

Terrorism in Eurasia: Enhancing the Multilateral Response

*Richard Weitz**

The upcoming summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization provides a timely opportunity to enhance the international response to Eurasian terrorism. China, Russia, the United States and their allies should establish mechanisms to integrate better the efforts of the main multilateral institutions concerned with preventing and responding to terrorism in Central Asia. Many of their activities needlessly overlap, leading to wasted resources and potential conflicts.

Responding to the threat of Eurasian terrorism requires a multilateral effort. Terrorists regularly move from country to country, seeking safe havens wherever they can. Operatives of the region's most prominent terrorist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), used Afghanistan and Pakistan as bases for launching forays into Central Asia.¹ Efforts to establish multilateral institutions exclusively among the Central Asian countries have regularly encountered insurmountable intra-regional rivalries. For this reason, the most successful cooperative initiatives thus far have involved at least one extra-regional great power. In the realm of antiterrorism, the most important multilateral institutions have been the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, with the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe playing smaller roles.

Eurasia's Key Antiterrorist Institutions

The title of the "Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism," signed at the organization's founding summit in June 2001, highlights the priorities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Its Regional Antiterrorism Structure

* Richard Weitz is a Senior Fellow and Associate Director of Hudson Institute's Center for Future Security Strategies in the United States.

¹ Richard Weitz, "Storm Clouds over Central Asia: Revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27 (2004): 465-490.

(RATS) in Tashkent officially began operations in June 2004. Its staff coordinates studies of regional terrorist movements, exchanges information about terrorist threats, and provides advice about counterterrorist policies. For several years, SCO members have undertaken numerous joint initiatives to combat narcotics trafficking and other organized crime, which has become a major source of terrorist financing. After the May 2005 Uzbek military crackdown in Andijan, the SCO members pledged not to offer asylum to designated terrorists or extremists.² In early March 2006, Uzbekistan hosted a multilateral exercise, *East-Antiterror-2006*, under its auspices.

After Vladimir Putin became Russian President, Moscow launched a sustained campaign to revitalize the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) by enhancing cooperation among a core group of pro-Russian governments. Defending against transnational threats such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and especially terrorism soon became a CIS priority. For example, the members established a Counter-Terrorism Center in Bishkek that is compiling a list of terrorist and extremist organizations operating in its member states. In May 2001, the CIS members created a Collective Rapid Deployment Force (CRDF) to provide a collective response to terrorist attacks or incursions. It initially was not a standing force, but a formation of earmarked battalions based in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.³ In August 2005, the CIS organized a major command staff exercise, "Anti-Terror 2005," in western Kazakhstan. Representatives from most members participated, as did Iranian observers for the first time.⁴

Russia's efforts to enhance security cooperation among a core group of pro-Moscow governments culminated in the May 2002 decision by the presidents of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan to create a new Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Besides developing the capacity to mobilize large multinational military formations in the event of external aggression, the CSTO has taken charge of the CRDF, giving it a multinational staff and a mobile command center. CRDF units have engaged in several major antiterrorist exercises in Central Asia, including *Rubezh-2004* ("Frontier 2004") in August 2004, and *Rubezh-2005* in April 2005, which involved

² Matthew Oresman and Zamir Charginov, "The Shanghai Cooperation Summit: Where Do We Go from Here?," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* (July 2005): 5-6.

³ Oksana Antonenko and Kathryn Pinnick, "Russia's Foreign and Security Policy in Central Asia: The Regional Perspective," in *Russia's New Southern Border: Western Siberia—Central Asia* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003), 6.

⁴ For more on these exercises see "Raising the Profile of Caspian Counterterrorism," *Eurasia Security Watch*, September 7 2005, <www.afpc.org/esw/esw101.shtml> (May 14 2006); and "CIS Holds Anti-Terror Exercise," *United Press International*, August 17 2005.

approximately 3,000 troops.⁵ Countering narcotics trafficking and terrorism within Central Asia have become major CSTO objectives. Since 2003, the intelligence, law-enforcement, and defense agencies of the member states have jointly conducted annual “Kanal” (“Channel”) operations to intercept drug shipments from Afghanistan through the region’s porous borders. Furthermore, the CSTO has established a working group on Afghanistan to strengthen that country’s law enforcement and counter-narcotics efforts.

By taking charge of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in August 2003, NATO has also committed itself to promoting long-term security in Central Asia. In line with this enhanced role, alliance representatives have sought military transit agreements, secure lines of communications, and other supportive logistical arrangements from Central Asian governments. At their late June 2004 Istanbul summit, the NATO heads of government affirmed the increased importance of Central Asia by designating it, along with the Caucasus, as an area of “special focus” in their communiqué. They also appointed a Secretary General Special Representative for the region and stationed a liaison officer there. The alliance has unsuccessfully pressed Central Asian governments to undertake both political and military reforms. After NATO’s North Atlantic Council curtailed cooperative programs with Uzbekistan following the Andijan crackdown, the Uzbek government responded by expelling almost all NATO forces from its territory. Despite the collapse of NATO-Uzbek security ties, the other Central Asian governments remain interested in cooperating with the alliance. For example, Kazakhstan recently negotiated an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO.

The EU seeks to eliminate sources of terrorism in Eurasia by reducing poverty, environmental degradation, and illicit trafficking in narcotics, small arms, and people. Notwithstanding these goals, its substantive focus remains developing the region’s energy and transportation routes, expanding trade and investment, and promoting political, economic, and social reforms. The EU also devotes considerably more resources to other regions such as the Balkans and the South Caucasus. For 2006, the European Commission has allocated only 66 million euros to help all five Central Asian governments reduce poverty, expand regional cooperation, and support ongoing administrative, institutional, and legal reforms.⁶ Another impediment to EU antiterrorist efforts in Eurasia is that the governments of Russia and Central Asia accuse EU officials of

⁵ For a description of the 2004 exercise see Erica Marat, “CSTO’s Antiterrorist Exercises ‘Rubezh-2004’ Score High Rating Among Member-States,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 25 2004; For the 2005 exercises see “Counter-Terrorist Exercise ‘Rubezh-2005’ to End in Tajikistan Soon,” *RIA Novosti*, April 6 2005.

⁶ “EU Aid for Central Asia to Fight Poverty,” *Iran News Agency*, January 3 2006.

employing “double standards” in approaching terrorist threats. For their part, EU governments have declined to share substantial terrorism-related intelligence with Russian or Central Asian governments because they consider the level of data protection in Russia and Central Asia inadequate.⁷

Like the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) seeks to reduce political, economic, and social causes of terrorism. Such factors include unfair elections, unjustified restrictions on freedom of expression, and discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, or other improper considerations. Current OSCE projects in Central Asia include curbing illicit trafficking in drugs and small arms, strengthening the security of travel documents and border controls, and countering terrorist financing and other transnational criminal activities. The OSCE Special Police Matters Unit seeks to bolster Central Asian countries’ ability to counter terrorism and other illegal activities. Its Forum for Security Cooperation has encouraged members to adopt stricter export controls on small arms, light weapons, and Man Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS), all of which could facilitate terrorist attacks. In recent years, Russia and the Central Asian governments have complained that the OSCE has become excessively preoccupied with democracy and human rights while neglecting their security and development needs. Resource limitations also constrain the OSCE’s influence in Central Asia. The organization allocates far more funds and personnel to its field missions in southeastern Europe than to Central Asia.⁸

Restructuring the Multilateral Response

The above survey makes clear the many overlapping multilateral antiterrorist activities in Central Asia. To reduce redundancies and exploit potential synergies, the leaders of these institutions and their member governments should deepen the dialogue and ties among them. The most urgent need is to connect NATO with the SCO and the CSTO, since the United States, China, and Russia are the most important non-regional countries active in Central Asia, and the most significant members of these institutions. In addition, Russia (which belongs to both organizations) and China have already taken steps to enhance cooperation between the SCO and the CSTO directly.

This month’s SCO summit would provide a convenient occasion for strengthening ties between the SCO and NATO. Russia and China would probably prevent NATO governments from obtaining formal

⁷ Dmitry Babich, “Russia as the EU’s Strategic Partner?,” *Russia Profile*, 3, 1 (January-February 2006): 39-40.

⁸ Solomon Passy, “Transforming the OSCE,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 3, 3 (Fall 2004).

SCO observer status, while the North Atlantic countries' physical distance from Eurasia makes full membership impractical. In November 2002, however, the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers adopted a mechanism whereby it could invite "guests" to attend its meetings.⁹ Alternatively, Western officials might induce the individual hosts of SCO meetings to invite NATO observers directly to those sessions. At the July 2005 summit in Astana, then SCO chairman and host, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, established this precedent by inviting senior officials from India, Iran, and Pakistan to participate as "guests of the chairman."¹⁰ Although these countries obtained formal observer status at the summit, Afghan representatives have attended several SCO meetings without receiving or requiring such status. Finally, NATO governments could seek to become a "partner" of specific SCO organs, such as the RATS.

Another institutional relationship that requires further development is that between the CSTO and NATO. Since late 2003, CSTO officials, strongly supported by the Russian government, have advocated cooperating directly with NATO against terrorism and narcotics trafficking.¹¹ In December 2004, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted that CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha had submitted an official proposal to NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer to establish formal contacts between the two organizations, especially in the counter-narcotics field.¹² At the February 2006 international security conference in Munich, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said that NATO and the CSTO should join forces to combat terrorism and reconstruct Afghanistan.¹³ NATO governments should consider such offers more seriously now that their position in Central Asia and Afghanistan has become more precarious.

Working together to strengthen security along the Tajik-Afghan border could provide an optimal locale for multi-institutional collaboration since the three organizations' zones of interest overlap there. The CSTO has established a special contact group with Afghanistan, and the SCO has invited Afghan delegations to several of its meetings. For its part, NATO enjoys overflight rights over Tajikistan in support of its operations in Afghanistan and provides technical assistance to Tajik border guards. The members of all three institutions have been especially

⁹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization," January 7 2004, p. 3, <www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/sco/t57970.htm> (May 15 2006).

¹⁰ "Natwar Singh Arrives for Central Asia Summit," *Indo-Asian News Service*, July 4 2005.

¹¹ Breffni O'Rourke, "NATO: Alliance Praises Efforts of CSTO States, But Cool to Offer of Cooperation," *RFE/RL*, December 3 2003, <www.rferl.org/features/2003/12/03122003164831.asp> (May 15 2006).

¹² "CSTO, NATO Should Unite Anti-Drug Efforts," *RIA Novosti*, December 16 2004.

¹³ "Ivanov for NATO-CSTO Interaction in Fighting Terrorism," *RIA Novosti*, February 5 2006 <<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20060205/43344211.html>> (May 13 2006).

concerned by the transit of Afghan heroin through Tajikistan to Russian and European markets. In December 2005, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) launched an initiative to improve counter-narcotics training in Afghanistan and Central Asia.¹⁴ NATO's participation in the CRDF's annual "Kanal" drug interception operations could expand such cooperation in a limited but mutually profitable manner.

A more ambitious idea would be to establish an overarching coordination mechanism for the region's major antiterrorist institutions. In mid-December 2005, CSTO General Director Toktasyn Buzubayev said the CSTO favored creating a Eurasian Advisory Council that could include representatives from the CSTO, the SCO, NATO, the EU, and the Eurasian Economic Community (which includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan).¹⁵ At a minimum, such a body could help de-conflict multilateral antiterrorist activities in Central Asia. A coordination council would also allow representatives from the various institutions to meet periodically to exchange ideas and explore possible collaborative projects.

Some might argue that the SCO desires less to cooperate with NATO in Central Asia than to displace it from the region. Not only are NATO and the SCO potential geopolitical rivals, but their members appear to have different understandings regarding what constitutes terrorists acts and who commits them. For example, American and European officials have criticized Russia, China, and Central Asia for employing overly broad definitions of terrorism in Chechnya, Xinjiang, and Andijan. Some fear these governments will justify suppressing their nonviolent political opponents by denouncing them as terrorists, bolstering terrorist recruitment in the process. For their part, the SCO members have complained that NATO governments are pursuing ineffectual antiterrorist and counternarcotics policies in Afghanistan. At their July 2005 Astana summit, the SCO heads of state asked the Operation Enduring Freedom coalition to establish a deadline for withdrawing from their military bases in Central Asia since they no longer appeared to be waging a vigorous antiterrorist military operation in Afghanistan.

Despite the unanimous adoption of the Astana resolution, the SCO appears divided over the desirability of a continued NATO military presence in the region. Some participants (e.g., Uzbekistan) clearly

¹⁴ "NATO and Russia Launch Afghanistan Counter-Narcotics Training," December 12 2005, <www.nato.int/docu/update/2005/12-december/e1208b.htm> (May 12 2005).

¹⁵ According to Buzubayev, "Through the council, it will be possible to carry out joint monitoring of the military-political situation, to develop and implement means for strengthening trust in the region, to agree on general standards and norms in relations and to agree on measures to ensure security in the region, countering terrorism and other challenges and threats"; cited in John C. K. Daly, "Kazakhstan Investigating Closer Ties with NATO," *United Press International*, December 13 2005, <<http://washingtontimes.com/upi/20051213-015005-7808r.htm>> (May 5 2006).

wanted to end the now unwelcome Western military presence. Some (e.g., Russia and China) might have sought to reaffirm their expectation that NATO would eventually reduce its regional military footprint. Others (e.g., Kyrgyzstan) might have hoped to leverage the statement to extract greater basing rents. Finally, some signatories might have wanted simply to express their disapproval of certain Western policies. For example, they might have sought to galvanize NATO into heeding their complaints about the terrorist and narcotics threats from neighboring Afghanistan. Since only Uzbekistan eventually proceeded to expel NATO forces, most SCO leaders apparently realized upon reflection that a major Western military withdrawal from Central Asia would substantially worsen their security given the inability of any other country or institution to fill the resulting vacuum.

The ambivalence among SCO members regarding the continuing military presence in Central Asia suggests that a NATO offer to establish direct ties might enjoy success. The SCO Executive Secretary, Zhang Deguang, said in early June 2006 that although his organization lacks contacts with NATO, “we are open for cooperation.”¹⁶ Russia could play a pivotal role here in framing a package deal. Since Russian officials have led the drive to develop ties between NATO and the CSTO, they might induce reluctant SCO members to open a formal dialogue with NATO if Western governments reciprocated in the case of the CSTO. A more elegant solution would be to establish an overarching framework that would integrate all three institutions. Although such architectural restructuring will not be easy, effectively countering terrorist threats in Eurasia requires better coordinating multilateral efforts in this area.

¹⁶ “CSTO Not NATO-Style Organization,” *Interfax News Agency*, June 6 2006.