

Russia, China join hands for Central Asian security

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, June 7. —Leaders of Russia, China and four Central Asian nations anointed their security group today as a full-fledged international organisation and vowed to strengthen their cooperation against terrorism.

Mr Vladimir Putin also used the regional summit to reassure China that his efforts to build closer ties with the West do not threaten Russia's burgeoning ties with Beijing. Mr Putin, Mr Jiang Zemin and leaders of former Soviet republics Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, signed the charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation — a document that will give the group formal, international legal status.

The six leaders also agreed to set up a joint regional anti-terrorist structure headquartered in Kyrgyzstan. "We bear a special responsibility for security and stability in Central Asia," Mr Putin said.

The group, which was set up in Shanghai in 1996, initially included five nations and called itself the Shanghai Five. Last year it embraced Uzbekistan and renamed itself to reflect more ambitious goals. The original group was created to help defuse tensions along China's 7,500 km-border with the other member nations. Recently, it has increasingly focused on combined efforts to fight extremism, terrorism and separatism.

Russia and China, which have dominated the group, have described it as an important tool to increase stability in Asia and foster the concept of a "multipolar world" intended to offset perceived US global domination. But the shared domination of Russia and China over strategically placed, resource-rich Central Asia ended after September 11, when Mr Putin gave a quick blessing for the US military deployment there for operations in Afghanistan.

The US push into the region has troubled China, which expressed support for the US-led war on terrorism but remains nervous

about American military presence near its borders.

Mr Putin sought to assuage China's concern about the US military presence in the region, saying in an interview this week that the USA's military presence in Central Asia was key to defeating Islamic terrorists who threaten to destabilise the entire region. He said that Russia no longer considers the USA a rival, but a partner in its relations with other ex-Soviet republics.

Uzbekistan has treated the Shanghai group with increasing neglect since its relations with America improved dramatically thanks to its offer to host US troops last fall. Some analysts said the Uzbek President Mr Islam Karimov is increasingly looking to the USA as Uzbekistan's chief protector and trying to distance his nation from Moscow and Beijing. During today's summit, however, Mr Karimov hailed the group as an important part of the global effort to combat terrorism. Mr Putin also soothened Beijing's uneasiness about ties between Russia and the West.

THE STATESMAN

Almaty summit chants anti-terrorism mantra

FROM OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

Almaty, June 4: The unconditional and unequivocal condemnation of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations emerged as the primary focus of the first-ever summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Central Asia here today. The 16-members of the body, including Pakistan, declared that no consideration could be invoked to justify terrorism.

This was done by adopting two declarations of intent — the "Almaty Act" and the "Declaration on Eliminating Terrorism and Promoting Dialogue among Civilisations". The Almaty Act, besides attempting to foster security co-operation, confidence-building measures and giving a formal structure to the

grouping, also resolved to "unconditionally and unequivocally condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations as well as any support to or acquiescence in it and the failure to directly condemn it".

Through the Declaration on Terrorism, the summit condemned all forms of terrorism "committed no matter when, where and by whom". At the same time, the declaration said that terrorism could not be attributed to religion, nationality or civilisation.

Thus, it said: "We believe that it is essential not to allow terrorists to lure us into a conflict of religions, cultures or civilisations."

Since in India's immediate context, terrorism is equated with Pakistan, Delhi can justifiably feel satisfied at the success of the summit. India played a cru-

cial role in steering the summit to adopt the declaration on terrorism. Earlier, only the Almaty Act was to have been adopted at the summit. However, India had suggested to Kazakhstan, a fiercely secular, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, that it might consider adopting a declaration against terrorism.

The suggestion was accepted by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose idea it was to form the grouping and who has nurtured it over the last 10 years. When an invitation arrived in Delhi for Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to attend the summit, India was pleasantly surprised to see that the Kazakhs had sent a draft of the proposed declaration along. Today, that declaration was adopted after much negotiation.

Without naming Pakistan, Vajpayee made it clear that "nuclear weapon

states should not indulge in nuclear blackmail".

Attempts were made before the summit by Pakistan to steer the final declaration towards making a distinction between terrorists and "freedom fighters". Islamabad also wanted the right to self-determination as another qualifier in branding certain activities terrorist. It was not successful.

All that it managed to get was a mention of self-determination in the declaration of terrorism in the context of the member states affirming their commitment to the principles of the UN charter.

A senior Indian official said: "Affirming faith in the UN charter is like affirming faith in motherhood and apple pie. It is fine with us (as long as terrorism is not justified by qualifying it)."

In this context, it was also signifi-

cant that the Almaty Act enjoined upon the members of the grouping not to "support on the territory of another member state any separatist, movement and entities" and not to establish any kind of relation with them.

The Act also resolved that the territory of member states must also not be allowed to be used by these organisations and nor should any economic, financial and other assistance be given to them. This, too, goes in favour of India's diplomatic line against terrorism and cross-border terrorism.

The Almaty Act rejected "the use of religion as a pretext" by terrorists and separatists to achieve their objectives. But it drew a clear link between drug trafficking, illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons and terrorism as they are used to finance it.

The U.S. and Central Asian oil

By Qamar Agha

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THE UNITED States-led "war on terrorism" has succeeded in achieving many of its objectives that include the dislodging of the Taliban regime and the installation of a pro-western Government in Afghanistan. It has also succeeded in dismantling Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network. Like Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf region, the Taliban in Afghanistan has provided the U.S. an opportunity to deploy its forces in Central and South Asia. Washington was trying since the disintegration of the Soviet Union to gain access to the strategic Central Asian region which has more than 6 per cent of the world's proven oil resources and almost 40 per cent of its gas reserves.

The U.S. is now involved in the unfinished task of restoring peace in war-ravaged Afghanistan and trying to gain influence in the newly-independent oil-rich Central Asian Republics of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan where a vacuum has been created with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. These countries are rich in resources but they neither have the technology nor the financial resources to pump out and distribute their energy resources from the isolated and land-locked region to the principal energy markets in Western Europe and South Asia. The only existing pipelines were those of the old Soviet distribution network through Russia, which after the collapse of the Soviet Union needs massive investments to upgrade.

The economic crisis in Russia, the Taliban-backed Islamic militancy in Central Asia and the inefficiency of the Central Asian regimes have further complicated the situation. Earlier, the U.S. policy in the region was to undermine "Russia's economic monopoly while at the same time ensuring that other rivals like Iran and China were kept out of the region". The American administration throughout the 1980s spent billions of dollars funding the jihad against the Moscow-backed regime in Kabul to undermine the Soviet Union. Once the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Americans turned a blind eye to the Islamic militancy and regressive social policies of the Taliban that was backed and funded

by two of its closest allies, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. initially tolerated the Taliban regime because it helped in the containment of Iran, and Russia's influences in the region.

But the Bush administration is now exploring the possibility of entering in a big way the new oil bazaar of Central Asia. Its plan is to bring oil and gas through pipelines via countries over which it could exert substantial political influence and

have oil concessions in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are seeking American permission to carry out swaps with Iran.

The American "war against terrorism" has also brought about a virtual encirclement of Iran. U.S. troops are now deployed in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Large numbers of western troops are also present in the Persian Gulf region to protect pro-west regimes against the threat posed by internal as well as external forces.

The American 'war against terror' has also become a battle to control the energy resources of the Central Asian region.

bypass Russia and Iran. Both these countries have large proven reserves of oil and gas but are opposing the U.S. moves in the region. However, the oil cartels are insisting that Iran, which has the second largest gas reserves in the world and has over 93 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, be included in the future setup. Otherwise they will have to spend billions of dollars to bring oil by an alternative route under the Caspian Sea through the Caucasus via Azerbaijan and Georgia and then across Turkey, known as the Baku-Ceyhan corridor, which links this region to Europe.

The strategic location of Iran and its vast energy reserves are important in the future oil market. Iran has borders with Turkey, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan as well as with Pakistan. Iran maintains friendly ties with Turkey and is also connected with it through an extensive pipeline network. Without spending much time and money, oil and gas from Central Asia can be transported to Europe through the Iranian route. This route is the safest and will need only \$300,000 to connect Iran with Azerbaijan. Besides, Iran will have to raise additional funds to bring oil and gas through pipelines to neighbouring Pakistan and from there to India, which is the major energy consumer in South Asia. Iran also has facilities where Central Asian oil can be refined and exported. Two U.S. oil companies, Chevron and Mobil, which already

Turkey, a member of NATO, also has the presence of U.S. troops. Besides, the Americans keep accusing Iran of harbouring terrorism. Iran is also facing serious economic difficulties because of its war with Iraq and the sanctions imposed by the U.S. in the wake of the takeover of its embassy in Teheran by Islamic zealots. However, the Iranian leadership has so far resisted U.S. pressure. It has improved ties with the European Union and invited E.U. oil companies to invest in its energy sector, which needs massive foreign investments and technology upgradation. It is also demanding that Central Asian oil be routed through Iran. It is trying to settle its problems with the western nations through diplomatic means. Even during the current crisis, it has taken a "principled" stand by declaring the terrorist attack on America as a "barbaric act against the tenets of Islam" but refused to be part of the U.S.-led war on terrorism. Instead, it proposed a "dialogue with civilisation" to avert any future confrontation.

The "pragmatic" leadership in Iran has always left room for diplomatic manoeuvring. Teheran maintains friendly ties with all its neighbours including the interim regime in Afghanistan. Neither India nor Turkey has any objection to buying oil and gas from Iran. In spite of its political differences with the West, Iran had developed economic ties with the European nations

and Japan. Similarly, it wants to establish a "limited relationship" with the U.S. Clearly, the signal is for reconciliation. But the economic differences between the two are still wide. The U.S. wants uninterrupted oil supplies to western nations at an agreed price, whereas Iran is working on a strategy which gives the oil-producing nations the right to determine prices. Washington is demanding that "market forces rather than politically inspired production agreements should govern the oil market". It believes that higher oil prices cause inflation, and the world economy will slip into recession that will also hurt oil-producing countries. But, the countries of the region believe the oil market is controlled by the western nations and their interest lies in keeping the oil prices low. And as a result, most of the countries of the region are facing serious financial difficulties.

But under the changed situation with American military presence across the region, these countries will find it extremely difficult to dictate oil prices. The newly-independent Central Asian republics are desperate for cash. For over a century, these countries were ruled by the Tsars and the Soviets and remained underdeveloped. Taliban-backed Islamic militancy has further worsened the situation in the region where it is now feared that Russian domination will be replaced by American hegemony. Iran was of the view that the vacuum created by the Russian withdrawal should be filled by the countries of the region and wanted major powers including India to prevent superpower domination in this strategic region.

However, this has not happened and now the western troops have arrived in the region but the U.S. is also facing a slowdown in its economy. Now its priority is to prevent recession rather than spend billions of dollars for investments in the oil bazaar of Central Asia just to bypass Iran — a project which is not viable commercially and opposed by western oil companies. There are already moves which point to incorporating Iran in the future oil strategy of the region. Now the Americans are spread all over Central and South Asia and the American "war against terror" has also become a battle to control the energy resources of the Central Asian region.

28 JAN 2002