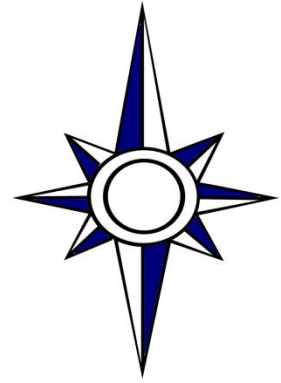


Comparative Connections

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China-Russia Relations: Succession, SCO, and Summit Politics in Beijing

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In early June, Russia's new, and old, President Putin spent three days in Beijing for his first state visit after returning to the Kremlin for his third-term as president; his hosts (Hu and Wen) were in their last few months in office. Some foreign policy issues such as Syria and Iran required immediate attention and coordination between the two large powers. They also tried to make sure that their respective leadership changes in 2012 and beyond would not affect the long-term stability of the bilateral relationship. Putin's stay in Beijing also coincided with the annual SCO Summit on June 6-7. As the rotating chair, China worked to elevate the level of cooperation in the regional security group, which is faced with both opportunities and challenges in Central Asia, where strategic fluidity and uncertainty are increasingly affecting the organization's future.

Beijing summit, for the next decade

The hosts and guests at the summit in Beijing on June 5-6 were no strangers. By one account, this was President Vladimir Putin's 10th official visit to China as either Russia's president or prime minister, and already had more than 30 top-level meetings with Chinese leaders – more than with leaders of any other country. The Russian leader continues to be popular in China, so much so that an article in *Global Times* asked why Putin is more popular in China than in Russia.

Putin's trip to Beijing was far more than a popularity contest for his rather colorless hosts. Perhaps the most important issue was how to broaden and deepen the current "best-ever" relations. In their talks, Putin and Hu Jintao tried to map out the bilateral relations for the next decade, which would span most of Putin's 12 years as Russian president (assuming he completes his fourth term) and the entire fifth generation of Chinese leaders (Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang to be in power from late 2012 and early 2013 for the next 10 years).

Putin's two-day visit in Beijing was the longest stay during his 10-day foreign trip following his inauguration in May. His itinerary included Belarus on May 31, Germany and France on June 1, St. Petersburg on June 3-4 for the EU-Russian Summit, Uzbekistan on June 4, China June 5-7, and Kazakhstan on June 7. Putin's decision to skip the G8 Summit in Camp David on May 18-19 postponed his first meeting with US counterpart Barack Obama to June 18-19 at the G20 Summit in Los Cabos, Mexico.

One of the major items for Putin in Beijing was to assess succession politics. While there, Putin managed to meet separately with all top Chinese leaders (President Hu Jintao, Chief Legislator Wu Bangguo, Premier Wen Jiabao, Vice President Xi Jinping, and State Council Vice Premier

Li Keqiang). Xi and Li, who are poised to take over from President Hu Jiantao and Premier Wen Jiabao in the next nine months and are expected to stay in power for 10 years, have visited Russia before (March 2010 for Xi and April 2012 for Li). Putin's curious mind, nonetheless, still needs to observe those future paramount leaders of China.

Aside from the joint declaration, Hu and Putin presided over the signing of 11 documents in Beijing in the areas of energy, nuclear power and technology, tourism, journalism, investment, banking, industrial park management, and insurance. The joint statement issued after the meeting between Putin and Hu emphasized the need to maintain "close high-level exchanges" and improve "mechanisms for cooperation between parliaments, government, and departments for closer coordination over regional and global issues; deepen economic relationship (\$100 billion trade volume before 2015 and \$200 billion before 2020); promote cultural, tourism, educational and other societal exchanges; promote stability, development, and confidence building measures along border regions; and fight transnational crime and illegal immigration.

Of particular importance in the joint statement is an explicit clause regarding military-to-military (mil-mil) relations:

[T]o enhance the traditional friendship between the armed forces of the two countries by deepening cooperation at various levels and in all fields between the armed forces of the two countries, and carrying out joint military exercises aimed at improving coordinating capacity of the armed forces of the two countries and promoting regional peace, security, and stability.

Mention of the mil-mil relationship is rarely included in the annual Sino-Russian presidential joint statements despite the fact that the two sides have significantly deepened their cooperation in this area. The only recent exception was in 2009 when the joint statement stressed cooperation in security issues such as defensive defense, opposing missile defense and militarization of outer space, and military cooperation with other countries without targeting a third party. There was, however, no mention of the phrase "armed forces." The 2012 declaration also stressed the need for joint military exercises, which until April 22-27 of this year when the two sides staged the largest naval exercise in the Yellow Sea, had always been within the SCO "anti-terrorist" framework (*Peace-Mission*).

An uncertain world

The military component in the summit declaration was no accident as there are increased calls in China for formulating, at least a "quasi-alliance" with Moscow. Gen. Wang Haiyun [王海运], director of energy diplomacy at the China Foundation of International Studies in Beijing and former Chinese military attaché in Moscow, argued that the time is ripe for a "united front," or a quasi-alliance; at a time when Putin is consolidating Russia's "near abroad," and "pivoting" toward the Asia-Pacific and Europe. Given these "strategic adjustments" by Putin's Russia that "extensively coincide" with those of China, according to Wang, there is no reason not to further China's strategic coordination with Russia. Su Han [苏涵], director of the Russian Studies Center at the Beijing Foreign Affairs Institute, anticipates that Putin's return to the Kremlin will provide stability in China's northern and northwestern frontier for at least six years. At a time

when China is being squeezed from its northeast, east, southeast, and southwest, stability in Sino-Russian relations is imperative.

Putin's three-day stay in Beijing, therefore, was rich in political symbolism and strategic substance at a time when the world for Russia and China was far from serene. Syria appeared to be on the verge of a free fall as the West was stepping up its support for the rebels; Israel was posturing, perhaps more than any time in history, for a surgical attack on Iran's nuclear facilities regardless of the US desires; and Afghanistan's future remained uncertain at best as the US-led forces will start to leave the war-torn country. Meanwhile, territorial disputes between China and some of its neighbors continue to escalate. Behind all these crises was the ubiquitous hand of the Asia-pivoting United States with its active support for its Asian allies (Japan, South Korea, the Philippines) and friends (Vietnam). Indeed, a new fault line seems to be emerging with the two largest Eurasian powers of China and Russia on one side, and the US and its littoral allies/friends on the other. It is against this backdrop that Putin and his Chinese counterparts identified Korea, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan and Asia-Pacific as paramount in their strategic coordination in Part III of the joint statement.

Despite enhanced strategic coordination between Beijing and Russia, particularly regarding the Syria crisis (jointly vetoing West-sponsored draft resolutions in the UN three times in October 2011, and again in February and July 2012), the health of the strategic relationship cannot be taken for granted. An editorial by the *Global Times*, though optimistic about stable bilateral relations under Putin, cautions that Putin's return to the Kremlin does not necessarily mean he has finalized his plans for Russia's relations with China and the West. Most often, argued the editorial, interstate relations go against the preference of individual leaders. Nor is there a case in history of absolute harmony between two large states. The editorial cites some Russia specialists in China as saying that deep in the Russians' psyche China is something to be questioned [怀疑] and guarded against [防范] despite Russia's use of China's strategic value for its own interests. Finally, one simply cannot rule out Russia's "strategic vacillation [战略摇摆]" given the efforts by both the West and pro-West Russian intelligentsia. Still, Putin's Russia provides China with the best strategic opportunity for deepening China-Russian strategic relations and Beijing should "treasure [珍惜]" the next six to 12 years while Putin is in power. For this purpose, the Sino-Russian strategic relationship needs to have adequate "inclusiveness [包容性]" for various problems and frictions in their bilateral interactions to gradually convert the transitory nature of their strategic coordination into reality and convention.

SCO's Beijing Summit: calling for harmony

Putin's third day in Beijing was spent attending the 12th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit. As the rotating chair for the annual meeting, China tried hard to make the SCO more effective in both economic and security areas. A total of 10 documents were inked by the six heads of state, including a presidential declaration pledging to promote lasting peace and prosperity in the region; a resolution endorsing the main aspects of the SCO's mid-term development strategy; a resolution on the organization's political-diplomatic measures and mechanisms to respond to situations jeopardizing peace, security and stability in the region; a resolution endorsing a program of cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism for 2013-2015; a resolution confirming the SCO secretary general's report on the

organization's operations; a decision confirming a report of the SCO regional antiterrorist structure detailing the results of its work in 2011; and a resolution granting observer status to Afghanistan and dialogue partner status to Turkey.

Founded in Shanghai on June 15, 2001, the SCO's "periphery" continues to expand. Admission of Afghanistan and Turkey this year follows the 2009 expansion, when Belarus and Sri Lanka were granted dialogue partner status. The current lineup now includes five observer states (Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan, India and Afghanistan) and three dialogue partners (Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey), in addition to its six full members (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).

The SCO has made considerable progress in terms of both institutionalization and outreach. The regional security group has been able to maintain relative stability (by China's account, over 500 terrorist plots have been foiled since 2004 and there were 70 successful projects in the defense and security area between 2001 and 2011) while promoting economic growth in an area encompassing a quarter of the human race and three-fifths of the Eurasian landmass. International Monetary Fund (IMF) statistics show that total gross domestic product (GDP) of the six SCO members reached \$9.39 trillion in 2011 despite the impact of the global financial crisis; the figure was just \$1.67 trillion in 2001. China's Ministry of Commerce data also show that China's trade with other SCO member states rose from \$12.1 billion in 2001 to \$113.4 billion in 2011. China has become Russia's largest trading partner, and the second largest partner of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

These successes, however, may not be perceived as positive among all SCO states. One of the perceptions, or misperceptions, among other SCO members is that China has been using the regional group for its own economic interests at the expense of other members. Russia is also keenly and genuinely sensitive about its declining influence in Central Asia, whether it is caused by West's strategic presence or China's economic advancement into this part of the world that has long been considered to be Russia's "backyard."

In retrospect, China's effort to achieve some degree of economic integration (forget about a free trade zone – FTZ) among the SCO member states has been, at best, a disappointment. Aside from the growing trade volume, large economic projects, mostly in the energy sectors, have been undertaken by China with either individual SCO states (oil pipeline with Kazakhstan) or outside the SCO framework (gas pipeline with Turkmenistan via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan).

China is well aware of the lack of trust, growing concerns, and even suspicions among SCO members regarding China's role and actions in Central Asia. At the Beijing summit, China continued to avoid discussion of an FTZ for the SCO, even as Beijing has been engaging in FTZ negotiations with many of its neighbors (Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN). Instead, a low-profile, less integrated and project-oriented approach was discussed and accepted by other SCO members. Part IV of the "Beijing Declaration on Building a Region of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity" reads: "The member states will deepen and improve win-win regional economic cooperation, promote trade and investment facilitation, undertake major co-investment projects..."

Meanwhile, other SCO members accepted China's suggestions for developing "transport infrastructure that connects Asia with Europe, building relevant international transport corridors and improving the efficiency of multimodal transport." In return, China supported the Russian initiative to create a fund for financing various integration projects within the SCO. Chinese diplomats reportedly proposed the possibility of using these funds to help participant countries in case of budget problems. According to Commerce Minister Cheng Deming, an infrastructure network connecting regional energy, transportation, and telecommunications networks was in the making, and financial cooperation has been taking shape.

For years, China has called for reinvigorating the famous "Silk Road" trade route, and much of it would go through Central Asia. It takes more than one month for a 40-foot container to reach Europe from central or western China by sea, but it only takes 14-15 days by the Eurasian land route. Despite the obvious benefit for all parties, including all transit nations, many technical issues of these transportation projects, particularly railways, remain unresolved. Even the width of tracks embodies the geoeconomic, if not geopolitical, patterns. China, for example, prefers 1,435-mm-wide tracks (that are also used in Iran and Turkey). Kyrgyzstan, however, uses 1,520-mm tracks inherited from the Soviet rail system. For some in Russia, Chinese-type tracks would take Central Asia further away from Russia and toward China.

Aside from technical and financial challenges and controversies, winning the hearts and minds of Central Asians is perhaps more challenging for China than investing in and completing infrastructure projects. For this goal, China did take advantage of hosting the SCO Summit by launching several long-term cultural and educational projects. In his speech at the summit, Hu Jintao highlighted the need to promote mutual trust and socio-cultural harmony within the SCO, while security, economic prosperity, and outreach are ranked lower in his priority list for SCO's future development. Specifically, the Chinese president suggested a "committee of good-neighborliness, friendship and cooperation [上海合作组织睦邻友好合作委员会]" be set up to promote people-to-people interactions among SCO member states in order to lay a more solid social foundation for the development of the organization. Hu informed his counterparts that China would, in the next three years, train 1,500 experts from other SCO states. Additionally, in the next 10 years, China plans to provide 30,000 scholarships and 10,000 language training slots for individuals from the SCO member states. In addition to these cultural and educational grants, China will also offer a \$10 billion fund for loans to SCO member states.

It remains to be seen how effective these projects will be in addressing the trust deficit among SCO members. A bigger, and perhaps more fundamental, issue is how China's economic dynamics in Central Asia and beyond will interface with Putin's "pet" project of the Customs Union (from 2010) and its fuller format of the Eurasian Union (currently only Belarus and Kazakhstan are in the two unions). Moscow has been encouraging Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to join them, despite the hesitance from both countries. Regardless, Hu's call for harmony within the SCO finds its position in the "Beijing Declaration" signed by the heads of state: "The member states will continue to strengthen and upgrade cooperation within the SCO framework and build the SCO region into a region of lasting peace, friendship, prosperity and harmony," stated the joint statement at the onset. "This is the first comprehensive and strategic outline for the future trajectory of the SCO since its inception 11 years ago," commented Cheng Guoping, deputy foreign minister of China.

Hello Afghanistan!

Like yin and yang, harmony and disharmony are two sides of the same coin. As noted earlier, China's economic success in Central Asia can be an obstacle to its future growth in the region. Similarly, granting Afghanistan observer status in Beijing was a timely action in anticipation of the withdrawal of the NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014. In the past few years, the SCO has established a liaison group with Afghanistan and held six rounds of deputy foreign minister-level consultations. In March 2009, the SCO also held an Afghan conference in Moscow.

Regardless of the SCO's effort, it is widely believed that the Karzai government will be further weakened by the NATO's withdrawal, at least in the short-term. A deterioration of Afghan security situation would affect its neighbors, many of which are already plagued by terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, and cross-border criminal activities. Although acceptance of Afghanistan as an observer state will facilitate the SCO's interface with the war-torn nation, it will also mean an increased stake and added responsibilities for the SCO in Afghanistan.

It is unclear how the SCO will respond to the security deterioration inside Afghanistan if Afghan forces fail to maintain stability in the post-NATO period. At the summit in Beijing, the heads of state only agreed to "help the Afghan people in their national reconstruction" while supporting the "United Nations' leading role in coordinating the international efforts on the issue of Afghanistan." More specifically, Chinese officials stated that the SCO is going to "continue to provide aid to Afghanistan to promote its reconstruction and reconciliation of its ethnic groups." Further, "After the withdrawal of NATO troops in Afghanistan, SCO won't replace NATO to conduct any military operation as NATO did in Afghanistan," stated Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping, shortly after the SCO Summit in Beijing. "The SCO will try to realize perpetual peace in Afghanistan under UN framework."

The SCO's Afghan policy is based on the prospect of national reconciliation in Afghanistan "led" and "owned" by Afghans. Such an expectation may not be the case in the post-NATO Afghanistan. In this context, the SCO's principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states and beyond would be seriously challenged. This is particularly true for those who have growing investment in Afghanistan, such as China and India.

Finally, the West is unlikely to hand off Afghanistan and leave it to Russia and/or China after 2014. So far, the SCO's "Afghan role" remains indirect at best and largely outside the country (Russia's transit hub for NATO, for example) with no direct involvement in Afghanistan's internal "reconciliation" process. Even if the bulk of the NATO forces in Afghanistan will be out of the country, tens of thousands of "contractors" are likely to remain inside the country for a long time. Moreover, NATO is preparing to relocate much of its logistics just outside Afghanistan. One may wonder if NATO's intelligence and Special Forces will also use those Central Asian hubs/bases.

Given these constraints, the SCO has been trying to get itself ready for the rapidly changing situation both inside and outside Afghanistan. One such effort was to gradually and continuously strengthen the SCO's ability to maintain security. There is a broad recognition for the need to

coordinate that effort with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose members (Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and, until recently, Uzbekistan) overlap with those of the SCO. During the summit in Beijing, Deputy Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping reportedly said that the SCO “won't allow any unrest like that's happening in West Asia and North Africa.”

The SCO Summit in Beijing also moved the SCO toward closer political and diplomatic coordination in times of crises by passing a resolution on “political-diplomatic measures and mechanisms to respond to situations jeopardizing peace, security and stability in the region,” which is described as a “breakthrough” by some ranking Chinese officials in terms of SCO institutionalization and functionality. Specifically, the SCO states would legalize procedures for joint early warning, crisis management, protection and evacuating citizens from crisis areas, etc. President Putin also urged others to incorporate the SCO's observer states into the operation of SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which would greatly expand intelligence exchange and operational coordination of the SCO's anti-terrorist work with the SCO's four observer members of India, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

In the area of defense, the summit in Beijing coincided with the second meeting of the SCO chiefs of staff, which was held in Khujand, Tajikistan. Delegates included Gen. Zhasuzakov Saken Adilkhanovich, chairman of the Kazakhstan Chiefs of Staff, Col. Subhankulov, Kyrgyz chief of general staff, Gen. Chen Bingde, Chinese chief of general staff, Gen. Aleksandr Postnikov, Russian deputy chief of general staff, and Lt. Gen. Naderrov, Tajikistani chief of general staff. They analyzed the security situation with a focus on the impact of terrorism on regional security and stability, discussed the future development of the defense security cooperation, and proposed cooperation measures, including strengthening military cooperation among the SCO member states and jointly combatting the “three evil forces” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism). The SCO launched its first chief of staff annual meeting on April 24-25, 2011 in Beijing and Shanghai.

Farewell Uzbekistan?

The Afghan factor itself will be challenging enough for the SCO in the next few years. The pending hand-off of Afghanistan by the United States and NATO would presumably reduce the West's strategic presence in this sensitive area for Russia and China. However, it has led to a surprising development that is impacting the cohesion and operation of the SCO.

On June 20, Uzbekistan signaled its intention to “suspend” its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); the decision was made public only eight days later. In its official note to the CSTO Secretariat, the Uzbekistan Foreign Ministry explained that “We are uncomfortable with the strategic plans of the CSTO in the Afghan sector ... Uzbekistan attaches priority to bilateral cooperation with this country;” and Tashkent is “uncomfortable with the plans for the increased military cooperation of the CSTO countries.” The Uzbek swing away from Russia's fold is not new. It actually did the same in 1999, only to return to the CSTO in 2006. In between, Tashkent allowed the US to use its Qarshi-Xonobod military base for the operation in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov is known to have been opposed to the formation of a CSTO collective rapid reaction forces and the “internationalization” of

potential conflicts in the post-Soviet area. Other grievances of Uzbekistan, such as its disputes with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, may also have contributed to its decision to quit CSTO. Apparently anticipating President Karimov's exit move, President Putin made Uzbekistan his first official trip to an Asian country on June 4, prior to his state visit to China and the SCO Summit. Putin, however, was unable to persuade Karimov.

Long before Tashkent officially notified CSTO of its decision to suspend its membership, the SCO saw the first "collateral damage" of Uzbekistan's "go-alone" strategy. With the exception of joining the SCO's *Peace-Mission 2007* exercise, Uzbekistan had essentially suspended its participation in the SCO's defense and security activities, including the *Peace-Mission 2010* anti-terrorist exercise in Kazakhstan, *Peace-Mission 2012* in Tajikistan, the SCO's second chief of general staff meeting in Tajikistan on June 7, and the SCO's annual defense ministers meeting on Aug. 10, 2012 in Almaty. In the recent *Peace-Mission 2012* exercise, Tashkent went so far as to refuse to grant transit rights for Kazakh arms going through its territory to Tajikistan for the SCO exercises. This was despite the fact that Uzbekistan ratified the "Agreement on the Procedure for Organizing and Staging Joint Counter-terrorism Exercises by the SCO States," but its Parliament ruled later that the Uzbek military would take part in such exercises only as an observer. Tashkent's passivity within the SCO is especially odd given that SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is located in Tashkent.

Perhaps the "last straw" on the Uzbek "camel" came from the US strategy of relocating its military presence from Afghanistan to its peripheral areas through the so-called Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a network of road, rail, and air routes that traverses Central Asia states and has served as the main supply line for US and NATO forces in Afghanistan since early 2009. After Pakistan's decision to close its supply route in November 2011 as a result of NATO's cross-border attacks, the NDN quickly expanded its role in supplying NATO forces in Afghanistan (75 percent of all non-military items bound for Afghanistan and more than 60 percent of the fuel are supplied through NDN). With the approaching withdrawal deadline, NDN is now actively considered to be NATO's "reverse transit route" for 2014.

For those Central Asian states covered by the NDN, the deals with the US and NATO not only mean additional revenue, but also access to more advanced NATO gear, which will inevitably be followed by increased mil-mil relations, training arrangements, and even arms sales. For Uzbekistan, the Pentagon has agreed to provide sophisticated non-lethal communication and other equipment. Tashkent, however, also hopes to obtain lethal weapons. One likely outcome of this is to increase the bargaining power of those Central Asian states with Moscow in diplomatic, strategic, and military areas. Uzbekistan's flip-flop with regard to military base deals with the US and Russia a few years ago was a prime example. For the US and NATO forces, NDN's "reverse gear" would allow them to operate those NDN hubs/bases for a considerable time. From those locations, NATO forces would be able to conduct both deterrent and offensive military operations inside Afghanistan. Meanwhile, such a strategy will clearly expand the US/West military presence in Central Asian countries.

In late November 2011, the Pentagon secured separate deals with the three individual Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan). Seven months later, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen confirmed that NATO reached an agreement with the

same three Central Asian countries on June 4, 2012, the same day that President Putin visited Uzbekistan for talks with President Karimov.

Uzbekistan's decision to exit the CSTO in June 2012 and its reluctance in joining SCO's security-related activities are not just a function of the NDN and its monetary benefit, but also the result of Washington's effective diplomacy. In late September 2011, President Obama called Karimov and congratulated him on Uzbekistan's 20 years of independence. Prior to the November 2011 NDN deal, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Tashkent and thanked it for supporting the US operation in Afghanistan. Clinton also noticed that Uzbekistan "is showing signs of improvement in the human rights situation and the broadening of political liberties," even if Western human rights groups disagree with that assessment. Shortly after the Pentagon's deal with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, US State Department officials were quoted as saying, "We are pursuing active diplomatic efforts with Central Asian partner nations to promote stronger economic ties throughout the region so that goods, capital, and people can flow more easily across borders. We are pursuing these agreements to better support our troops in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's neighbors and the United States all have a common interest in regional stability." After the Uzbek withdrawal from CSTO, US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake visited Tashkent on Aug. 15-18, 2012, five days after a defense experts meeting of the SCO in Kazakhstan that Uzbekistan also skipped.

For all of this, Moscow could do little, not only because these Central Asian states are independent entities capable for conducting their own "multi-vector" diplomacy much as Moscow has been doing, but also because Russia itself is part of the NDN, allocating its Ulyanovsk air base on the Volga as a transportation hub to meet NATO's logistical needs. In exchange, Russia receives up to \$1 billion per year.

Outlook

The jury is still out on the fallout from Uzbekistan's sudden exit from CSTO and hesitation with SCO. Flirting with the West, however, does not have to come at the expense of existing relations, which is exactly what other SCO members such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan, and even Russia, have been doing. China's relationship with the US is also one of cooperation and competition. The 74-year old President Karimov is a proud Uzbek national, representing a proud nation and people. With a population of 28 million, Uzbekistan is by far the most populous state and influential power in the region. The Central Asian nation, nonetheless, appears to be trying to figure out its identity regarding the differences in and limitations between independence, interdependence, neutrality (like Turkmenistan), and isolation. While warming up to Washington and NATO again, the Uzbek Parliament passed a law on Aug. 2, 2012, banning foreign military bases on its territory. Tashkent may well be playing the same game with bigger powers to maximize its interests such as higher payment for Russian bases, better terms for membership of the Eurasian Union, more loans with better terms, etc. Last if not least, Tashkent's move regarding CSTO is to "suspend" rather than terminate Uzbekistan's membership in the Russian-led security group, which indicates that Karimov is keeping the door open. Regardless, a period of uncertainty and fluidity seems to be in store for the SCO and Uzbekistan may not be the last the SCO member to increase its strategic space by playing major powers against each other.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations

May – August 2012

May 7, 2012: Chinese President Hu Jintao congratulates Vladimir Putin on his inauguration as Russian president and wished for great achievements of the Russian people in developing their country under Putin's leadership.

May 8, 2012: Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao congratulates Dmitry Medvedev on becoming Russia's prime minister after Russia's State Duma, the lower house of Parliament, approves him as prime minister in the new government.

May 10-11, 2012: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visits China and meets Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and Vice President Xi Jinping. He also attends the opening ceremony of the Museum of History of Liberation of North East of China by the Soviet Army.

May 13, 2012: The 11th Russia-India-China (RIC) Foreign Ministers Meeting is held in Moscow. Among the topics discussed are North Korea's satellite launch and Iran's nuclear issues.

May 26, 2012: Hu Jintao, in his capacity as general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, congratulates Prime Minister Medvedev on being elected chairman of the ruling United Russia party.

June 5, 2012: Twelve cars carrying over 30 Chinese and Russian journalists left Beijing for Moscow to mark Russia Tourism Year. In 2011, 840,000 Chinese visited Russia and 2.4 million Russians visited China.

June 5-7, 2012: President Putin visits China. He signs 12 agreements and participates in the annual SCO Summit in Beijing.

June 7, 2012: The 2nd meeting of SCO chiefs of general staff is held in Khujand in Tajikistan.

June 9-14, 2012: SCO member states conduct *Peace Mission 2012* at the Chorukh-Dairon range in northern Tajikistan. More than 2,000 soldiers and officers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Russia, and Tajikistan participate. Uzbekistan declines to join the drill.

June 18-22, 2012: He Guoqiang, member of the Standing Committee of the CPC Central Committee Political Bureau and head of the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, visits Russia. He meets President Putin after the opening ceremony of the 16th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

June 18, 2012: The leaders of BRICS nations (President Putin, President Hu, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and South African President Jacob Zuma) met in Los Cabos, Mexico on the sidelines of the G20 Summit. They agree to boost cooperation within the group of emerging economies.

June 20-22, 2012: The 10th meeting of the Sino-Russian Joint Border Inspection Committee is held in Moscow. Deputy Foreign Minister I. V. Morgulov receives Deng Zhonghua, director of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

June 29, 2012: Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Chinese Ambassador to Moscow Li Hui meet in Moscow regarding the situation in Syria on the eve of the international ministerial meeting on Syria.

July 16, 2012: Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) states that a Russian Coast Guard vessel (*Dzerzhinsky*) seized a Chinese fishing boat for poaching within Russia's exclusive economic zone in the Sea of Japan after a three-hour pursuit. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping expresses strong dissatisfaction with the alleged attack on a Chinese fishing vessel.

July 19, 2012: Russia and China veto a British-sponsored resolution regarding Syria. This is the third time Russia and China have acted together in the UN regarding Syria (two previous UN vetoes were on Oct. 4, 2011 and Feb. 4, 2012).

July 23, 2012: President Putin sends a condolence message to Hu Jintao over Beijing flood casualties that killed 80 people in the strongest flood of the past 50 years in Beijing.

Aug. 9-10, 2012: SCO defense experts meet to plan for joint events in 2012-2013 in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Representatives from Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan attend the workshop.

Aug. 23-25, 2012: The 15th round of strategic consultations between the Chinese and Russian General Staff Headquarters is held in Irkutsk, Russia. PLA Deputy Chief of General Staff Ma Xiaotian and Russian Deputy Chief of General Staff Alexander Postnikov co-chair the consultations, which are described as "frank, friendly and in-depth" over bilateral and global issues of common concern.