

By Invitation

SCO and the elusive anti-American coalition

Russia and China want to build a united front against the US in Eurasia, but the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is not a credible vehicle for it.



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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), whose leaders gathered this week in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, is named after one of the modern world's great maritime nodes – the port city of Shanghai.

But its agenda is purely continental – that of stabilising the Eurasian landmass under the leadership of China and Russia.

On the face of it, this week's summit was an impressive affair, with more countries jostling to get in. Expansion, however, will likely make it increasingly difficult for the SCO to stay cohesive in the face of new challenges. And one of its biggest tests has to do with the United States.

Superficially, the deepening partnership between China and Russia and their shared interests should help raise the performance of the SCO. Yet, the essential weakness of the Sino-Russian partnership might well be their shared interest in opposing the US, for the US is not declining as fast as China and Russia would like it to and is pushing back. This casts a shadow not only over the Sino-Russian alliance, but also the future of the regional grouping.

The meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping on the margins of the SCO summit drew widespread international attention. It was their first since they declared a strategic partnership “without limits” and “no forbidden areas” in Beijing this year.

In a Kremlin transcript of the meeting, Mr Putin said he appreciated Beijing's “balanced stand” on the Ukraine conflict, acknowledged China's “questions and concerns” and offered to answer them. Mr Putin also condemned the “provocations of

the US and its satellites in the Taiwan Strait” and talked of building a more “just, democratic, and multipolar world” in tandem with Mr Xi.

Reflecting the new status of China as the “senior partner” in the relationship, Mr Xi was far more reticent. The Chinese leader offered continued support for Russia's “core interests” and promised to work with Moscow in “injecting stability in a troubled and interconnected world”.

Although the intention and interests of Russia and China in resisting the US domination are clear, there are big questions about their capacity to deliver on a new global or regional order.

If there is one place Russia and China could build a new regional order it is in Eurasia. And the primary instrument is the SCO – set up and nurtured by both countries over the past quarter of a century.

BIGGER IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER

The SCO began as a small regional framework with limited objectives in the mid-1990s; since then, it has acquired a larger membership and more expansive objectives. In the process, it has become a lot less cohesive and the gap between the SCO's geopolitical grasp and reach has only widened.

The grouping began its journey as the “Shanghai Five” when China, Russia and three central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – came together to cooperate on regional security in 1995. Six years later, the SCO was launched at the summit level with six members, including Uzbekistan. Since then, India and Pakistan have become full members. Iran was admitted formally at the Samarkand summit while Belarus, a Russian ally, is applying for membership. Taking after Asean, the SCO has a number of dialogue partners and observers. Asean itself has been an observer.

While there is growing interest in the SCO across Eurasia and beyond, it has also revealed the growing divergence within the organisation. India and Pakistan barely agree on anything and the

conflict between Delhi and Beijing involves multiple dimensions, including territorial ones.

In the last few days, there have been border clashes between two member states – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – as well as armed violence between two observer states, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

To be sure, despite these differences the SCO has been able to stay intact and develop a range of cooperative activities – on counterterrorism, for example.

Yet even there, not everyone agrees on the sources and challenges of terrorism. For example, the return of the Taliban to power last year has exposed the deep divisions within the SCO on how to pursue declared objectives of fighting terrorism and religious extremism.

Meanwhile, shifting geopolitical winds are testing the organisation's ability to deal with a growing number of challenges, including in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Even more consequentially, the Chinese and Russian assumptions about US power have come into question.

The SCO says it is not directed against any other power. But the question of the US and its global role never stopped looming over the SCO and its proceedings. Anxieties about the US meddling in the internal affairs of the Eurasian countries have long simmered just below the surface in the geopolitical calculus of China and Russia.

Recall the American focus on promoting democracy in the former Soviet republics and beyond in the 1990s under then President Bill Clinton. In the end, the US did not do too much in Central Asia as it turned its attention to the Greater Middle East to fight its war on terror at the turn of the millennium.

The war on terror that followed the 9/11 attacks, organised from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, opened the door for collaboration between the US and the SCO member states. The US determination to drain the swamps of terrorism in Afghanistan seemed to fit nicely with the agenda of the SCO to combat terrorism and religious extremism.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there indeed was an outpouring of support for the US from all the members of the SCO. But as the decade wore on, strategic differences between the US on the one hand and Russia and China on the other began to deepen and overshadowed the convergences on Afghanistan.

After the 2008 global financial crisis, the strategic perspectives in China and Russia began to converge on the idea of US decline and its terminal nature. It also bolstered confidence in Moscow and Beijing that they could provide the basis for a post-Western world. If both countries needed some clinching evidence, America's humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan in August last year seemed to provide it.

Yet, both Russia and China are now finding it hard to cope with the consequences of the US retreat from Afghanistan. The US, on the other hand, looks to have gained from its Afghan pullout.

Without the burden of administering and securing Afghanistan, it can now exploit the contradictions among the SCO

members that will be most affected by developments in Afghanistan. At the same time, Washington has retained the freedom to act against terror targets in Afghanistan.

It is by no means clear if the SCO can ever generate the level of intervention in Afghanistan demonstrated by the US drone attack that killed Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in July. The sense of US decline that permeated the Chinese and Russian discourse in the wake of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan looks rather premature in retrospect.

UKRAINE WAR'S IMPACT

Meanwhile, the SCO's claim for leadership in Eurasia is being challenged by developments in Ukraine. Russia has justified its invasion of its neighbour by pointing to the steady expansion of Nato into the former Russian sphere of influence in Central Europe and Eurasia. President Putin has also claimed that Ukraine has no right to separate existence.

Yet by failing to achieve a quick victory, and retreating in the face of a lightning counteroffensive by Ukraine, Russia is in danger of further weakening itself in relation to the US and its Western allies.

Russia's invasion has already consolidated trans-Atlantic solidarity and strengthened Nato. Should Moscow's “special military operation” fail, it would create new fissures within Russia and its sphere of influence. As it is, many members of the SCO who were part of the Soviet Union are deeply wary about Mr Putin's imperial ambitions and have been unwilling to support the position of Russia and China on Ukraine.

The outcome in Ukraine will also have a major impact on the nature of the Russia-China partnership that is at the core of the SCO. A debacle in Ukraine would likely make Moscow even more dependent on Beijing. At the same time, a weak ally might not be of much use for China in managing its increasingly complex relationship with the US.

Washington is, on the other hand, strengthening its alliances in Asia, bilaterally as well as through coalitions such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad.

Further, collapse of the Russian resistance to the US on the western edge of Eurasia is likely to liberate the US and Europe to play a more active role on the eastern edge and its Indo-Pacific waters. Within Eurasia itself, the political quest for autonomy from Russia and China is real despite the traditional dependence on Moscow for security and the growing reliance on Beijing for economic growth.

That brings us to the final paradox: The origins of the SCO lay in the Sino-Russian effort to limit US power in Eurasia, but Russia's avoidable confrontation with Europe and China's premature assertion against the US might end up reinforcing the West globally and within Eurasia itself.

The Chinese and Russians do seek to build an anti-American front, but it is unlikely that the SCO will be a credible part of it.

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