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Toward A New Cold War?

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Military alliances are always sold as things that produce security. In practice they tend to do the opposite.

Thus, Germany formed the Triple Alliance with Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to counter the enmity of France following the Franco-Prussian War. In response, France, England and Russia formed the Triple Entente. The outcome was World War I.

In 1949, the U.S. and Britain led the campaign to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) a deterrent to a supposed Soviet attack on Western Europe. In response, the Soviets formed the Warsaw Pact. What the world got was not security but the Cold War, dozens of brushfire conflicts across the globe, and enough nuclear weapons to destroy the earth a dozen times over.

The Cold War may be over, but you would never know it from April's NATO meeting in Bucharest. The alliance approved membership for Croatia and Albania, and only French and German opposition prevented the Bush Administration from adding the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia.

1. George Bush and Hamid Karzai at Bucharest Nato summit

"NATO," President Bush told the gathering, "is no longer a static alliance focused on defending Europe from a Soviet tank invasion. It is now an expeditionary alliance that is sending its forces across the world to help secure a future of freedom and peace for millions."

NATO will soon begin deploying in Poland and the Czech Republic anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems that are supposedly aimed at Iran, but which the Russians charge really target them. The alliance has encircled Russia with NATO allies and bases, has added troops to the stale-mated war in Afghanistan, is preparing to open shop in the Pacific Basin, and is increasingly sidelining the United Nations.

But politics is much like physics: for every reaction there is an equal and opposite reaction. In this case the most important reaction is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an organization that embraces one quarter of the world's population, from Eastern Europe to North Asia, from the Arctic to the vast steppes and mountain ranges of Central Asia. Formed in 2001, its members include China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Iran has observer status, although it has applied for full membership. An application by the U.S. and Japan for observer status was turned down.

SCO is, in the words of a Financial Times editorial, "everything that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger—who sought to keep Russia and China apart—tried to prevent."

According to Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, last August's SCO meeting in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, "mapped out Sino-Russian ties and upgraded bilateral strategic coordination." The two nations also agreed "to join forces to tackle other major security issues,

in a concerted effort to safeguard the strategic interests of both countries."

2. Putin and Hu Jintao at Bishkek summit

It is useful to remember that it was just four decades ago that Chinese and Soviet troops clashed across the Ussuri River north of Vladivostok, and that throughout the '60s and the '70s both nations waged a savage propaganda war against one another.

According to China's People's Daily, SCO discussions included strengthening the United Nations and "the common challenge facing the two countries, emanating out of the U.S. plans to deploy the missile-defense plans targeting Europe and the East."

China is deeply concerned about the Bush Administration's anti- missile system, which is widely understood as targeting China, and has the capacity to cancel out Beijing's modest Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) force.

Writing in the official China Daily, Fu Mengzi, vice-president of the institute of Contemporary International Relations, accused NATO of trying to tighten a "noose" around Russia, and charged that the U.S. is not as worried about terrorism as it is about "major power challenges." Fu writes "We are watching a rekindling of the Cold War mentality in Washington's efforts to find allies and partners while beefing up its military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, East Europe and South Asia, apart from occupying Iraq indefinitely."

The Bishkek summit adopted a declaration that took direct aim at the Bush Administration's foreign policy, including condemning "unilateralism" and "double standards," supporting "multilateralism," and "strict observance of international law," and underlining the importance of the UN.

Is SCO evolving into a political alliance with a strong military dimension, like NATO? Not yet, but its member states carried out joint "anti-terrorist" maneuvers in Russia and China last August, and the organization is closely tied to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

3. The first joint exercise, 2007

CSTO, established in 2002, includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. It is a traditional military alliance whose members have pledged to come to one another's support in case of an attack. It is currently developing a rapid-reaction force similar to the one being built by NATO.

CSTO has offered to cooperate with NATO, but so far the western alliance seems uninterested, preferring, instead, to deal with CTSO member nations on a bilateral basis. The refusal of NATO to treat CTSO as a regional force has sparked some anger and a good deal of suspicion. NATO has a policy, according to CTSO General Secretary Nikolai Bordyuzha, of "projecting and consolidating its military-political presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia." It is a policy, said the CTSO leader, which could destabilize the region.

M.K. Bhadrakumar, a former career diplomat who served as India's ambassador to Uzbekistan, says that that the SCO and CSTO may eventually merge. "The SCO may focus on the range of so-called 'new threats' [terrorism] rather than on the conventional form of military threats, while CSTO would maintain a common air-defense system, training of military personnel, arms procurement, etc."

In the same week that SCO met in Bishkek, the Russians announced their response to NATO's ABM system: a resumption of strategic air patrols, improving Moscow's anti-missile system, modernizing the Topol-M ICBM, and constructing new missile firing submarines.

To counter SCO's growing influence—the organization now has official observer status at the UN, and a working relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations—the U.S. launched a "Great Central Asia" strategy to try and drive a wedge between Central Asian nations and Russia, and to woo India by playing on New Delhi's apprehension of China's growing power.

But, according to Bhadrakumar, the Central Asian part of the U.S. strategy is not likely to be very successful, with the possible exception of Turkmenistan. With the U.S. deeply mired in Iraq and Afghanistan, he says, "U.S. stock is very low" in the region.

Washington appears to have had more success with India, but New Delhi is clearly of two minds about SCO. On one hand, many Indians are nervous about the growing power of China. On the other, India desperately needs the energy resources of Central Asia.

India will probably try to chart a middle course, keeping itself free of political alliances, but making sure it doesn't do anything that might disrupt the flow of gas and oil to its growing industries. For instance, New Delhi sharply rejected the Bush Administration's efforts to halt a pipeline deal between India and Iran.

Whether SCO will turn into an eastern NATO is by no means clear, but the economic side of the alliance is solidly grounded in self-interest pivoting on oil and other natural resources.
NATO, on the other hand, is an alliance in trouble. While the organization has agreed to help bail the U.S. out of the Afghan quagmire, many member nations are hardly enthusiastic about the war. At the April meeting the U.S. plea for more troops turned up 700 French soldiers. As Anatol Lieven, a professor of War Studies at King's College London, points out, this comes to one for every 400 square miles of Afghanistan. NATO also agreed to supply 18 new helicopters, "a fraction of the numbers it takes to ferry millionaires to their European ski resorts on any given day," says Lieven.

NATO did back the ABM deployment, but no one besides Washington is breaking out the champagne. Some 70 percent of the Czech public opposes it, and the Poles are using the issue to blackmail the U.S. into modernizing its military. With the Poles suddenly playing hard to get, Washington has opened talks with Lithuania as a possible back-up site for the ABMs. The Russians—already unhappy about the missiles and the attempt to recruit Georgia and Ukraine into NATO—would react furiously to an ABM system literally in their front yard.

The Lithuania proposal has made many Europeans uncomfortable as well. "The last thing we need is another conflict with Russia," Gereon Schuch, a program director at the German Council for Foreign Affairs told the New York Times.

In spite of NATO backing the ABM deployment, many are hardly enthusiastic. As one NATO official cynically remarked to Financial Times columnist Gideon Rachman, the ABM is "a system that won't work, against a threat that doesn't exist, paid for by money we don't have."

The U.S. ABM program has run up a bill of over $100 billion and, according to a recent Government Accounting Office report, it hasn't been successfully tested with "sufficient realism."
Translation: the tests are rigged.

If NATO falls apart, and the SCO never develops into a military alliance, history suggests that we will probably all be better off. Military alliances have a way of making people miscalculate, and miscalculating in a world filled with nuclear weapons is a dangerously bad idea.

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