicians simply refused to discuss publicly this vulnerable and "internal" issue. They simply followed the old Soviet pattern when even under Gorbachev our officials refused to talk about glaring ethnic and national problems in Soviet republics, though they were evident. Returning back to China we see that they have just started talking... In such a case real actions in fight against terrorism and Islamic extremism could be seen at the beginning only as exchange of intelligence information, legal support, including extradition issues, etc. We shall see, whether the Chinese political leadership has enough will to push to the co-operation its rather conservative and very closed security and intelligence service. In general, Sino-Russian intelligence co-operation seems to be even less developed than Russian-Western interactions in this sphere.
- 3) In general, China seems to make very realistic stake on the Shanghai organisation – Beijing is not going to plunge deeply to the Third World problems (as it did in 1960s-1980s) while Central Asian countries could be considered (from the Chinese point of view) as one of the Third Worlds. Nowadays China's aim is to provide a breakthrough from the South to the North, and, surely, the relations with the last one are more important for Beijing. In this case Moscow has to balance adequately its own stress over the region with China intensions.
- 4) The 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 has brought new realities to the Central Asia and they could change regional status quo, that had existed since early 1990s. If Russia and China were afraid in the mid-1990s with NATO activities in the region, mainly through PfP mechanism, now, they face American immediate presence in the region. However, this presence tactically

has helped both Russia and China to smash down one the most known source of Islamic terrorism – Taliban movement. At the same time, neither Russia, nor China have no any detailed scenario for dealing with/against (?) US presence in the region. They even not ready to discuss it bilaterally, at least publicly, since both of them has its own “adventure” with Washington. (As we know, during President Bush’s visit to China on the 21<sup>st</sup> –23<sup>rd</sup> February 2002 American president and Jiang Zemin among other problems discussed situation in Central Asia, but the results of this discussion have not been publicised.) This “stance of avoid” in countries’ position shows that they, either both (or one of them) have left the idea to contain US out of the region, or they don’t believe in each other readiness to do this. In any case, lack of strategic vision could stimulate US *fait accompli* policy in Central Asia. That could be vulnerable mostly to Russian interests and it is, Moscow, who has to start talking with Washington on this subject. Though before talking we need to formulate carefully our position, since strong suspicions arise an idea of simple “get away” suggestion made to the US. They also could answer with simple “no”.

***Prospects and would-be dimensions of the co-operation.***

- 1) An economic co-operation within SCO could turn to be fruitful, but with some reservations. First of all, it is very unrealistic to count in foreseeable future on economic “integration” in this region. We must and could depart from trade issues, from trans-border co-operation. Trans-border co-operation (not only trade!) could contribute to the development of the border regions that are the less developed regions in all of the member-states and it will bring evident advantages to the local inhabitants. Politically, this will contribute to better attitude towards China in Central Asian frontier regions.
- 2) Co-operation in production and transportation of energy, with stress on oil and natural gas could create absolutely new pattern of multilateral relations. Growing China economy can absorb tremendous amounts of energy, both from Siberia and Caspian region, joint and agreed actions of Russia and Central Asian on energy issues through SCO help to avoid clashes between them. SCO is an ideal mechanism for adjusting (with Russian interests taken into account) transportation and energy projects such TRACECA, INOGATE, initiatives within Energy Charter and Crete corridors. Energy co-operation within the SCO will complement growing Sino-Russian bilateral interactions in energy sector and will bring business community interests to the organisation.
- 3) SCO could contribute to further stabilisation of Afghanistan and democratic international control over this country to avoid return of Islamic extremist domination there. Any of the SCO member-country has some exclusive means of influence over this country and different factions of the elite, especially Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China. These means put together could really bring tremendous results, which in their turn could influence positively over the whole South Asia. (Surely, here it is a room for joint actions with Washington). These efforts could be officially canalised through UN mechanisms or/and newly created Conference on co-operation and trust measures in Asia.