

SCO “Peace Mission” 2012 Promotes Security Myths

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The security dimension of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which consists of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, focuses on combatting the three “evils” of terrorism, extremism and separatism. The organization has become closely associated with the joint biannual “Peace Mission” military exercises, which has prompted some observers to overestimate the organization’s emerging military dimension. The ninth Peace Mission exercise, aimed at showcasing advances in military cooperation and the anti-terrorist capabilities of the SCO, was staged on 8-14 June 2012 in Tajikistan.

Moscow is seeking to boost its security apparatus beyond SCO’s information sharing Regional Antiterrorist Centre (RATS) in Tashkent. It also promotes a joint military anti-terrorist dimension modelling Peace Mission exercises around the bilateral prototype with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) conducted under the SCO banner in 2003. However, the trends in these exercises have gradually moved away from larger-scale combined-arms exercises to fit an anti-terrorist model. Yet, the internal divisions surrounding the exercises, forces involved, limited scenario planning and lack of any credible joint force structure suggest that its real purpose lies in projecting an unrealistic image of the SCO’s military capabilities.

Peace Mission 2012 was held in northern Tajikistan, culminating on the last day with the live-fire element at Chorukh-Dayron Combined-Arms Training Range in the mountainous northern terrain of Sugd Region. The exercise involved military and security forces from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As in most previous Peace Mission exercises, Uzbekistan refused to participate. Tashkent has frequently objected to what it regards as the unrealistic aspects of these exercises, com-

plaining that heavy equipment, strategic bombers and submarines contradicted the official claims of the exercises having an anti-terrorist scenario. Uzbekistan has only participated in one Peace Mission in 2007, limiting its involvement to sending a small number of officers to the command-staff element of the exercise. Although no official explanation was offered by Tashkent to explain its stance on Peace Mission 2012, it may have been influenced by tense bilateral relations with Tajikistan, which include mining the border and enforcing a visa regime between both countries. Tashkent also denied an official request to allow Kazakhstan to send troops and military hardware to transit through Uzbek territory to Tajikistan rendering the whole display of SCO unity entirely open to question.

Peace Mission 2012 was the smallest in the series of exercises involving only 2,000 personnel, including 369 from the PLA and 350 Russian servicemen (Peace Mission 2005 involved 9,800 troops). On 5 June a PLA aviation group flew from Kashi in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR), and PLA Ground Forces represented by infantry and artillery companies began a 48 hour journey on 3 June from Atushi in XUAR overland through Kyrgyzstan. Astana sent a Kazakh battalion from an air assault brigade in its airmobile forces together with tactical and army aviation including Mi-24 and Mi-17 helicopters and Su-27 fighter aircraft. Kazakhstan also dispatched Turkish built Kobra armoured reconnaissance vehicles on-board An-12 to the exercise. Tajikistan was represented by air assault and infantry battalions together with Special Forces, while Kyrgyzstan deployed a mountain warfare company and Special Forces unit. Peace Mission 2012 was therefore less dominated by Chinese and Russian forces than in previous exercises.

Russia's Deputy Defence Minister Army-General Dmitry Bulgakov referred to Peace Mission 2012 as an example of the SCO meeting new and emerging global threats and challenges. Yet, as Russian military officials promoted their own positive version of the exercise, Chinese experts were actively downplaying the event and particularly any suggestion that the SCO may become an eastern counter-balance to NATO.

Moscow deployed a battalion with artillery subunits from the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, along with 50 pieces of hardware including 15 BTR-80 APCs and Tigr armoured vehicles and air support flew 600 km from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) base in Kant, Bishkek including Su-24 frontline bombers, and Il-76 and An-124 military transport aircraft. Krasnaya Zvezda reported that Moscow had planned to send an air assault brigade from the elite Airborne Forces, but this most likely referred to a small-scale involvement of GRU Spetsnaz in support of reconnaissance efforts.

Russian preparations for Peace Mission 2012 involved rotating personnel from Central Military District into the 201st Military Base in order to replenish the conscript elements earmarked to participate in the exercise. The decision to use the 201st Military Base indicates that Moscow wanted to avoid sending higher readiness units to participate in the exercise. Ahead of the exercise Moscow also talked up a classified element intended to test "new" tactical approaches to anti-terrorist operations. Photographs from the exercise published by Chinese news agencies suggest that the live-fire element and tactics were still rooted in traditional approaches to combined-arms operations. Observers also noted that although the force was integrated it was Chinese-led and rather than fitting a strictly "counter-terrorist" model, concentrated on showcasing firepower.

The exercise was divided into three stages culminating in four tactical episodes. Political-military consultations were followed by preparing the operation and finally

overseeing its implementation. The combined forces conducted air-to-ground fire attack, joint encirclement and suppression, inserting forces at depth for pursuit and annihilation of enemy forces and vertical interception and annihilation. Given the weak defence planning capacity in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the scenario was designed by Beijing and Moscow with input from Astana. Moreover, the lack of civilian expertise in devising the scenario contributes to its unrealistic nature.

Ten years after forming the SCO and nine Peace Missions military exercises later, with some more clearly than others contradicting official claims to centre upon anti-terrorist scenarios, Moscow and Beijing engage in no real intelligence sharing beyond security exchanges related to the SCO, which undermines the ability of the SCO to respond to a real security crisis.

The modelling of the Peace Mission scenario reflects perceptions of Central Asian security in the General Staffs in Beijing and Moscow; the weaker members contribute little or nothing to this planning process. Equally, the "joint force" that features in such exercises exists in name only; there is no consistency in either the units or personnel involved a permanent joint forces command or adequate numbers of contract personnel serving within units. Security experts in Central Asia question the viability of such a force structure to act during a crisis, and off-the-record discussions with Chinese officials suggest that the PLA would only act during a real regional crisis using a bilateral mechanism.

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