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## China, Russia face up to Taliban threat

By Dmitry Shlapentokh  
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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced in April that Russia and China would strengthen their military cooperation through the [Shanghai](#) Cooperative Organization (SCO), and engage in several joint military maneuvers.

Some observers feel the plans for improved ties are aimed at limiting the United States' presence in Central Asia, but there are more factors in play. The new promises of cooperation are not based solely on fear of the West's imperial expansion, as was the case in 2001 at the beginning of the George W Bush and Vladimir Putin presidencies.

Indeed, 2009 is very different from 2001, when the US - full of confidence as the only superpower and taking advantage of the September 11, 2001, attacks - accelerated a drive for imperial expansion that had begun in the late 1980s when the Soviet empire started to crumble. Now, it is the US's turn for a decline, and it could be a rapid one.

The erosion of the US's economic foundations is clear. Chrysler, one of the major US car companies, is bankrupt, and its other major car manufacturers are moving in the same direction. Even the most optimistic economists are assuming that recovery from the financial crisis will be slow and that unemployment will remain high in the foreseeable future.

President Barack Obama has made some sound statements in regard to the improvement of the US economy in the long run, such as increasing reliance on alternate forms of energy and the development of the country's [railroads](#). Still, unless his goal is a Potemkin Village showcase with no visible implications for the US economy, he needs more than some elements of a planned economy. Nothing like this is in sight; and the US mint will

continue to print billions of dollars and the country's debt continues to pile up.

The economic decline is increasingly being translated into military weakness, which will affect US military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. With mercenary armies increasingly employed, the military is inspired not so much by the image of the flag as the image of cash. And this is increasingly short in supply. The endless redeployment of the same soldiers also leads to poor morale.

While the US is in the process of decline, it has considerably reduced its tensions with Russia. The US-China relationship is also much better than in 2001, when there was the serious incident over the American spy plane that collided with a Chinese fighter over [China's air](#) space.

The reason for Russia and China's concern over Central Asia is not US might, but actually its weakness. Both nations fear that the coming surge of US troops in Afghanistan might be the last desperate attempt to turn the tide before departure, which would lead to the spread of Muslim insurgencies not just in [Pakistan](#) but in Central Asia. This increased spread of Muslim insurgents could not only disrupt the gas and oil supply from the region, which is essential for both China and Russia, but create problems in their respective Muslim-dominated areas.

Russia is increasingly concerned with the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which led to its attempt to build a sort of united force with Central Asian states as well as other former republics of the Soviet Union, such as [Belarus](#). It soon became obvious that those arrangement will have little value.

Alexander Lukashenko, the Belarusian leader, stated that he would not send troops outside Belarus, while [Uzbekistan's](#) President Islam Karimov lost interest in military cooperation with Russia early on. The same seems to be true with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon.

Despite the country's vulnerability due to its proximity to Afghanistan, the Tajik press increasingly presents Russia in an unfriendly light. Not only is Russia accused of sending back Tajik migrant workers, but also of not providing Tajikistan with enough economic assistance. Russia is also accused of fomenting the Tajik civil war in the 1990s.

With their plans for alliances in Central Asia flagging, Russia turned to China as the only option; and China seemed to be happy to reciprocate. Still, Russia continues to be suspicious of China because it is economically stronger and has greater demographic clout in the Far East.

China also does not see Russia as a trusted ally. China does not receive Russian gas or oil in its entirety and competes with Russia for Central Asia's natural resources. China was also displeased with the Russian war in Georgia, the ultimate goal of "regime change" in Tblisi and Russia's recognition of the breakaway Georgian regions Abkhazia and South

Ossetia.

The Central Asian states, despite their suspicion and dislike of Russia, could well be even more displeased with a strong Chinese presence in their region, because of the fear that China with its huge population and rising economic and military muscle could totally absorb Central Asia in the future. While possibly all states in the region understand the danger of the Taliban in various degrees, it remains to be seen if the Chinese/Russian cooperation will, indeed, stop the Taliban tide.