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Peace Mission 2009: Securing Xinjiang and Central Asia

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The Peace Mission 2009 counter-terrorism exercises under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation manifest the growing collaboration between China and Russia. Both face common threats in Xinjiang and Central Asia. For China, Xinjiang is not only a domestic issue but also closely tied to China's Central Asian strategy.

THE SHANGHAI Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held a five-day counter-terrorist exercise from July 22 to July 26 in Jilin, northeastern China, using primarily Chinese and Russian troops. The Peace Mission 2009 exercise also involved the participation of the four SCO member states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – with the SCO Secretariat sending military observers.

The joint military training underscores China's and Russia's growing partnership in fighting what they see as their three threats of separatism, extremism and terrorism, as well as a common desire to improve stability in Central Asia and Xinjiang. The ethnic clashes between the Uighurs and Han Chinese in Urumqi in early July have added to the tension in the region. The stability in Xinjiang is not only a domestic issue for China. It has also a regional dimension. China's overall Central Asian strategy is clearly tied to the security of Xinjiang.

SCO and Central Asian Security

Under the SCO framework, Peace Mission military exercises were successfully held in 2005 and 2007, with 2005 representing the first-ever such joint exercises between Russia and China. For Peace Mission 2007, more than 10,000 troops from all SCO member states (except Uzbekistan which sent military observers) were involved. Although fewer troops participated in Peace Mission 2009, that exercise nonetheless represented China's – and to a lesser degree Russia's – interests in securing the Central Asian region. There is also the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO established in 2004. Together, these have not only strengthened China's security ties with Russia, but also increased Beijing's role in the security of Central Asia.

In 2002, the Comprehensive Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) was founded by the presidents of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with Uzbekistan joining in 2006. The Russian leadership aimed to establish a Central Asian security alliance with military-political components that are similar in structure to NATO. The pivotal goal of CSTO is the maintenance of regional stability. Recently, CSTO leaders, except for Belarus and Uzbekistan, signed an agreement to establish the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (CRRF). The CRRF is comparable to NATO forces. It is an idea that has been long promoted by the Russian leadership.

This notwithstanding, the SCO leaders have been stressing -- the latest being at their summit on June 15, 2009 in Yekaterinburg -- that they are not out to establish a military alliance in competition with NATO. The Peace Mission exercises are mainly focusing on counter-terrorism drills and are not seen as a basis for a military bloc. They emphasise that the SCO has given them the ability to deal with non-traditional security threats in the region. Even though SCO and CSTO share common interests, cooperation between these two regional organisations is still limited.

In 2007, Russia suggested that the Peace Missions should be held under the joint framework of SCO and CSTO, but the Chinese leadership denied the Russian request. In the same year, both organisations nevertheless signed a Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretariats of the CSTO and CSO. This has since facilitated CSTO-SCO interaction and information exchanges, especially between the anti-terrorist structures of SCO and CSTO.

China is mainly concerned about the spread of terrorism from its Western Xinjiang province. A stable Xinjiang is vital for regional stability in Central Asia. Without stability in Xinjiang, China cannot pursue its energy and trade interests in the Central Asian region. Hence, the Chinese leadership has used the SCO framework successfully to promote its fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism. Beijing also benefits from the fact that Russia faces similar problems in Chechnya, with Moscow viewing militant groups such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) as a threat to Russian interests in the Central Asian states.

Tensions in Xinjiang and Peace Mission Exercises

Since the late 1990s China has viewed with concern the revival of terrorism in Central Asia, which Beijing sees as a source of inspiration for terrorism in Xinjiang. The Uighur minority in Xinjiang are Turkic-speaking people, who are ethnically and culturally similar to the Central Asian peoples rather than the Han Chinese, who form the majority of China's population. From a Chinese perspective, the separatist movement in Xinjiang is closely related to the pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic ideology spreading in this region following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is fighting for the independence of Xinjiang and has been associated with the Central Asian militant groups such as IMU and IJU. The latter is a faction of IMU and is currently active in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

There has been a number of attacks targeting Chinese interests in Central Asia. In June 2002, a Chinese diplomat and his driver were gunned down in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. In March 2003, 19 Chinese traders were killed when an armed group attacked a bus en route from Bishkek to Xinjiang. Radical groups in this region have shown sympathy and support to terrorist organisations and the Uighur separatist movement.

The Peace Mission military exercises are, therefore, one of China's comprehensive responses to the growing instability in Xinjiang and Central Asia. Given the sporadic ethnic clashes in Xinjiang, China is expected to continue seeking cooperation with the SCO members in its struggle to secure Xinjiang.

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