

Partners and competitors

NATO and the (Far) East

Marcel de Haas

Obvious partners for NATO in the (Far) East are Russia and China. With Russia the Alliance cooperates through the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). China, as a rising international power, can also no longer be neglected by NATO. But so far only mutual high-level visits have been conducted. Furthermore, as strategic partners, China and Russia share a negative attitude towards the West. They have issued joint statements against the U.S.–Japanese initiative to develop a theatre anti-missile system in Asia, NATO enlargement, NATO's 'interventionist' Strategic Concept of 1999 (justifying its military action in Kosovo), President Bush's 2002 decision to annul the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, and against the US/NATO missile defense shield. Furthermore, Moscow and Beijing take the lead in international (security) organizations in the Far East region: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Although in public everything seems smooth, recent developments in Russo-Chinese cooperation provide a different view. Possible disputes between China and Russia might also be a concern for the Western Alliance. The common ground of attention for NATO, CSTO and SCO is Afghanistan. Will these three actors cooperate in dealing with the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014? This article will outline CSTO and SCO and their attitude towards NATO. Next, I will address the relations between Russia and China as well as the mutual challenges of NATO and the East around Afghanistan. The article concludes with an assessment of NATO's interests and options in the (Far) East region.

CSTO, SCO and actions by the 'Big Two'

CSTO

The *Collective Security Treaty Organization* (CSTO) is a Russian-led military alliance with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as the other member states. Uzbekistan suspended its CSTO membership in June 2012.¹ Like NATO, the CSTO has a military assistance provision, which states that aggression against one party will be considered an attack on all parties. The main responsibilities of the CSTO are defense cooperation, weapons manufactur-

ing, military training, peacekeeping activities, a common integrated air-defense system, and the fight against terrorism and narcotics, especially in Central Asia. Although China is not involved in the CSTO, this organization is also relevant for China because of its military activities in Central Asia and its interest in security in and around Afghanistan. The CSTO itself and Russia have repeatedly invited NATO to cooperate on Afghanistan. However, NATO, and especially the U.S., has been reluctant to cooperate with CSTO because of the dominating role of Russia in this military bloc and its occasional negative statements towards the West. According to CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha, because of Afghanistan, the CSTO has formed a Collective Rapid Reaction Force, deployed in Central Asia, and has continued to build up its military forces in that region. Furthermore, the CSTO invited the SCO to join its efforts on post-conflict rehabilitation of Afghanistan. According to Bordyuzha, the CSTO, together with China and the SCO, should prevent the Taliban from coming back to power.²

SCO

The *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO) is a regional political, economic and security cooperation organization. The SCO includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and



Uzbekistan as member states, with Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan, India and Afghanistan (since 2012) as observer states. SCO member states have a combined population of nearly 1.5 billion people, which is about one-quarter of the total world population. Including the four observers, the SCO encompasses nearly half of the world's population. In addition to member states Russia and China, the observers India and Pakistan bring together in the SCO four nuclear-weapon states. Furthermore, the Chinese and Russian armed forces are among the largest in the world. Important ingredients of economic cooperation are (conventional) arms trade and energy. Although the SCO started as a security organization, SCO members have frequently stated that its primary purpose is political and economic cooperation and that military cooperation – focusing on domestic security – plays a minor role. Nevertheless, in 2005 and 2007, the SCO conducted large-scale military exercises, called 'Peace Missions', with an emphasis not only on counter-terrorism but also as a demonstration of force, to show others (the West) who is in control of the Asia-Pacific region. Under the aegis of the SCO, these drills were dominated by Russia and China, the organization's leading actors.

The final declarations of the annual SCO summits have frequently, although indirectly, criticised the West (U.S.,

NATO) with statements condemning a confrontational mentality, bloc politics and unipolar policy, and raising objections against the development of a global anti-missile shield. However, around 2009 the usual 'antagonistic' attitude of SCO towards NATO (and the West) gradually started to change as a result of the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. At an SCO Afghanistan conference on 27 March 2009 in Moscow, for the first time NATO and the EU were invited to a SCO event. A next step in possible cooperation between NATO and SCO took place at NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Security Forum in Astana, Kazakhstan, from 24-25 July 2009. This meeting was also attended by Bolat Nurgaliev, Secretary-General of the SCO. Although this seemed to be a small step forward in closer ties between the two organizations, NATO's Secretary-General, Mr. De Hoop Scheffer, denied that the alliance wanted to establish formal relations with the SCO.³

The 'Big Two'

The Russo-Chinese teamwork within SCO is not always as positive as members state in public. For instance, the August 2008 SCO summit was dominated by the Russian-Georgian conflict, which had taken place earlier that month.

[A member of the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan \(CNPA\) in Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, showing seized heroin. With the end of ISAF after 2014, Russia and especially its Central Asian friends are becoming increasingly nervous since they will be the ones that have to cope with Taliban terrorism and narcotics. \(photo: UK Ministry of Defence/Neil Chapman\)](#)

Russia's recognition of the independence of the regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not receive any support from the other SCO member states. The countries of the SCO themselves cope with separatism within their own borders. This also certainly applies to China because of Tibet and the Xingjian province. Consequently, opposition to recognition of Georgian separatist regions – considered by Beijing as a primary threat to its national security – was a logical development.

Another Sino-Russian dispute concerned the development of a closer relationship between the SCO and the CSTO. As early as 2003, Russia had the intention of bringing the two organizations closer together for the purpose of combatting terrorism and the drug trade but probably also to form an 'Eastern bloc' against Western military involvement in the Central Asian region, in and around Afghanistan. However, subsequently the negotiations on an agreement between the two organizations deadlocked as a result of Chinese reluctance. According to Beijing, the CSTO was primarily a political-military organization, but the SCO was to remain a political-economic organization. China feared that a closer relationship between the CSTO and the SCO might give the impression to the outside world that the SCO endeavored to become a 'NATO of the East'. Since China would like to keep all (trade) doors open, it regarded such a development as counterproductive to its economic and political interests. Unlike Russia, and in spite of the Russo-Chinese joint rejection of the 'dominating' policies of the U.S., China did not want to damage its crucial economic ties with the Americans.

In addition to delaying the agreement between the SCO and the CSTO, China also prevented the CSTO from contributing to the SCO's 'Peace Mission 2007' military exercises. In November 2006, China had rejected the Russian proposal to make the 2007 drills a SCO-CSTO event.⁴ On 5 October 2007, during a Central Asian Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit in Dushanbe, the signing of the agreement between the SCO and the CSTO at last took place. Presumably to gain China's support, the agreement was between the secretariats of the two

organizations, not between the organizations themselves, although such hair-splitting would have little practical consequence.⁵

Bilateral Russian-Chinese relations

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, bilateral relations between China and Russia improved across the board. Nowadays, Russia and China maintain a strategic partnership that includes comprehensive cooperation in the areas of diplomacy, defense and security as well as in energy. However, whereas until recently Russia had been the big brother in the relationship between Beijing and Moscow, China has now become stronger than Russia. The 1.3 billion Chinese outnumber the 140 million Russians by a factor of ten. In 2010 China's economy was already four times the size of Russia's and was the second largest economy in the world after that of the U.S. Moreover, Beijing's defense budget is the second biggest in the world (the U.S. is number one), while Moscow's accounts for the third largest. Russia outnumbers China only in nuclear weapons; its conventional defense forces and troops of other security departments, formally 1.5 million, are less than half of China's 3.7 million soldiers.⁶ This reordered relationship between Moscow and Beijing, in which China is no longer the junior partner, definitely has consequences for cooperation between the two actors. But China, as a rising regional and global power, undoubtedly must be a concern for NATO too.

During the course of the last decade, more and more signals have appeared that the Sino-Russian teamwork is crumbling. What will the security relationship between Moscow and Beijing look like in the future? Russo-Chinese security cooperation has mainly consisted of mutual foreign policy statements (against the West), not of intensive (socio-) economic cross-border ties. Furthermore, the importance of energy and arms deals – the core of their cooperation – is steadily decreasing because China has found alternative energy suppliers – to avoid dependency on Russia and because China nowadays is manufacturing its own weapon systems. When China has achieved enough independence from Russia in military technology and has found sufficient alternative sources of energy, Beijing might well 'dump' Russia as a 'strategic' partner. Differences have also come to the surface in the military field. Whereas joint war games were earlier a united demonstration to show the West the duo's command in the Asia-Pacific region, more recent unilateral exercises include scenarios in which the 'partner' was considered the potential adversary.

The CSTO, China, and the SCO should prevent the Taliban from coming back to power



There are several reasons for the deterioration of the previously good relationship between Moscow and Beijing, including China's rejection of Russia's war against Georgia and Moscow's subsequent recognition of the Georgian separatist regions in 2008. Furthermore, Beijing's increasing intrusion into 'Moscow's Central Asia' and in Russia's Far East province as well as China's rapid military build-up, has raised awareness in Moscow of a threat from China. Beijing has accomplished more and more economic influence in the former Soviet Central Asian states, especially in the energy domain. China is replacing Russia as the 'imperial' power in Central Asia, economically but also politically pushing Moscow out of the CIS republics, its traditional realm. In recent years, Moscow has been investing heavily in its Far East province in order to counterbalance the population decline as well as China's economic and demographic 'takeover' of this region. Furthermore, Russian military and intelligence capabilities in the Far East have been reinforced. As to cooperation in regional international organizations, the relationship between Russia and China is also fading. Parts of Russia's security elite were reluctant about Moscow's involvement in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), out of fear that this might position Russia on a collision course with China.⁷

Afghanistan

Regarding Afghanistan, NATO and Russia, and its allies in the CSTO and SCO, face the same threats: terrorism by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and drug trafficking. With NATO withdrawing (most of) its forces from Afghanistan in 2014, Russia and especially its Central Asian friends are becoming increasingly nervous since they will be the ones that have to cope with Taliban terrorism and narcotics. Russia, as the leading member state of the CSTO and together with China on the forefront in the SCO, could promote a joint effort of these two Eastern (security) organizations to cooperate with NATO in Afghanistan. First of all, this could be achieved by a military contribution, by dispatching troop contingents to Afghanistan to strengthen the remaining NATO forces in the post-2014 war against the Taliban. However, actual military cooperation between NATO and CSTO/SCO seems still to be a remote possibility because of political sensitivities. Furthermore, Russia, with its own military history in Afghanistan, but also China, would be hesitant to become militarily involved in Afghanistan. Alternatively, other options for political and socio-economic cooperation between CSTO/SCO and NATO, for instance in reconstruction



projects in Afghanistan and in the fight against drugs, are also imaginable.

Currently, NATO's cooperation with Russia on Afghanistan includes a number of activities. Russia and a number of Central Asian states have granted NATO transit rights to transport goods for NATO troops in Afghanistan through or above their territory. Furthermore, within the NRC framework joint training of counter-narcotics personnel from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Pakistan is conducted. Also, a NRC Helicopter Maintenance Trust Fund has been created, which supports Afghan Air Force helicopter maintenance personnel, by training Afghan technicians in Russia and providing helicopter spare parts.⁸ The feeling of the necessity of a joint Western-Eastern approach in fighting terrorism and drugs around Afghanistan is thus gaining momentum.

As to institutional cooperation, for a long time NATO wanted to discuss Afghanistan only with individual neighboring countries, not with the regional, (partly) Russian-led organizations, CSTO and SCO. However, since spring 2009 NATO (and the EU) and SCO and CSTO have attended the same conferences on the future of Afghanistan. Moreover, China and Russia have demonstrated increasing awareness of the

threats emerging from Afghanistan after NATO's departure, by pleading for a bigger role for the SCO and – once more – for cooperation between NATO and CSTO. Kazakhstan has also called for a dialogue between NATO and SCO.⁹ Teamwork between NATO and CSTO/SCO and/or Russia and China, bearing in mind that East and West face the same threats, could also reduce mutual suspicion and distrust and improve stability and security in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Central Asian region.

NATO's stance towards the (Far) East

The U.S. is becoming more interested in China as an actor in the Asia-Pacific region, which is becoming the economic hub of the future. In his defense strategy of early 2012, U.S. President Obama revealed a clear policy shift from West to East, by withdrawing forces from Europe while reinforcing troops in the Asia-Pacific region. The American administration is well aware of China's growing military power, which could threaten the region and U.S. interests.¹⁰ Since the Asia-Pacific region is becoming the new global economic center of gravity, it makes sense for other Western countries and organizations to do the same as the U.S. and pay more attention to Asia-Pacific and thus also to China. Another

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that a NATO-China Council would be possible in the future. Establishing such a council, comparable to the NATO-Russia Council, has now become an agenda item (photo: Texas Military Forces/Eric Wilson)

reason for the West to become more involved with China is the role that Beijing may play in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of NATO forces in 2014.

Within NATO circles, the option of establishing a NATO–China Council, comparable to the NATO–Russia Council, has now become an agenda item. In November 2012, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Prague that such a NATO–China Council would be possible in the future.¹¹ Just five years ago, in November 2007, such a rapprochement of NATO towards Beijing was still unthinkable, when I suggested creating a NATO–China Council in a publication on the SCO. At the time, NATO was still very cautious about its cooperation with China.¹² Because of China's rising global importance and its influence over Central Asia and Afghanistan, NATO should keep watch on Beijing but also maintain stable relations with China and should not wait any longer before approaching Beijing to establish a NATO–China Council. At the same time – as a double-track policy – cooperation between NATO and Moscow should be maintained at the current level, with the NATO–Russia Council as its primary forum. Since NATO would do well to be friends with both Russia and China, a possible Russian move towards reconciliation with the West – out of fear of China – should be carefully studied since the U.S. and NATO will also have to take into account their own interests in the Asia–Pacific region as well as their relationship with China. On the other hand, an improved relationship with Russia could also be in the interest of the West as this could serve its enhanced focus on the Asia–Pacific region where both parties – Russia and the West – are confronted with China's rising political, economic and military power.

For NATO the future of Russo–Chinese relations is relevant. A deteriorated relationship between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China could be harmful for economic cooperation with the West. Escalating military tensions between Moscow and Beijing –unlikely but not impossible – would endanger global peace and security considering that both parties possess nuclear arms and that Russia would have to use them against a conventionally superior China and would thus also threaten Western security interests. Most importantly, NATO should avoid being dragged into choos-

ing sides between Moscow and Beijing but instead pursue intensive cooperation with both actors.

Lieutenant Colonel (Royal Netherlands Army, ret.)
Dr Marcel de Haas is a Senior Research Associate at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' and a Senior Researcher at the Russian Studies Centre of the University of Groningen.

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*China is replacing
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'imperial' power in
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