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Afghanistan Looms Over SCO Forum

By Alexandra Odynova

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President Dmitry Medvedev joined other heads of state in the Kazakh capital on Tuesday evening for the opening of a two-day summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that is expected to be dominated by Afghanistan.

Medvedev will meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai to discuss bilateral relations on the sidelines of the 10th anniversary summit Wednesday, the Kremlin said in a statement.

Afghanistan's future is key for the SCO member states as a U.S.-led coalition prepares to start withdrawing troops from the country, said Yevgeny Minchenko, a political analyst with the International Institute of Political Expertise.

"The main problem is simple: What is to be done when the United States leaves Afghanistan?" Minchenko said by telephone. "How can radical Islamism be fought and stability preserved?"

The 130,000 international troops fighting insurgency in Afghanistan are due to start limited withdrawals next month, with a full withdrawal scheduled for 2014.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose country holds the SCO's rotating chairmanship this year, said the SCO had to confront the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism and extremism in its neighborhood, even though it was not a military organization.

"We believe that the prosperity of Central Asia and the surrounding states can only be achieved through a strong, independent and stable Afghanistan," Nazarbayev said in an op-ed piece for The Moscow Times.

"It is possible that the SCO will assume responsibility for many issues in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of coalition forces in 2014," he added.

The Russia- and China-dominated organization also includes the four Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Four other countries — India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia — are observer states that have expressed interest in joining. Medvedev's top foreign adviser Sergei Prikhodko said Tuesday that "one shouldn't expect that some decision on the enlargement of the organization will be made in Astana," Interfax reported.

Afghanistan and Turkmenistan are special guests of the summit this year.

Heads of state will discuss what the SCO has accomplished in its first 10 years and outline tasks for the future, the Kremlin said. The summit will end with a declaration on a decade of cooperation, it said.

Minchenko said, however, that the states have little to declare because the SCO has proved to be "a toothless organization" serving as "a platform for discussions."

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