

Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Aftermath of the Russian Invasion of Georgia

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Georgia did not provoke too much concern from either China or the Central Asian governments. On the contrary, smug smiles were initially seen in many capitals of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members. Georgia is, to the displeasure of many, a very defiant and rapidly growing democracy that had the nerve to leave the embracing bosom of Russia. Many of the SCO member states have been concerned with domestic upheaval and the spread of “destabilizing” democratization movements and color revolutions. Nevertheless, this shared threat perception did not translate into support for Russia’s invasion as the consequences and the reactions have been far greater and stronger than any of the SCO members possibly could have imagined, including Russia. The invasion has resulted in three key developments: first, it speeded up the process of Georgia’s NATO membership; second, it opened up discussion of Georgia becoming an EU member state; and third, it highlighted the question of recognition of separatist regions. Although EU membership remains distant, these three developments should be considered a major setback for Russia’s interests.

Negative Reactions Towards Russia

What then went wrong in Russia’s calculations? First of all, there was far greater support from the West, in particular from the U.S. and the former East European states, than the SCO members ever could have imagined, especially Russia. Chinese newspapers, for instance, had earlier ridiculed Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvilli for his “naïve belief” that his American friends would come to his rescue. Beijing’s mockery has now ended as the U.S. demonstrated a very strong commitment, not

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only to the rebuilding of Georgia but also to that of the Georgian military forces. Similarly, the EU has taken a very strong political stand against Russia, and anti-Russian sentiments have surfaced in many European states. This came as a surprise to China and the Central Asian states who did not foresee how the defense of a small state like Georgia could be worth the potential costs of alienating Russia. While this support, unfortunately, came late, it nonetheless pitted the West, as well as most of the international community, against Russia. Some states in Europe, most notably Germany, have taken a more moderate policy towards Russia due to its own energy interests. Even so public opinion within the EU towards Russia has taken a great hit.

Calls for sanctions against Russia were raised in Europe and the US. Russia has managed to avoid such efforts although the US has become much tougher on business originating from Russia after the invasion of Georgia. Sanctions are also unlikely to garner traction in international bodies such as the UN due to the veto powers of Russia and China in the UN Security Council. It is, however, very likely that Europe and the U.S. will engage in indirect forms of sanctions, such as keeping Russia outside political and military cooperation. This said, Europe has always been divided on how to handle Russia although most EU member states share a strong concern for a revanchist Russia. Indeed, the strength of the support to Georgia is often considered to be directly related to the dependence on Russian energy supplies and fear of Russian responses. Concerns over further Russian adventures in its neighbors' territories are especially felt among the former Soviet-states bordering Russia, such as Ukraine. Similarly, the Central Asian SCO members have become increasingly worried over the extent of Russia's influence in Central Asia as their perceived misbehavior could be met with retaliation. Tajikistan has already begun to question the size of the Russian military presence at its Gissar Airport, while other states are showing similar concerns about Russian adventurism and extra-territorial action. These concerns are heightened by the West's slow reaction to Russia's invasion of Georgia. The common sentiment among the Central Asian governments is that reactions would be even slower if similar actions were taken against Central Asia considering their weaker links to the West. Hence, the Central Asian governments are likely to want to further diversify their foreign relations away from Russia, towards the West and China, as a result

China, in contrast, is not concerned with the prospect of punitive actions from Moscow. Beijing's first priority has been to contain the Russian invasion of Georgia to a "European problem", hoping that it would not become an internationalized issue. This approach has lost its value as Russia has internationalized the issue by declaring the territories independent. While Nicaragua has sided with Russia in the independence

issue, the U.S. and Europe are vigorously trying to prevent further escalation in Georgia and nullify (or contain the impact of) the Russian declaration of independence.

China like the rest of the SCO members should in fact be very concerned with this development since Russia's invasion of Georgia has effectively created a conflict between its raw material supplier (Russia) and its export markets (Europe and the US). Moreover, if it escalates and Russia continues to violate Georgia's, or any other states, sovereignty, it will be difficult for China to stay neutral. It has been suggested that China should act as a middleman between Russia and the West. However, this would put China's relations with all parties at risk if the conflict escalates.

Impact on the SCO

The West cannot back down at this stage as Russia has attacked a nascent democracy in Europe's neighborhood. This has been regarded by the West as an affront by Russia towards the core liberal values the West embodies, and also in breach of international law. China and the Central Asian states may not be overly concerned about Russia's hostility towards democratic states but other core values are at stake for them. First, principles of sovereignty and self-determination were compromised. Russia's behavior has affected the SCO members' basic stand on non-interference and casts unwelcome light on China's own secessionist conflicts in Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. Would Taiwan, for example, with the assistance of the U.S., be allowed to secede from China or would China accept foreign states handing out passports in Chinese territories? A number of parallels could be drawn from China's situation and Russia's actions and Russia seems to have ignored the very well-known attitude of China to these problems. If China had received a guarantee from Russia that the issue would not affect the Chinese situation, it is obvious that such assurances were of little substance. China has tried to define this conflict as a territorial conflict between Russia and Georgia. However, with the prior struggle for self-determination in South Ossetia and Abkhazia combined with the declaration of independence, this becomes a very hollow argument. This risks ensnaring many states in a secessionist debate and, worse, conflict that would be very unfortunate for these states as well as the international community. The scourge of separatism and foreign intervention in internal affairs will directly create problems for China and many other states. In the interest of international peace and security, these trends seen in Georgia and Kosovo need to be addressed through the right political mechanisms, and not with the use of military force.

If these tensions continue, and they are likely to so for some time, relations between Russia and China will be altered and, by extension, the very structure of the SCO will be affected. The bilateral Sino-Russian relationship is one of the primary pillars of the SCO and continued healthy relations are fundamental for the organization. Two questions have surfaced as a result of Russia's behavior. First, will the SCO continue to mature as the preferred regional cooperation organization in Central Asia? Second, will the SCO take a more anti-western stance as a result of differing values and perceptions of international law?

It is apparent that China is dependent on Russia to a great extent, especially for natural resources, and it would be hugely advantageous for China in the short-term, if Russia would redirect its energy flow to China. However, the sovereignty issue together with Russia's support for separatist forces drives a wedge between them. China will have to choose between scylla and caribus (economy versus political stability): while the West offers political stability and a principle supporting China's sovereignty, the Russian option opens up for separatism but guarantees natural resources. In the end, many factors support the argument that China and the Central Asian states find political stability more important. Moreover, China has shown itself, since 1979, to be an increasingly responsible power at the international level with little taste for geopolitical adventures, such as those Russia currently engages in.

This is not only a question of Sino-Russian relations. The smaller states in the SCO are increasingly concerned about present development. If Russia continues down the road of unilateral intervention it will undermine the Central Asian states' sovereignty, threatening the integrity and independence of the latter. Kazakhstan, with a large Russian minority, has many reasons to be concerned with Russia's actions in Georgia. Other Central Asian states in the process of democratization, changing geo-political partners, or in any way "challenging" Russia's interests would also feel more insecure towards a revanchist and more interventionist Russia.

As a result, China has strengthened its position inside SCO, as the other members regard it as a more benign power. In the SCO context, this may not be a positive development since Russia will not continue to support SCO if its own position in the organization diminishes. It is no wonder that the Georgian question was avoided at the SCO heads of state meeting in Dushanbe. The discussion of this conflict could have created a split between Russia and the other members on the fundamental principles of sovereignty, self-determination, and non-intervention. The deafening silence that the SCO members directed towards Russia, which had expected greater support for its actions, is indicative that Russia's behavior towards Georgia would not be supported by fellow SCO members.

Conclusion

Will the crisis in Georgia and the Russian aggression have a lasting effect or will this be forgotten in a few months? At present, the former seems more likely. The crisis has triggered a number of security worries among Russia's neighbors both in Europe and Asia, and also in the US. Russia is once again viewed as an aggressor, expansionist and interventionist. This is especially so among its smaller neighbors that have earlier been subject to Russian interventions and occupation, most notably the Central Asian states.