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## THE LIMITS OF SINO-RUSSIAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA

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U.S. foreign policy has recently suffered setbacks in Central Asia, where its role had expanded dramatically following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Recent events appear to indicate growing Sino-Russian cooperation to limit U.S. influence in the region. Although Russia and China have grown closer together in recent years based on convergent strategic views, a number of factors will limit their strategic partnership at the global level. Likewise, their interests in Central Asia mix elements of cooperation with competition, reducing the likelihood of a Sino-Russian condominium in the region. Prudent U.S. foreign policy can prevent anti-American, Sino-Russian power balancing in Central Asia. In order to achieve its goal of a stable, independent Central Asia, the United States should seek to promote a regional concert with Russia, China, and the Central Asian states. If this is not fully achievable, the United States should promote maximum cooperation to address shared interests on issues of security and economic development.

### INTRODUCTION

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Central Asia has been a major focus of U.S. foreign policy. Even before the attacks, the United States was heavily engaged in this region, seeking to establish itself as a major regional power in pursuit of its economic and security interests

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(Blank 2001, 127). After the attacks, the U.S. security role in the region expanded quickly and dramatically, as the United States and its allies secured bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan for use in the military campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. During the past two years, however, U.S. influence in Central Asia has suffered setbacks, while Sino-Russian cooperation in the region has appeared to flourish. This has raised the possibility that a Sino-Russian condominium could displace U.S. influence in Central Asia. However, several factors act to limit the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, including its Central Asian dimensions. U.S. foreign policy can prevent Sino-Russian balancing against the United States in Central Asia while encouraging cooperation among the three major powers in the region.

Several recent events have represented setbacks for U.S. policy in Central Asia. In July 2005, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), consisting of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, issued a declaration calling for U.S.-led forces to establish a timetable for the withdrawal of their military bases from Central Asia (Radio Free Europe 2005; Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2005). Later that month, Uzbekistan evicted the United States from the Karshi-Khanabad air base in southern Uzbekistan. U.S.-Uzbek relations, already tense because of Uzbekistan's poor human rights record, ruptured following U.S. criticism of Uzbekistan's bloody crackdown on protesters in the eastern city of Andijon in May 2005. Thus, Uzbek President Islam Karimov had political reasons for the decision to evict the United States from the base. However, many analysts argued that pressure from China and especially Russia was the major factor in the Uzbek decision (Synovitz 2005). Both Russia and China had given their blessing to the U.S. military presence in Central Asia following September 11, 2001 because they supported the war on terrorism, but from the beginning they were wary of an extended U.S. presence in the region.

In August 2005, following the events in Uzbekistan, Russia and China held their first-ever joint military exercises. The drills, called Peace Mission 2005 and conducted under SCO auspices, supposedly simulated a scenario in which the two countries deployed troops to restore order in a third country torn by massive ethnic unrest. They involved as many as 10,000 soldiers, mostly Chinese, as well as 140 naval ships and submarines, Russian Tu-22M long-range bombers, and Tu-95 strategic bombers. Both Russian and Chinese officials insisted that the exercises were designed to strengthen the two countries' capabilities to fight terrorism and extremism jointly and were not directed at any third country, though many

observers contended that they were intended to send a signal to Taiwan. Many analysts argued that the exercises' primary purpose was for Russia, China's leading arms supplier, to demonstrate weapons and technologies that it hoped China would purchase. Others suggested, however, that an additional goal was to show the United States that Russia and China were capable of being close partners (Bigg 2005; Wishnick 2005).

The SCO's June 2006 summit in Shanghai raised further concerns. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, attending because of Iran's new status as an SCO observer, called for the SCO to become a "powerful body" able to "block threats and unlawful strong-arm interference from various countries" (Cody 2006). The summit took place as the United States led diplomatic efforts to pressure Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Although Russia and China have been unwilling to support Iran's request for SCO membership, Iran's observer status irritates the United States.

Given these developments, U.S. analysts have grown concerned about the possibility of Sino-Russian balancing against the United States in Central Asia, especially if expanded to include closer ties with Iran. Some analysts warn of the possibility of conflict arising from a new "Great Game" in the region among major outside powers (Klare 2004; Kleveman 2003), while others have called such concerns overstated (Collins and Wohlforth 2003). To evaluate such arguments, this article begins by discussing the overall Sino-Russian relationship, the prism through which analysts must view Sino-Russian interactions in Central Asia. The first section concludes that the two countries' strategic partnership faces significant limitations. The second section examines Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia. Although the two countries share many common interests, persistent areas of disagreement limit the prospects for a Sino-Russian condominium in the region. The final section outlines U.S. interests in Central Asia and proposes policies designed to reduce the likelihood of an anti-American, Sino-Russian alliance emerging in the region.

## **THE SINO-RUSSIAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP**

In the post-Cold War era, Russia and China have held similar views on a number of strategic issues, though their partnership has been, and remains, limited (Garnett 2000; Garnett 2001; Anderson 1997; Kuchins 2002; Brzezinski 1997; Trenin 1999). Both countries have expressed concerns about what they view as U.S. hegemony. In 1996, they agreed that NATO should be disbanded rather than expanded (Rozman 2000). Both Russia and China harshly criticized NATO's 1999 bombing campaign in Serbia because of their opposition to intervention in what they considered a

state's sovereign, internal affairs (Lampton 2001, 228-229). Both resisted the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (Kuchins 2002, 210-211). Russia and China have held similar positions regarding the war on terror, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and international conflict management. Both opposed the war in Iraq. China has supported Russia's handling of Chechnya. Russia has reciprocated, supporting Beijing's position on Taiwan and backing Chinese efforts to suppress separatism in Xinjiang and Tibet (Lo 2004, 296). Russia and China both oppose what they view as U.S. attempts to diminish the role of the United Nations and the Security Council, where both Russia and China hold vetoes (Lukin 2003, 311). Russia and China both have opposed tough sanctions on Iran or North Korea for their nuclear programs. Both Russia and China resent pressure from the West on democracy, market liberalization, freedom of the press, and religious freedom.

Russian and Chinese leaders frequently declare their intention to create a multipolar global order (Wishnick 2001, 799). Former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov once called for the formation of a "strategic triangle" of Russia, China, and India to act as a stabilizing force in a multipolar world (Kuchins 2002, 206; Lo 2003, 77). This proved impractical, but Russia and China announced the formation of a "strategic partnership" in 1996, setting in motion a process that culminated in the July 2001 signing of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation (Wilson 2004, 148-164). In this treaty, the two states pledged to continue developing a "strategic cooperative partnership," renounced the use or threat of force against each other, and reaffirmed the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity in their mutual relations. The treaty also called for an increased role for the United Nations in international politics. It specified that "neither party will participate in any alliance or bloc which damages the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of the other party" or allow a third party to use its territory for such ends, and it provided for immediate mutual consultations in the event of a crisis (Wilson 2004, 163). The treaty did not bind the two countries in a formal military alliance and did not contain a mutual defense clause, but some of its pledges were typical of alliances (Wishnick 2001, 805).

The SCO's declaration on U.S. bases in Central Asia demonstrated Russia and China's willingness to use this organization to limit U.S. influence in Central Asia (Blank 2006d). The joint military exercises showed the two countries' increasing unity in opposition to a U.S.-dominated security order (Wishnick 2005). Although the exercises did not signify the creation of a political-military alliance, they demonstrated a deepening

strategic partnership and an intensification of military-technical cooperation (Lo 2006, 10, 12).

On the surface, the closer Sino-Russian relationship that these actions represented seemed to signal incipient power balancing against the United States. Structural realism contends that weaker powers will work together to balance the power of stronger states. Kenneth Waltz makes the classic case for balancing: "Secondary states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger state that threatens them. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking" (Waltz 1979, 127). Although a striking aspect of contemporary international relations is the lack of power balancing (Ikenberry 2002b, 3), Waltz argues that structural realism retains its explanatory power in the post-Cold War era (Waltz 2002, 30). The U.S. position of preeminence is indeed a "unipolar moment," Waltz argues, and from a historical perspective, balancing will come "in the blink of an eye" (Waltz 2002, 54). "One does, however," Waltz writes, "observe balancing tendencies already taking place" (Waltz 2002, 52). By expanding NATO and criticizing Moscow and Beijing for human rights abuses, Waltz argues, the United States has pushed Russia and China closer together (Waltz 2002, 46, 63-64).

Indeed, some academic and policy analysts argue that post-Cold War Sino-Russian relations conform closely to structural realist analysis. In this view, Russia and China, both acutely aware of the distribution of power and their own positions in the international system, have sought to challenge the unipolar order by promoting multipolarity (Wilson 2004, 197). Moreover, some analysts have argued that Sino-Russian relations, previously limited by a history of mistrust and divergent interests, may have turned a corner as a result of several factors. Russia is apprehensive about pro-Western governments in the Baltics, Ukraine, and Georgia, while China worries about growing U.S. ties with India and Japan. Both Russia and China are concerned about the U.S. presence in Central Asia. In addition, growing Sino-Russian energy ties may further enhance the partnership. Russia, riding a wave of high oil prices, has grown in self-confidence and is questioning the benefits of cooperation with the West (Bremmer 2006). In the view of these analysts, both the international distribution of power and a convergence of interests are pushing Russia and China closer together in opposition to U.S. hegemony.

Yet a survey of the current international landscape shows the complete absence of the anti-American political and military combinations

that balance-of-power theory would predict (Mandelbaum 2005, 159). The two main indicators of balancing—substantial increases in defense spending that could change the global balance of power and the formation of new alliances—are absent. Russia, China, and other major powers such as India have not sought to ally with each other, nor with other countries such as France and Germany, to balance the United States. True balancing would cause serious disruptions in relations with Washington. Instead, all of these countries have sought to maintain close working relationships with the United States (Lieber 2005, 200-201). Because they do not perceive a direct threat from the United States, they are unwilling to take the steps necessary to balance American power. In fact, as Michael Mandelbaum writes, they recognize—usually discreetly—that U.S. leadership provides many valuable services that promote international security and global economic well-being (Mandelbaum 2005, 161-164). As realist theory predicts, Russia and China are uncomfortable with a unipolar world dominated by the hegemonic power of the United States. Their frequent calls for a multipolar distribution of power reflect this discomfort. However, neither Russia nor China fears invasion or direct imperial domination by the United States (Ikenberry 2003).

Even if other powers such as Russia and China sought to engage in serious balancing against the United States, they would face daunting obstacles. The United States is the first leading state in modern history that is dominant in all aspects of power: economic, military, technological, and geopolitical (Wohlforth 1999, 7; Brooks and Wohlforth 2002, 23). Other states are unlikely to take actions that would invite what William C. Wohlforth calls the “focused enmity” of the United States (Wohlforth 1999, 26). If other candidates for polar status, including Russia and China, sought to balance U.S. power through military buildups and alliances, they would spark counterbalancing actions by other countries in their regions before they were able to mount an effective challenge to U.S. primacy (Wohlforth 1999, 8; Ikenberry 2003).

Despite Russia and China’s convergent interests, their strategic partnership does not constitute power balancing as predicted by structural realist theory. Although both countries have endured strains in their relations with Washington, neither country has risked a sharp rupture with the superpower. Rather, both countries have to a large extent bandwagoned with Washington, recognizing that the economic strength of the United States is crucial to their own efforts at modernization and economic growth (Voskressenski 2000, 132-134; Lampton 2001, 232; Brooks and Wohlforth 2005, 83-84).

Moreover, several factors in Sino-Russian relations are likely to limit the strategic partnership. A history of mutual distrust lurks behind the recent rapprochement. In the post-Cold War era, Russia has been too weak to balance against the United States and, from the perspective of other world powers such as China, still too unattractive a partner for an alliance (Kuchins 2002, 205). This remains true despite Russia's recent resurgence owing to sustained high oil prices. Russia, on the other hand, is concerned about the implications of rising Chinese power. In many ways, China already surpasses Russia in aggregate national power (Trenin 1999, 12). The rapid pace of China's modernization indicates that this gap will expand steadily in the coming years. Many Russian military leaders, at least in the backs of their minds, consider China a potential adversary, which makes them nervous about Russia's status as China's leading arms supplier (Trenin 1999, 9; Donaldson and Donaldson 2003, 713). Russia would find little cause for celebration should China mount an effective challenge to U.S. global supremacy. In such a case, Russia would have even greater cause for concern about China as a potential threat, given China's geographic proximity, its historical complaints about territorial losses to tsarist Russia in the "unequal treaties" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the legacy of the Sino-Soviet split and the 1969 border clashes (Lo 2006, 26).

In addition, economic ties between China and Russia are growing but remain minimal compared to each country's economic relationship with the West. Russia's unwillingness to commit to the construction of an oil pipeline from Siberia to Northeast China—while using the uncertainty as bargaining leverage over China and its rival for the pipeline route, Japan—has increased tensions in Sino-Russian relations. Given Russia's willingness to use oil and gas supplies as political weapons, even the eventual construction of oil and gas pipelines from Russia to China could cause strains in bilateral relations. China must be wary of the political ramifications of increased dependence on Russian energy supplies (*The Economist* 2006).

Given the Russian Far East's demographic and economic underdevelopment, Moscow's ability to maintain control over the region in the long term is uncertain, as President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials have acknowledged (Trenin 1999, 36; Lo 2004, 298). Population density in the Russian Far East, with just 8 million residents, is much lower than across the border in China, where 100 million people inhabit northeastern China (Wishnick 2001, 809). Chinese immigration to the Russian Far East has been less extensive than many reports have suggested, but still considerable. The "yellow peril," which recalls the medieval Mongol invasion of Russia and envisions a Chinese absorption of large chunks of Russian

territory, remains a powerfully ingrained idea among both Russian elites and the general population (Lukin 2003, 316; Trenin 1999, 9; Lo 2004, 298; Lo 2006, 20). The full demarcation of the Russian-Chinese border has put to rest any concerns about Chinese territorial acquisitions for the foreseeable future. However, Russia remains apprehensive that long-term economic and demographic trends could lead to growing Chinese influence in the Russian Far East—and possibly even Chinese control of the region—in the more distant future after China has consolidated its power (Lo 2006, 21). All of these factors will serve to limit the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. In the coming decades, Russia and China are likely to cooperate on a range of issues and avoid serious conflict, but they are also likely to have conflicting interests that will lend an increasing degree of strategic tension to the relationship (Lo 2006, 28).

## SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

As discussed above, Russia and China recently have moved closer together based on convergent interests, including in Central Asia. Like other facets of Sino-Russian relations, however, cooperation between Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia does not represent true power balancing against the United States. This cooperation is unlikely to produce a strong anti-American, Sino-Russian condominium in the region. Both countries' approaches toward Central Asia fit into their overall foreign policy strategies and reflect their national interests in the region. These interests converge in many respects but diverge in others.

Russia's overall foreign policy strategy is to maintain sound relations with the West while using energy resources for economic development, laying the groundwork for a return to great-power status (Wallander 2005; Hill 2004). Yet, as Putin made clear during a February 2007 speech in Munich in which he sharply criticized the United States (Putin 2007), Russia also has grown disenchanted with the West and seeks to keep its strategic options open (Trenin 2006). Russia strives to maximize its influence in former Soviet countries, including formerly Soviet Central Asia. It has sought to bring these states into a single defense and security organization under its exclusive control and to exclude the West, especially the United States, from this organization (Blank 2003; Jonson 2001, 98). It seeks to secure Russia's vulnerable southern borders against Islamic extremist groups, drug trafficking, and other threats (Weitz 2006a, 156). Moscow also seeks to use energy policies to establish hegemony over the region. It has sought a leading role in the development of offshore Caspian oil and gas reserves, dominance in Central Asia's gas industry, and control of the



region's hydroelectric power (Olcott 2005a, 193). Moscow hopes to use Gazprom's "gas caliphate" in Central Asia as the basis for a "gas union" in the former Soviet space (Saprykin 2004, 89-91; Blank 2006c).

China's overall foreign policy strategy is to nurture an amicable international environment that allows it to focus on domestic modernization, economic growth, and social stability (Swaine and Tellis 2000, 97-98). China's long-term intentions are unpredictable, but for now its focus is on building "comprehensive national power" through a "peaceful rise" (Bergsten et al. 2006, 118). This strategy provides the framework for China's relations with Central Asia, where it has several interests. Crucially, China seeks to cut off any possible support from Central Asia for Uighur separatism in Xinjiang and to ensure that radical Islamic forces do not destabilize Central Asian governments (Guangcheng 2001, 161-163). China seeks expanded economic ties with the region, especially access to energy resources to satisfy its rapidly growing energy needs and reduce its dependence on Middle Eastern sources (Gill and Oresman 2003, 13; Downs 2006, 32-33).

Strengthened Sino-Russian ties in Central Asia originated because of shared concerns about border security. The SCO was an outgrowth of 1996 and 1997 agreements to demarcate former Sino-Soviet borders and to reduce each country's military presence in the border areas. The agenda gradually has expanded to address a broad conception of regional security. Uzbekistan gained observer status in 2000 and officially joined in June 2001, when the "Shanghai Five" became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Wilson 2004, 51-52). Through the SCO, Russia and China seek to oppose what the Chinese call the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Gill and Oresman 2003, 13-14). The SCO has established the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and a Secretariat in Beijing (Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2003; Blua 2004). Joint SCO statements have focused on issues such as ethnic disputes, religious extremism, international terrorism, cross-national crimes, weapons smuggling, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration. The SCO also has established structures to address spheres such as the economy and trade, culture, environmental protection, law enforcement, and diplomacy (Wilson 2004, 52).

Sino-Russian concerns about perceived U.S. hegemony are especially acute in Central Asia. Neither country opposed U.S. operations in Afghanistan, which, by toppling the Taliban and striking a blow against al-Qaeda, greatly reduced a threat to both Russia and China. However, both countries opposed the war in Iraq and remained wary of an extended

U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Russia opposes a long-term U.S. presence in a region it considers its backyard, while China worries about “strategic encirclement” (Gill and Oresman 2003, 32). U.S. efforts to promote democracy, including in Central Asia, create discomfort for both Russia and China (Olcott 2005b, 331). A series of pro-democracy “color revolutions” in former Soviet territory began with the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and continued with Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004. In March 2005, a revolt in Kyrgyzstan toppled Askar Akaev’s regime. As these events unfolded, both Russia and China perceived the U.S. presence and support for democratization as potentially destabilizing forces. The Andijon events, which served as an important turning point in the region’s geopolitics, remain murky. Western human rights organizations accused Uzbek forces of killing more than 700 innocent people, while the Uzbek government claimed that it was cracking down on Islamic radicals and killed fewer than 200 (Donovan 2005). The SCO staunchly supported Karimov, and the Andijon events allowed the organization to draw a connection between revolutionary social movements, as embodied in the color revolutions, and terrorism (*The Economist* 2005; Baev 2005, 200). Russia and China’s shared interests, especially a desire to limit U.S. influence and democracy promotion in the region, led to the declaration on U.S. military bases.

Despite these common interests, several factors are likely to limit the partnership. In many ways Russia and China are not true allies, but competitors (Gill and Oresman 2003, 32; Jonson and Allison 2001, 17). Russia perceives its economic policies in Central Asia, including its plans for infrastructure development, as closely related to its goals for overcoming the stagnation in its Far East. Russia fears that new East-West transport routes through the Caucasus and Central Asia could hurt its own economy, restrict the Russian Far East’s development, and possibly damage its territorial integrity. If the Russian Far East fails to revive, an increasingly powerful China eventually could pose a threat to this region. Thus Russia harbors ambitions for North-South trade corridors linking Russia, Iran, India, and Central Asia (Blank 2003). Russia perceives China’s development of the port at Gwadar, Pakistan, as conflicting with its own goals. China’s attempts to gain access to Central Asian energy resources conflict with Russia’s goal of establishing monopolistic control over the region’s energy sector (Christoffersen 1998, 6; Blank 2006a, 2). China respects Russia’s interests in Central Asia but opposes a Russian monopoly of influence in the region (Gill and Oresman 2003, 44; Guangcheng 2001, 166). China has not aimed to push Russia out of Central Asia, but it has sought to

strengthen its long-term position in the region in order to fill a potential void should Russian influence wane (Olcott 2005a, 53).

In addition, Russian and Chinese goals for the SCO do not fully mesh. China sought Russia's involvement in order to give the organization more credibility, but Russia is likely to assert its interests strongly. For its part, Russia realized it could no longer provide stability in Central Asia, so it sought China's help. The organization allows Russia to monitor China's activities and possibly restrain it (Gill and Oresman 2003, 14), but it also restrains Russia by providing a forum for China to assert its security and economic interests in the region.

China and Russia have different strategies for intra-SCO relations. Whereas China seeks to work with each SCO member on a state-to-state basis to expand military cooperation, Russia would prefer to strengthen the Commonwealth of Independent States and have the CIS members operate as a bloc within the SCO (Olcott 2005a, 198). When Russia proposed inviting India to the July 2005 summit as an observer, China immediately insisted on inviting Pakistan. This showed Russia's desire to counterbalance China within the organization, as well as China's wary reaction to such moves (Sokov 2005, 227).

Finally, a Sino-Russian partnership in Central Asia is likely to be limited by the Central Asian countries' desire to play the great powers off against each other in order to preserve their sovereignty. This tendency can be seen in Kazakhstan's "multi-vectored" foreign policy (Tokayev 1997; Tokayev 2006; Blank 2005; Olcott 2002, 50), Uzbekistan's entreaties to both Russia and China following the souring of relations with the United States, Kyrgyzstan's delicate balancing act in which it joined the SCO declaration but reaffirmed U.S. access to the base at Manas airport, Tajikistan's close relations with the United States, and Turkmenistan's stubborn neutrality.

Russia has been unable to create an effective collective security organization under the CIS because no Central Asian country is willing to trade its sovereignty for protection by Moscow (Olcott 2005a, 187). Nor do these countries wish to endure a crippling economic dependence on Moscow that limits their sovereignty. For example, Kazakhstan has sought multiple export routes for its energy resources in order to prevent a Russian monopoly (Christoffersen 1998, 26-28).

The Central Asian countries generally welcome China's involvement in the region, especially because of the economic benefits it offers. China also serves to balance U.S. and Russian power (Olcott 2005a, 197). Like Russia, however, the Central Asian countries are wary of China's long-term

intentions and of Chinese migration (Gill and Oresman 2003, 15, 37-38). These concerns are most acute in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the Chinese economic presence is greatest, and are expected to increase in the long term. Akaev took considerable domestic political criticism for allegedly selling out Kyrgyz interests during border negotiations with China (Olcott 2005a, 199-200). Kazakhstan does not wish to become simply a supplier of raw materials to China (Christoffersen 1998, 26).

Russia and China have moved closer together based on shared interests in Central Asia. However, these efforts do not constitute power balancing against the United States. The SCO declaration on U.S. military bases did have the effect of constraining U.S. influence in Central Asia, especially following Uzbekistan's eviction of the United States from Karshi-Khanabad. However, Russian and Chinese pressure has not succeeded in forcing Kyrgyzstan to evict the United States from its base there. The SCO base declaration, while partially effective, did not represent a larger effort to constrain U.S. power through a military alliance. Russia and China share a history of mistrust, and several of their interests in Central Asia are divergent. Therefore, a Sino-Russian partnership based on shared interests in Central Asia is likely to remain limited.

## U.S. INTERESTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Given the structural limits on the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, both generally and in the context of Central Asia, U.S. foreign policy can prevent the emergence of a Sino-Russian condominium in Central Asia that would be damaging to U.S. interests.

At the global level, Russia and China each have higher stakes in relations with the United States than with each other, especially in the economic sphere. China is unlikely to risk a sharp break in relations with Washington while it is still building its national power and thus dependent on the U.S.-led economic and security orders. Likewise, Russia recognizes its need for integration with global economic institutions, as seen by its aggressive pursuit of World Trade Organization membership. Therefore, by maintaining at least sound bilateral relations with both Russia and China, the United States can prevent a Sino-Russian counterbalancing alliance.

U.S. policy should seek to ensure that Beijing and Moscow each retain higher economic stakes with Washington than with each other, prevent U.S. relations with each country from deteriorating simultaneously, and demonstrate that Russia and China each pose a greater long-term threat to the other than the United States does to either (Lampton 2001, 232). From the perspective of U.S.-Chinese bilateral relations, as long as the

United States remains economically engaged with China and adheres to the one-China policy, it is unlikely to push China into enhanced strategic cooperation with Russia (Burlingame 1999, 41). Russia's wariness about China as a potential long-term threat is likely to limit its own willingness to pursue an alliance with Beijing. In the international sphere, the standoff over Iran's nuclear program is the current crisis most likely to affect Sino-Russian relations. If the United States takes military action against Iran in response to Tehran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, this would probably push Russia and China closer together. However, given the logic circumscribing the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, such action would be unlikely to raise Sino-Russian relations to a qualitatively higher level such as an anti-American alliance.

The United States should maintain its commitment to Central Asia. The Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks starkly demonstrated the direct security threat to which instability in Central Asia can give rise. The most important U.S. objective in Central Asia should be to promote stability and prevent this region from posing a threat to vital U.S. interests, especially to homeland security (Fairbanks et al. 2001, 93).<sup>1</sup> In order to achieve the goal of stability in Central Asia, U.S. policy should seek to prevent regional conflicts that could invite great-power intervention and to prevent outside powers, especially a single hegemonic power, from gaining dominance in the region (Fairbanks et al. 2001, 97). One possible strategy for reducing the likelihood of great-power conflict in Central Asia, which also would help forestall the possibility of a Sino-Russian condominium, would be to establish a regional concert. Under a concert, both the small countries in the region and the major outside powers would exercise restraint and place the interests of stability over unilateral interests they might be tempted to pursue through a more aggressive posture (Fairbanks et al. 2001, 101, 104-105). This is a worthy policy goal, and the United States should pursue it.

Nevertheless, significant obstacles stand in the way of achieving a concert. In the years after the Napoleonic wars, the Concert of Europe functioned on the basis of shared support among the major powers for conservative, monarchical values (Kissinger 1957; Kissinger 1994). By contrast, Moscow and Beijing hold different values from those of Washington. Politically, the United States seeks to promote democracy, an objective Russia and China do not share. In economic terms, the primary obstacle is likely to come from Russia, which ruled over Central Asia during the tsarist and Soviet periods and now seeks to revive its influence in the region. China's influence in the region is growing, but its strategic orientation is still to-

ward the east and southeast. Whereas the United States seeks to nurture free-market principles, Russia harbors ambitions of economic hegemony over the region, especially in the energy sector. The United States recognizes that Russia has legitimate interests in the region but objects to the strong-arm tactics it uses to increase its influence there. Russia, on the other hand, does not recognize that the United States has a long-term role in the region beyond fighting terrorism (Allison 2001, 251).

If a concert is not fully achievable, the United States should seek to expand consultation with Russia, China, and other outside powers as much as possible. The U.S. strategy should begin from the recognition that Washington, Moscow, and Beijing share a number of common interests in Central Asia, beginning with the vital interest of eliminating the threats from terrorism and Islamic radicalism (Gill and Oresman 2003, 32; Allison 2001, 237).

Robert Cooper has suggested that when confronting a difficult problem, it is often helpful to enlarge the context (Cooper 2003). In Central Asia, enlarging the regional context highlights further areas of common interest among the United States, Russia, and China. It is helpful to conceptualize the region not simply as the five former Soviet Central Asian states, but as "Inner Asia," encompassing, in addition, southern and eastern Russia; China's frontier regions of Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet; and Afghanistan (Legvold 2003a, 70; Allison 2001, 263-264). Viewed in this context, conflict resolution becomes an issue of pressing concern, one that requires consultation among the great powers. An explosion of violence in the Ferghana Valley, instability in Xinjiang, or conflict resulting from separatist sentiments among ethnic Russians in northern Kazakhstan would create a crisis for the international system and threaten to attract great-power intervention. None of these potential crises is likely to explode soon, but if any of them did, the consequences would be profound. The United States has a strong interest in preventing these conflicts from erupting, an interest it shares with Russia and China. It should consult with Russia and China far in advance to discuss ways to ensure that a potential outbreak of violence in any of these regions would not lead to great-power conflict (Legvold 2003a, 71-73).

This underscores the need to expand great-power cooperation in order to address common security problems. An enhanced security dialogue among the United States, Russia, and China is needed (Legvold 2003a, 104). In particular, the United States should encourage the creation of a strategic dialogue between NATO and the SCO (Gill and Oresman 2003, 41). Although NATO is active in the region through its Partnership for

Peace program and its command of military forces in Afghanistan, it lacks institutional ties with the SCO (Weitz 2006b). Possible areas of cooperation include counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, efforts to counter narcotics trafficking, economic development, energy exploitation, and disaster response (Gill and Oresman 2003, 41; Weitz 2006b). China might value such an arrangement as a way to establish ties with NATO, while NATO would benefit from greater interaction with China (Gill and Oresman 2003, 41-42). If Russia balked at such an initiative, an offer to include the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose members are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, might entice Russia to join (Weitz 2006b). Closer interaction between NATO and the SCO would offer the United States an opportunity to lobby against Iran's bid for SCO membership (Cohen 2006).

Economic development in Central Asia is another potential area for cooperation among the United States, Russia, and China. It is certainly a prerequisite for firmly establishing the Central Asian states' sovereignty. Economic development may not guarantee the short-term success of democratization but would make it more likely to succeed in the long run. Once again, it is important to view the region in a larger context. Reopening ancient trade and transport routes through Central Asia, including Afghanistan, will be crucial in ensuring the region's economic development (Starr 2005). The United States has recognized this, seeking through its "Greater Central Asia" initiative to expand economic ties between Central and South Asia. If efforts to stabilize Afghanistan are successful, the Central Asian states will have greater access to markets in South as well as Southeast Asia. This could raise concerns in Russia and China, both of which may view such regional efforts as a means for the United States to extend its presence. It may frustrate Russian ambitions to exercise economic hegemony over the region. Yet the expansion of transport and trade infrastructure would benefit Russian and Chinese companies (Starr 2005, 20). It would be a boon to Russian regions such as western Siberia and the southern Urals as well as to China's "Develop the West" program. By discouraging Russian aims of economic hegemony, such a region-wide development program would encourage Russian firms to compete on commercial terms, which in turn would bolster free-market forces in Russia (Starr 2005, 14). Although great-power economic competition in Central Asia would continue, successful economic development over time could discourage zero-sum thinking by Russia and encourage cooperation among the United States, Russia, and China.

The United States and Central Asian energy producers such as Ka-

zakhstan share an interest in preventing a Russian monopoly on energy exports from the region (Marten 2006). The United States has sought the construction of a Trans-Caspian oil pipeline that would connect with the new Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan line, allowing Kazakh oil to be piped west. Kazakhstan already has agreed to ship up to 500,000 barrels of oil per day by tanker to Baku and has expressed interest in a Trans-Caspian pipeline if the project becomes economically feasible (Dinmore and Gorst 2006). The United States should continue to promote this project, but oil exports to China, and eventually toward the southeast, also serve the goal of loosening Russia's grip over Central Asian energy exports (Fang 2006; Boucher 2006). Russia would continue to play a major role in Central Asia's energy sector, but its companies would have to compete on commercial terms.

The United States also should refine its efforts to promote democracy in Central Asia. Democracy promotion should continue to be an important U.S. objective in this region. Successful democratization would not only improve the lives of Central Asians, but also promote U.S. security interests. Stable democratic states with market economies would be better able to preserve their sovereignty and freedom of action. Moreover, they would make a valuable contribution to the war on terrorism by curbing the poverty and deprivation that create fertile breeding grounds for terrorist organizations. All of the Central Asian states continue to exhibit democratic shortcomings, hurting their own long-term prospects for development. The United States should continue to call attention to these problems.

At the same time, the U.S. strategy to promote democracy should take a realistic, long-term view. Following "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, an impression has taken hold in Central Asian countries, as well as in Russia and China, that the United States seeks revolutionary regime change in order to promote democracy—or, in a more cynical version, simply to promote its own strategic interests. Although this impression is inaccurate, it has cast suspicion on U.S. policies in the region and has contributed to the SCO's growing influence (Rumer 2006, 150; Roberts 2006; Blank 2006b). The United States should make clear that it does not seek to incite revolutions in order to destabilize or topple Central Asian regimes, but rather to work closely with both the governments and opposition groups in these states to promote democratic reform. Given these countries' historical experiences, it is unrealistic to expect democratic institutions and values to take root overnight. The United States does not have the leverage to bring about such rapid results.

Therefore, instead of hectoring these states or downgrading relations with them, the United States should engage with their leaderships in a



long-term effort to promote democracy. Joint programs to reform legal systems, electoral systems, and ministries of internal affairs may bear more fruit in the long run than lectures. Attempts to isolate these countries will only harm U.S. interests by pushing these countries closer to Russia and China. Moreover, such a policy would do little to promote democracy and perhaps would even strengthen the position of authoritarian forces (Cornell 2006, 30). The United States should promote democracy through engagement, not isolation. Such an approach may yield minimal short-term results, but in the long run it is likely to be more effective than conditioning relations entirely on democratic progress.

Finally, although the U.S. strategy for Central Asia should focus on the region broadly, Washington should seek to build close bilateral relations with the Central Asian states when possible. Russia and China's indifference to democracy gives them an advantage in building relations with Central Asia's undemocratic regimes. However, the United States also has an advantage: its goal of enabling the Central Asian countries to become strong, stable, independent states free of undue influence by outside powers coincides with those states' own objectives.

The United States faces obstacles to improved bilateral relations with some states. Uzbekistan, the most populous and militarily powerful state in the region, has realigned itself with Russia. The United States should seek to engage Tashkent in an effort to help bring about long-term change in this vital regional state, though U.S.-Uzbek relations are unlikely to revive soon following their sharp break after Andijon (Rumer 2006, 152-153). Turkmenistan's repressive domestic politics, which seem likely to continue following President Saparmurat Niyazov's death, and its neutral foreign policy stance make U.S. engagement with Ashgabat difficult as well (*The Economist* 2007). Thus, U.S. policy should seek to maintain strong relations with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and especially Kazakhstan (Cornell 2006, 32, 35). The latter, despite its democratic shortcomings, boasts the region's strongest economy. Its "multi-vectored" foreign policy, which seeks to balance relations with Russia, China, and the United States, offers an opportunity for fruitful partnership that helps to limit the prospects of anti-American, Sino-Russian regional balancing.

Recent setbacks for U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia need not signal a new "Great Game" or the dawn of a Sino-Russian condominium in the region. Although the great powers will continue to compete for influence, this need not lead to serious conflict. The major U.S. interest in the region is to preserve stability and prevent outside powers from dominating the Central Asian states. U.S. strategy can pursue this goal by working to

achieve a concert of regional powers, built on increased cooperation in pursuit of common interests, as well as dialogue on those issues where the great powers remain at odds.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a recent summary of U.S. policy toward Central Asia, see “A Strategy for Central Asia,” Testimony of Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary for Europe and Eurasia, House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Middle East and Asia, Oct. 27, 2005.

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