

Mission Afghanistan: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Goes “Out of Area”

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Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed to achieve twin objectives: to counter and contain the US influence in Eurasia and to balance the Russian and Chinese influence within a multilateral group in that space. Since its inception, the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and extremism have been at the core of its concerns and activities. Afghanistan, therefore, has been a virtual test-case of its commitment and the *raison d’être* of its existence. It is also the first ever “Out of Area” operation that it has undertaken. Committing itself to the Afghan issue is going beyond its mandate; not to have done so would have undermined its very credibility. Its “Out of Area” mission is modeled on the NATO example and has been duly acknowledged by NATO. Like any other regional organisation, it suffers from internal divisions and disunity. And like the rest of the world, it recognises the perils of an unstable Afghanistan. To that extent, it shares a common goal with the US that neither of them can achieve alone. It remains to be seen whether SCO’s recognition of a common goal and working towards it with the US will lead to a transcendence of its own ultimate objective of containment and eventual rollback of the US from its strategic neighbourhood.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Eurasia

“In the past decade, NATO nations have expanded the geographic scope of Alliance operations and activities and transformed their nature, all without forgetting our core task of collective defense. In response to a series of new strategic challenges, the Alliance has decided to go "out of area" to build stability in a number of regions that have an impact on the security of the Euro-Atlantic area.⁽¹⁾

"Even though we're not a member (of the Shanghai group), we're not an observer, we think it's important. We're glad we were invited, [to the SCO Conference on Afghanistan] and we look forward to attending."⁽²⁾

For the past three decades, Afghanistan has been in turmoil and this turmoil has not remained confined within its borders, but has been spilling out into its neighborhood, which since 9/11 has acquired global dimensions. The external influences – military, economic and mediatory – have not always been



beneficial. In fact, there are too many outside actors working at cross-purposes, each with a purpose and a preference of its own.

The paper proposes to scrutinize the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in the above context; its stakes, its involvement and the likely impact of its role on the Afghan situation. Afghanistan is the first “Out of Area” assignment that the SCO has undertaken. Its success or failure notwithstanding – it is a landmark decision that has transformed the SCO profile forever.

Conflict in Afghanistan: Internal Weaknesses and External Influences

Afghanistan has witnessed three systemic changes since 1979; monarchy to Marxist to Islamic fundamentalist to the present system, which claims to be a constitutional democracy. While change is a normal occurrence anywhere, each of the changes in Afghanistan has been violent. Death, destruction and dispersal out of the country have been the destiny of the Afghans for over the past three decades.

There is a mosaic of ethnicity in Afghanistan. The Pashtuns constitute 38 percent of the population, the Tajiks 25, Hazaras 19 and the Uzbeks 5 (87% of the total population). The rest is accounted for, among



others, by Turkmens, Nooristanis, Hindus, and Sikhs who have lived in the country for generations and are Afghan citizens. Within these broad categories are the subgroups. President Hamid Karzai belongs to Ahmadzai, a west Pashtun tribe. The east Pashtun tribe of Ghilzai suffers from a lack of leadership after the assassination of Abdul Haq Ghilzai at the hands of the Taliban and his brother Haji Abdul Qadeer Ghilzai by a bomb blast. The Tajiks, similarly, are divided into Badakhshanis and Panjshiris, who are against each other; and the Western Tajiks who are against them both. The Hazaras in the central mountains of Hazarajat are Shi'is. The Uzbeks reside in the north along the border with Uzbekistan.

It is perhaps the country's saving grace that the diverse ethnicities are not distributed into neat geographic spaces. Thus, no single Tajik entity or union with Tajikistan can bring all Tajiks together. Similarly, although historically the Pashtun's homeland is south of the Hindu Kush, they have a significant presence in the north as well. Indeed, before the anti-Soviet Basmachi rebellion of the 1920s in Central Asia, which brought in a large influx of Uzbek refugees into northern Afghanistan, the Pashtuns outnumbered the Uzbeks in the north.⁽³⁾ And until the Soviet occupation, the Pashtuns were settled in the north as a



deliberate state policy. Thus, disintegration along ethnic lines would be quite difficult.

Instead, the threat to the integrity of the country lies in the fact that the ethnic diversity within is accentuated by the interested and influential neighbors across its landlocked borders. There is Pakistan to its south, Iran to its west, China along a narrow, inaccessible mountain strip across the Pamirs to its east, and three Central Asian states to its north. Russia and India, though not immediate neighbors, have high stakes in the situation in the country. And the United States has no intention of leaving Afghanistan alone in the near future.

In fact, President Barak Obama has made Afghanistan the central battleground in the US “war on terrorism”. This is a significant shift in strategy from the Bush Administration, during which the primary focus was on Iraq.⁽⁴⁾ Obama’s first move on the matter was to dispatch 17,000 troops to the country and the number is expected to go up to 70,000 by the end of the year.

The most immediate goal of the current American administration is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a staging ground for terrorist attacks on the US mainland, US assets world-wide and those of its Allies. Secondly, Afghanistan must not be

allowed to become a source of instability in the region. The situation in Pakistan is critical in this context. In a remarkable display of coordination, the US “Surge” to defeat the Taliban within Afghanistan and the Pakistani military offensive against its own militants came as a pincer around the unstable region of “Af-pak”.⁽⁵⁾ Thirdly, of course, Afghanistan’s potential to serve as a transit route for oil and gas export pipelines must be realized and utilized.⁽⁶⁾

In addition to the US military presence, there are 32,000 NATO troops already stationed in Afghanistan – to be supplemented by an additional 5,000 troops who were scheduled to provide support during the recent Afghan presidential elections. Additionally, the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has asked NATO to send military and police trainers, help with fighting corruption and drug-trafficking, road-building etc., and preparing Afghan civilians to improve the performance of government and its legal system. The British have taken up the task of identifying capacity gaps and of persuading NATO allies to fill them. The Germans have agreed to train the army and Italy has agreed to train the para-military.

SCO: Organisation and Objectives

SCO deserves more scrutiny than it has received to



date. Let us consider the simple facts. Spatially, it covers most of the Eurasian area. Numerically, it is a billion-and-a-half strong. Russia, the former Super Power is a member together with its former territories that are today sovereign states. China, the future Super Power, is the initiator and host of the group. Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia are waiting in the wings to join it in the not too distant future. Belarus and Sri Lanka are granted the status of dialogue partners and Afghanistan is an invited guest. A new package of documents is proposed to be adopted soon to regulate the admission of new members. Most importantly, it is the richest territory in terms of energy resources.

It has differently and, at times, derogatorily, been called the Eastern NATO, OPEC-with-the-Bomb, Russia's Neo-imperialism, Dictators' Club and Eurasian Powerhouse.

The following three issues sum up the broad SCO objectives:

Security Concerns

Even today, the Russian ambition and influence in its former space is substantial. The Russian Diaspora is spread through the region. Their presence is Russia's strength and their security and well being are Russia's moral responsibility. Territorially, it constitutes a buffer against China and a benign observer of its own



Caucasian Autonomous Republics like Chechenya and Ingushetia. Lastly, Russia has privileged access to the installations like the early warning radar in Sary Shagan, testing and launching facilities at Baikanur, Emba and Semi-Palatinsk in Kazakhstan.

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, China acquired new neighbors on its Western flank. The Chinese feared that its Uighur separatists were getting arms and money from the Uighurs across the border. They, therefore, reached out to the Central Asian countries in general and Kyrgyzstan in particular through the SCO. The Chinese and the Kyrgyz forces did the very first joint anti-terrorist exercise under the SCO auspices.

The Sino-Russian Treaty of Good Neighborly Friendship and Co-operation of 2001 was a milestone in international strategic development. In August 2005, the two held the first-ever-military maneuver involving 10,000 land, sea and air forces and stretching from China's Shandong Peninsula to Russia's Pacific port city of Vladivostok.

Today, the two share an overarching goal: containment and eventual rollback of the US presence in their strategic neighborhood.

The security concerns of the Central Asian states are those of the rulers, primarily. Their first priority is



the regime survival in the face of the domestic opposition to authoritarian rule and Western exhortations for democracy. The SCO has long insisted on the principle of “non-interference” in countries’ domestic affairs, regardless of their human rights policies. After perceived election improprieties served as the immediate trigger for the “colored” revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the SCO formed its own cadre of election observers. Since their debut in the February 2005 ballot in Kyrgyzstan, they have endorsed every election held in a member state, despite the comprehensive criticisms offered by foreign observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and other groups. The observers help bolster the legitimacy of SCO ballots by prominently certifying results that more independent organizations typically question.⁽⁷⁾

The Energy Issues

With the largest global reserves of gas and substantial oil reserves, Russia is a formidable energy power. Gazprom, a successor of the Soviet Ministry of Gas Industry, produces ninety to ninety-five percent of Russian gas today and has a monopoly over gas exports from the country. The US and other Western nations have demanded that in the name of global energy security, Russia break up Gazprom, dismantle



government control of the energy sector, and open unlimited access for the Western companies to its energy resources and pipelines. Russia refuses. It would let them into its energy market only if Gazprom is allowed to buy into their lucrative downstream energy industry.⁽⁸⁾

On the energy front, China is the second biggest consumer of oil after the US. By 2020, it will top the chart. Though it is self-sufficient in natural gas at present, an active promotion of gas utilization will push the country into a state of import dependency. China has consistently advocated a pan-Asian continental land bridge of oil and gas pipelines stretching from West Asia to Southwest and Central Asia, Russia, and to Southeast Asia to China.

Russia and China are natural partners in the global energy trade. During a visit to Beijing, the then Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia would bring gas shipments to China by 2011, and could eventually supply the country with up to 80 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas per year. Beyond the bilateral Russia-China co-operation, there could be a wider regional gas network. It is estimated that around 50 bcm of Central Asian gas can be brought into Europe with very little more than refurbishment expenditures on existing infrastructure. Central Asian



gas can either be delivered to Europe by displacement – which will undoubtedly be the preferred option of sellers like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – or sold in Russia and Ukraine, thereby freeing up more Russian gas for sale in Europe. That would almost certainly be the preferred Russian option. The eventual outcome would need to be a compromise between the two positions.⁽⁹⁾ The SCO could provide a forum for the purpose.

The US Factor

If the SCO had been set up to counter the US presence in Central Asia,⁽¹⁰⁾ the global context quickly pulled it back in its track. It was the first regional grouping to issue a formal statement condemning the nine-eleven terrorist attacks on the US. An extraordinary meeting of the SCO foreign ministers met in Beijing in January 2002 pledging support for the UN Security Council resolutions on Afghanistan and the international war on terror. At that point in time, the world was united and stood together.

It did not stay that way for long. The US war for a “regime change” in Iraq and the US-sponsored “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan created nervousness in every single SCO state. Each one has been accused of a lack of democracy and human rights violations. Interestingly,



these “revolutions” seem to occur in energy-rich countries or countries on the energy transportation routes. The SCO provides a lifeline to the member-states by shielding them against external interference and according them legitimacy against domestic opposition movements.

The SCO, a defiant front against the US, is not devoid of games within its own interstices. In fact, the original rationale of the SCO was not to aggregate the Russo-Chinese strength as much as to balance them within a multilateral group. The very fact that the SCO has not been able to admit new members suggests the inherent fears of upsetting that balance. So long as the interests of Moscow and Beijing do not diverge radically, the SCO will continue to counter the increased American presence in the region, while Moscow keeps the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a backup solely controlled by itself.⁽¹¹⁾

In fact, the SCO is not necessarily the first priority of its member-states. Russia is more focused on admission into the World Trade Organization and containing an ever-advancing NATO. The Chinese concentrate on the Taiwan issue more than any other. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the former pawns asserting their autonomy. Even as



the SCO is rising in international stature, and even as their commitment to it is growing; each one of them is guided by its own internal and regional compulsions. The SCO is one of their fraternities. And the members have their own links with and dependencies on the United States – the very nemesis of the SCO.

SCO and Afghanistan

In June 2004, President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai attended the Tashkent Summit of heads of SCO member states; a meaningful gesture of personal independence and Afghan autonomy.⁽¹²⁾ At this Summit, the then Russian President Vladimir Putin called for setting up a contact group between the SCO and Afghanistan: "All SCO member-states are interested in peace and stability and economic revival on Afghan soil," he said. SCO members have a significant role to play "in setting up security belts around Afghanistan to prevent drug trafficking," he added. In fact, he claimed that "the dramatic situation in Afghanistan was one of the reasons why the SCO was set up".⁽¹³⁾ Karzai's presence indicated his support for a greater SCO involvement in the Afghan situation.

Soon thereafter, the SCO and Afghanistan started negotiations on the establishment of a contact group.

The Council of ministers of foreign affairs of SCO member states officially authorised the then Secretary-General Zhang Deguang to sign the agreement on cooperation with the Afghan party. On 4 November 2005, a ceremony was held at the SCO Secretariat to sign the Protocol on the establishment of a Contact Group between the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Contact Group consists of Permanent Representatives of member states to the SCO Secretariat, Secretariat officers and senior diplomats of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the People's Republic of China. If necessary, meetings of the Contact Group can involve representatives of other SCO bodies, as well as experts of SCO member states and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Coordination is carried out by an SCO Secretariat officer and an authorized senior diplomat of the Embassy of Afghanistan to the People's Republic of China.

The Contact Group conducts its activities in the form of consultations, which are held by mutual agreement on the premises of the SCO Secretariat and/or the Embassy of Afghanistan to the People's Republic of China. By mutual agreement, meetings can



be held in other places. If necessary, under mutual coordination, Contact Group members can travel to Afghanistan for consultations with competent Afghan institutions.⁽¹⁵⁾

SCO Conference on Afghanistan, March 2009

The SCO hosted a conference on Afghanistan in Moscow on 27 March 2009. It came after four-years-long consultations between the SCO and Afghanistan; but surpassed expectations both symbolically and in terms of substance.

Apart from six full members and four observers, the list of participants included the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon; Secretary-General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Mark Perrin de Brichambaut; the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Patrick Moon; and NATO Deputy Secretary-General, Martin Howard. The representatives from the Group of Eight countries, the European Union and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference also participated; bringing the number of participating countries to thirty-six. Rangin Dagdar Spanta, the foreign minister of Afghanistan represented his country.⁽¹⁶⁾ It was the first time that a US official was invited and participated in a SCO event.



Even more importantly, the Iranian deputy foreign minister Mehdi Akhundzadeh held informal talks with Moon through British mediation. “We’ve turned a page to have Iranians and Americans at the same table all discussing Afghanistan,” Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, told delegates.⁽¹⁷⁾ While the Russians were justified in taking credit for the meeting, it was significant in terms of the US recognition that Iran was crucial to the resolution of the Afghan situation and the Iranian willingness to engage with the US on the issue.

The timing of the conference made it even more important. The conference came just over a month after Kyrgyzstan decided to shut a major US base on its territory. It was held on the same day that the US President Barak Obama released his new “AfPak” strategy for US involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan and four days before the United Nations conference at The Hague. Most observers interpreted this as reflecting a tacit agreement between the US and Russia/China that an improvement in the situation in Afghanistan was their common goal and that neither could achieve it alone. The Moscow conference was devoted to the “threats of drugs and terrorists originating in Afghanistan”, whereas the US-sponsored conference under the auspices of the UN



was to have a broader agenda of stabilising Afghanistan. According to many informed analysts, the United States pulled back from opposing the SCO conference, while Russia agreed to keep the Moscow conference's agenda in modest terms so as not to overtly complicate Obama's Afghan strategy.

The Conference issued a statement recognizing the challenges facing Afghanistan and supported “the efforts of the Afghan Government, with the assistance of the international community, aimed at ensuring social and economic development, building democratic institutions, strengthening operational capability of the Afghan national army and police and enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement bodies.”⁽¹⁸⁾

The conference approved the SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan that calls for joint operations in combating terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime; for involving Afghanistan, in a phased manner, in the SCO-wide collaboration in fighting terrorism in the region; and for inviting relevant Afghan bodies to take part in joint law-enforcement exercises by the SCO. The Plan also provides for stepping up the training of drug agencies, combating laundering of drug money and improving drug controls. The measures are aimed at setting up anti-narcotics, anti-



terrorism and anti-laundering security belts around Afghanistan.⁽¹⁹⁾

The US delegate welcomed the Action Plan “as a positive forum for additional cooperation on Afghanistan.” The Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, in turn, welcomed the US-led conference in The Hague four days later. In an article published in the American newspaper, *The Washington Post*, on the eve of the conference, he wrote: “It also appears that we all understand the need to search for collective solutions to the problems facing Afghanistan, with the involvement of all influential players. In this spirit, Moscow hosted a broad-based conference on Afghanistan under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. We welcome the U.S. initiative to convene a United Nations conference in the Netherlands. It is critical that Russia and the United States view these conferences as mutually reinforcing rather than competitive.”⁽²⁰⁾

SCO Summit, June 2009

The ninth Annual Summit of the SCO took place in Yekaterinburg in Russia on 15-16 June; i.e. less than two months after the Conference on Afghanistan. In the meanwhile, the SCO Defense Ministers had met in Moscow during April and confirmed that Russia and



China would hold 25 joint maneuvers in the current year; all of them to be focused on the “war on terror”. The first anti-terror joint military exercise was held on the Afghan border in Tajikistan. The training scenario was that Islamic militants had entered from Afghanistan and captured a chemical factory. The SCO also offered to integrate Afghanistan into its counter-terrorism structure with a strong military component.⁽²¹⁾

The Yekaterinburg Summit, in the circumstances, came in the midst of SCO-Afghan engagement. The Summit Declaration “expressed grave concern over the complicated situation” in Afghanistan and acknowledged the need “to increase interaction” with Afghanistan, the SCO observer states, the other concerned states, and regional and international organizations to improve it. It was decided “to establish anti-narcotic and financial security belts in the region.”⁽²²⁾

At the Summit, the Uzbek president Islam Karimov reaffirmed his country’s proposal on changing the format of peacekeeping efforts in Afghanistan. In his view, the Contact Group on Afghanistan should include the six states bordering Afghanistan, the US, Russia and the NATO. He said that the new group could become a major consultative



body facilitating conciliation in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.⁽²³⁾ The proposal is extremely significant in that it raises the issue to a global level deserving a united global effort to solve it.

The Summit was followed by yet another military exercise named “Peace Mission 2009” from 22 to 26 July.

An Assessment

The two indented quotes at the beginning of this paper are self-explanatory. The first by the NATO Secretary-General justifies the “Out of Area” engagements by NATO and the second by the US State Department spokesman concedes a similar role to SCO.

SCO was formed to achieve twin objectives: to counter and contain the US influence in Eurasia and to balance the Russian and Chinese influence within a multilateral group in that region. Since its inception, the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and extremism are at the core of its concerns and activities. Afghanistan, therefore, has been a virtual test-case of its commitment and the rationale of its existence.

It is also the first ever “Out of Area” operation that it has undertaken. Committing itself to the Afghan issue is going beyond its mandate; not to have



done so would have undermined its very credibility. In a similar case five years back, NATO Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, in a speech to the U.N. Security Council had justified the Alliance's "Out of Area" missions in Macedonia and Kosovo as responses to new strategic challenges that would have "an impact on the security of the Euro-Atlantic area."⁽²⁴⁾ The SCO mission in Afghanistan, under such circumstances, is a response to a strategic challenge that would have an impact on the security of the SCO area.

Towards the end of March last year, the bilateral coordination between the SCO and Afghanistan was enlarged to a conference in which thirty-six countries participated. For the first time, a high level US official was invited and participated in the SCO deliberations. Four days thereafter, the US-led summit on Afghanistan took place in The Hague. There have been mutual expressions of support to the efforts of each other to stabilise Afghanistan.

The SCO Action Plan addresses the fundamental problems on the ground: terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering, law enforcement and so on. There have been follow-up actions by way of military exercises along the Afghan border, Afghan involvement in the SCO initiatives and an



institutionalized consultation.

Eurasia today is a jumble of alphabets and every once in a while, a new regional group is formed. There are sub-regional groups and there are groups that go beyond regional confines. Inevitably, there are overlapping memberships in most of them. Whereas SCO is a Sino-Russian bipolar entity, China is not even a member of the Russia-led CSTO. That the CSTO held its own Summit in Moscow on the eve of the SCO Summit in Yekaterinburg can hardly be explained in terms of logistics/economy. And unlike the SCO, the CSTO is evolving as a military alliance with a collective rapid response force and a strong Russian military contingent in Central Asia. And then, there are problems among the rest of the SCO member-states with one another and with the SCO itself. For example, Uzbekistan stayed out of the SCO military exercises in April last year and Kazakhstan has been invited by NATO to participate in its own operations in Afghanistan.

Russia and China have had close encounters with “separatism” in the past two years— one of the three threats that SCO was established to counter. After the conflict with Georgia in August 2008, when Moscow recognized the breakaway Georgian Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Chinese did not



follow suit. In fact, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying “in accordance with China’s consistent and principled stance on the issue of this kind, we hope the relevant parties can resolve the issue through dialogue and consultation.”⁽²⁵⁾ The response was guided by China’s own problems with separatist movements on its periphery.

In less than a year, in summer 2009 China was putting down the violent clashes between Uighurs and Han Chinese in its Xinjiang province. The statements from Moscow and likewise the SCO Secretary-General strongly supported and endorsed the steps taken by Beijing. Moscow’s response, in this situation, was guided by its own domestic priorities.

More recently, Russia and China seem to have come to terms with the US presence in Afghanistan and have actually sought to benefit from the situation. Two weeks after the Yekaterinburg Summit, Obama’s special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, arrived in Beijing for talks. A few days later, the US gave in to a longstanding Chinese demand. It announced that the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP), which China has alleged is a terror outfit, would be added to the US list of organisations that support al-Qaeda. ETIP’s assets would be frozen, as would those of its leadership. It should be noted



that ETIP survived the Bush administration that tended to view the issue from the point of view of Chinese denial of religious freedom to the Uighurs.⁽²⁶⁾

Moreover, China has become the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan. The state-owned China Metallurgical Group signed a \$3 billion dollar contract in 2007 to develop the Aynak copper mines. The deal was largely perceived as a US-China deal. The “US army is providing security that will enable China to exploit one of the largest unexploited deposits of copper, earn tens of billions of dollars and feed its voracious appetite for raw materials”, was one such interpretation of the deal.⁽²⁷⁾

The Russians have also been quietly supporting the US presence in Afghanistan. In February 2009 even as the Kyrgyz president was announcing the closure of Manas Airbase during his visit to Moscow, Moscow agreed to the shipment of non-lethal supplies destined for Kabul across its territory and since the Obama-Medvedev Summit in April 2009, Russian airspace is open to the US-NATO supplies to Afghanistan.

To conclude, the SCO is now a regional organisation with a rising profile. It has moved beyond collective security for its members to an involvement in its neighbourhood. Its “Out of Area” mission is



modelled on the US-NATO example and has been duly acknowledged by the US-NATO.

Like any other regional organisation, it suffers from internal divisions and disunity and like the rest of the world, it recognises the perils of an unstable Afghanistan. To that extent, it shares a common goal with the US that neither of them can achieve alone.

It remains to be seen if SCO's recognition of a common goal and working towards it with the US would lead to transcending its own ultimate objective of containment and eventual rollback of the US from its strategic neighbourhood.

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