



"We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there."

—C.F. Kettering

17-Aug-07

A Threat in Central Asia

When foreigners come to this country and comment on American news coverage, it is usually to opine that our reporting is, frankly, self-interested. The talking heads tell their audiences about American politics, American tragedies, American foreign policy, American military activity, and American human-interest stories. If something happens in which U.S. interests are not involved, well, it gets a momentary mention or none at all. The American public, it seems, only needs to know about events that hit close to home.

This is probably why only a handful of Americans—and most of them are foreign policy watchers and news junkies—have any idea what the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is or that it even exists. To enlighten the rest of us, the SCO was organized in June 2001 as an intergovernmental security group composed of six nations: Russia, China, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Before that, since 1996, the first five of these six nations had been similarly organized as the Shanghai Five under the "Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions," which was signed in Shanghai, thus the memorable name.

Since 2001, four additional countries—Mongolia, Iran, Pakistan, and India—have all been officially accepted as observer nations in the group, and all of these desire to become full members. Significantly, the United States applied for observer status in 2005 and was summarily rejected as not having a stake in the region. Several other Central Asian nations, such as Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, have shown interest in joining the group.

Ostensibly, the purpose of the SCO is security in the Central Asian region, with the focus on separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Although SCO officials have said that it is not the Organization's purpose to form a military bloc, they have held several joint military exercises—in fact, they met in summit and held joint exercises just this week in the southern Ural Mountains. Member nations' foreign affairs and defense ministers hold regular meetings, and they encourage contact and cooperation among their various law enforcement agencies. Its interests have also expanded into economics, trade, investments, energy, transportation, legal cooperation, illegal drug interdiction, humanitarian assistance, and environmental concerns.

In an August 17, 2007, release, the Associated Press reports:

The summit concluded with a communiqué that sounded like a thinly veiled warning to the United States to stay away from the strategically placed, resource-rich region.

"Stability and security in Central Asia are best ensured primarily through efforts taken by the nations of the region on the basis of the existing regional associations," the statement said.

India-born Dilip Hiro, writing in *The Guardian* on June 16, 2006, comments: "The rising importance and coherence of the SCO worries Washington—as well as its closest Asian ally, Japan. 'The SCO is becoming a rival block to the U.S. alliance,' said a senior Japanese official recently. 'It does not share our values. We are watching it very closely.'" The concern is that the SCO is becoming a challenger to NATO.

The nation that has the most to gain by using the SCO for its purposes abroad is Russia. Under Vladimir Putin, the Russian bear is reviving

internationally, once again making "great power" statements on foreign affairs and flexing military muscles that were even recently thought to be atrophied (for instance, Russian TU-95 bombers buzzed U.S. Navy assets near Guam on August 9). Due to its huge energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, the Russian economy is stable, and the fossil fuel demands of nearby nations, specifically European nations, give Moscow a stout cudgel to use to persuade them to see things its way. Thus, it is thought that Russia, as well as the other oil-rich Central Asian nations, may try to use the SCO as a club to expand its energy dominance. In this guise, the SCO would be a new OPEC with teeth.

From a biblical point of view, the formation of this relatively new group may have interesting ramifications. Ezekiel 38 contains the famous and somewhat controversial "Gog and Magog" prophecy. The controversy revolves primarily around the prophecy's timing. Some—and a majority of Protestant prophecy watchers would fit in this camp—believe that this great army will come out of the East to destroy the State of Israel during the lead-up to the [return of Christ](#). The other side figures that Ezekiel 38's placement and many of its internal details argue for it being a parallel prophecy to the attack of Gog and Magog in [Revelation 20:7-9](#), that is, late in the Millennial period.

However, the intriguing aspect of the SCO concerns the peoples, the nations, that are involved. To a great extent, they line up well with those mentioned in [Ezekiel 38:2-6](#). Gog, Magog, Rosh, Meshech, and Tubal all have links with Russia. Persia is modern Iran. Ethiopia and Libya are "Cush" and "Put" in the Hebrew, both of which had Eastern branches that settled in the areas of the "Stans" (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, etc.) and India. Gomer probably refers to China, and Togarmah most likely indicates Mongolia and some of the Siberian tribes.

So, an Eastern bloc led by a resurgent Russia, comprised of nations that contain half the world's population in aggregate, having four nuclear club members and huge, modern, well-equipped armies, and with black gold to back it, is a force to be reckoned with. We would be wise to keep an eye on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization over the next few years.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Why Study Prophecy?](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The study of prophecy has perhaps done more to divide than unify, so we need to approach it in a balanced manner. Generally, prophecy is anything spoken or written under the inspiration of God, not only foretelling but forthtelling—speaking out as well as speaking beforehand. The functions of a prophet include 1) foretelling the future, 2) carrying out a mission, 3) revealing sin, 4) revealing God, and 5) witnessing before the people. Jesus Christ is the focus of prophecy (Luke 24:27). We study prophecy to 1) know the general outline of future events, 2) be prepared for the next significant event, 3) understand God's will, and most importantly, to 4) understand God and His character. God's prophecies, bearing the stamp of His mind, are sure and do not require our private interpretation.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Globalism \(Part Eight\): A Force for Conflict](#)

by Charles Whitaker

Globalism, as it comes in contact with tribalism, often causes conflict because the two systems are incompatible. Charles Whitaker also explains how globalism, China and prophecy collide in the last days.

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