

India's Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) comprises four Central Asian Republics (CARs), namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; Russia; China; India and; Pakistan. Russia and China are contiguous to Central Asia. India does not have a direct land boundary with the CARs. In Indian strategic thinking CARs are part of its extended neighbourhood. The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have already established a strong presence in the Region and have initiated mega projects. It is an opportunity as well as a challenge for India to carve out a niche for itself in a Region that is of vital importance to it. The article explores the significance of regional grouping as well as India's ability to play an effective role.

Introduction

A discussion was held among experts on the question: whether

India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) would be helpful in promoting India's foreign policy goals in the region? The discussion revealed two diverse opinions. One point of view was that the Russian Federation had already established their presence in Eurasia. They have established a strategic partnership and are key players in the region. Both have initiated their respective ambitious projects in the region; the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) by Russia and China has launched its mega project Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), often referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These projects

encompass the area of the other four members of the SCO, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Importantly, Russia and China are contiguous to Central Asia, whereas India does not have a direct land boundary with these landlocked members. In view of the geopolitical reality, would the two leading actors share their Eurasian space with India? Can India overcome the geographical impediment or be able to compete with the leading players? However; now that India is a full member of the SCO, it is plausible that such a view may have undergone a rethink.

On the other hand, a large section of experts, diplomats, journalists etc. had been of the opinion that India should strive for membership as it would be an opportunity to advance India's strategic interests in the region. After all, in Indian strategic thinking the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are part of its extended neighbourhood and this objective has acquired even greater significance by the turn of the century. In June 2017 India, along with Pakistan, was accorded full membership and in June 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi participated in the 18th Summit of Heads of State in Qingdao, China. It is argued that membership of SCO is not only a major milestone in India's foreign policy, importantly it will give a big thrust to its "Look North" strategy. Though Russia and China are pursuing a vigorous foreign policy in the region, India can play a productive role in the SCO. It is proposed to explore areas where Indian engagement can be productive. The focus of the article is on those members of the SCO who are equally important for the CARs. In order to assess India's role, it is necessary to analyse the significance of the grouping for it.

Significance for India

The SCO is an Eurasian inter-governmental organisation. After the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the vast Eurasian land mass was open. Its geopolitical location, flanking two potential leading powers of Asia and abundant natural resources, attracted global attention from the beginning. As a consequence, a fundamental shift in international outlook occurred from Europe to

Asia including Eurasia. In the process, Eurasia began to witness an interplay of two tendencies; cooperative as well as competitive.

However, these developments did impact on Indian policy. India's strategic vision had broadened by the turn of the century. It was no longer South Asia centric, but had expanded to include the Middle East, Persian Gulf, Central Asia, South Asia and South East Asia. Two factors, however, stymied Indian engagement with the Central Asian Region. Firstly, Indian attempts to energise its ties with the CARs coincided with the focus on multilateralism in which the SCO assumed significance as its instrument. India was not a member. Secondly, India's bilateral mechanism was not an efficient instrument because it did not share a direct land boundary with the Central Asian Region. Today, India's full membership of the SCO and the operationalisation of Shahid Behesti port in Chabahar has opened a regular gateway to the region and provided a vast opportunity.

An equally significant development was India's launching of its Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP) in 2012 encompassing all the CARs as a region. The CCAP was India's first regional initiative. Prime Minister Modi's visit to all the five Central Asian countries highlighted India's regional approach. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan he said, "We see an important place for Central Asia in India's future".¹ The centrality of the region was brought out in a succinct manner while addressing members of the Nazarbayev University. He said, "Central Asia is at the crossroads of Eurasia. It has been caught in the currents of history and it has also shaped".² In its regional focus, India accorded equal importance to connectivity.

Besides, as a member of the SCO India can participate in all its structures and not remain a mute spectator watching from the sidelines. The structures are: Heads of State, Heads of Government, Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Meetings of Heads of Ministers and/or Agencies, Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) etc. Moreover, the focus of SCO is on regional security and economic development and deliberations on these issues are also in India's interest. Participation in these structures, with commonality of interests, gives India an opportunity to

understand these issues and interact with Central Asian leaders. Since joining the SCO, India has participated in over 12 Ministerial level meetings. In October 2018, Foreign Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj participated in the Council of Heads of Government in Dushanbe. The meeting was both in the restricted as well as extended formats.³ In fact, informal meetings play a useful role in fostering better understanding of issues at hand and could often lead to solutions. Moreover, the regional presence will enable India to observe trends in security, energy, connectivity etc. Undoubtedly, membership of the SCO will provide a stimulus to CCAP.

India and the SCO

The establishment of the SCO coincided with the broadening of India's strategic vision. With the defeat of the Taliban, a window of opportunity opened to connect with Afghanistan and the CARs. Since its inception, India had evinced interest in joining the grouping because of its stake in peace and stability in the region. At the Astana summit in 2005 India was accorded Observer status in the grouping. In his acceptance speech, then Foreign Minister Shri Natwar Singh highlighted the role India could play. He said, "If India was offered full membership, it would bring its rich experience of multilateral diplomacy into the SCO. India has played a very productive role in organisations like the Non-Aligned Movement of which it was a founder member". India had been cooperating with RATS and shared its experience and intelligence in tackling religious extremism and terrorism.

India has been regularly attending the summit meetings, represented by its Foreign Minister. In the course of the past years, the SCO passed several momentous resolutions such as the Astana summit in 2005 where the SCO gave a call to the US to announce a time frame for the withdrawal of its military base facilities from Central Asia. Later, the SCO at its Shanghai summit in 2006 forcefully asserted that it was the responsibility of the countries in the region to take care of their security issues.⁴ The SCO set up an Afghan-SCO contact group with the goal of ensuring peace, stability, and reconstruction of Afghanistan. A

Comprehensive Counter Terrorism Resolution was passed in 2009.

At the Ufa summit in Russia in 2015, it was decided that India and Pakistan would be admitted as full members of SCO. After procedural matters were sorted out, the membership became effective in 2017. The CARs and Russia supported India's candidature as full member. India's membership at that juncture, in the opinion of Dr. Alexander Lukin, a reputed Russian scholar, was because of India's political weight and economic attractiveness among developing countries as India can make a significant contribution to the Central Asian countries and help diversify their external economic relations.⁵ In his acceptance speech Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "... our membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is the natural extension of the relationship that India has with member countries and mirrors the region's place in India's future".⁶ At the Qingdao summit in China in June 2018, Prime Minister Modi stated, "... that SCO should explore ways to utilise the SCO platform to stabilise the energy market for mutual benefit and that the development strategy of SCO until 2025 provides a good roadmap for cooperation".⁷ However; the high point of Prime Minister Modi's speech was that, connectivity was key to economic development of the region. He said, "Connectivity with our neighbourhood and in the SCO region is our priority. India welcomes any such (connectivity) project which includes sustainable, transparent and which respects member states' sovereignty and territorial integrity".⁸ He suggested a novel acronym outlining his vision for a "secure" region; where "S" stood for security for citizens, "E" for economic development, "C" for connectivity in the region, "U" for unity, "R" for respect of sovereignty and integrity and "E" for environmental protection. India has also been participating in various structures of SCO.

However, over the years the SCO has evolved as a forum, rather than as a regional security and stability provider. Nevertheless, the SCO can initiate a positive discourse on regional cooperation. In the light of widespread expansion of religious extremism and terrorism in the region, the SCO can initiate a discourse on extremism and terrorism and promote

regional cooperation. From the Indian perspective, membership of the SCO is a milestone in its regional policy. It is an opportunity to engage with members, as well as with countries of Observer status, that is, Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia, on issues of common concern within the framework of SCO.

What Role Can India Play in SCO

The CARs have viewed India as a friendly country with no hidden agenda. Hence have been supportive of India's candidature in the SCO. In the changed context of fundamental shifts in the region and the emerging geopolitical competition between Russia and China for the Central Asian space, the support of CARs is also of equal importance. The CARs are apprehensive that in pursuit of their respective projects, they are likely to come under pressure. Undoubtedly, Central Asia is the key to the success of Russian and Chinese projects. The CARs are of the view that India's regional presence would strengthen their multi vector foreign policies. In their opinion, India could change the existing narrative and add substance to their policy of "No Single" power shall dominate Central Asia.

Meanwhile, another noteworthy trend that is apparent is the rising need for cooperation among the Central Asian leaders. In this regard the role of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is commendable. His primary goal is "Region First" and has launched hectic diplomatic parleys towards this objective. These initiatives have elicited a positive response from the other members. At a conference in Astana in March 2018 to discuss regional cooperation, the following reaction by the Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbayev to a question reflects the cooperative spirit at the conference. He said, "... In order to solve the problems of Central Asia, we do not need any third person. We ourselves can resolve all questions and that is why we are meeting".⁹ There is now greater awareness that, if they have to progress and be recognised as sovereign and equal partners by the international community, and not as pawns in the power play of other powers then economic development is absolutely essential to integrate into the world economy. An idea that is likely to fructify is the introduction of a Silk Road visa on the pattern of

Shengen visa. This trend towards regional cooperation needs to be encouraged and strengthened.

The regional aspiration of members can be fulfilled with faster economic growth. Although these members are still in their transformative stage, nevertheless their economies are fairly well developed and can adapt new and high technology especially in agriculture and industry. In this regard, they need investments, trade and transit facilities. They are seeking opening in the southern direction on the Indian Ocean. Intertwined with trade and transit, and investments is the issue of connectivity because all are landlocked. India can assist in their aspiration. On the issue of connectivity in the region Prime Minister Modi highlighted India's goal of connecting with the region, "...Our involvement with the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chabahar Agreement and our decision to join the Ashkhabad Agreement will bring India close to the region".¹⁰ Besides, India can play a significant part in modernising and upgrading infrastructure, which will facilitate inter as well as intra-regional trade. There is a possibility of linking Mongolia with Kazakhstan giving it a north south opening. In the words of President Khaltmaagin Battulga, "Mongolia wishes to work actively in energy, infrastructure, transit transport, mining, heavy industry, agriculture and other economic spheres in cooperation with the SCO participating countries".¹¹

In the sphere of economic development, India has offered to foster socio-economic development of the SCO region as well as share its experience in skill development, capacity building and human resource development.

Apart from the urgent need for transport links in the southern direction, peace and stability in neighbouring Afghanistan is equally crucial. An Afghan-SCO contact group was set up in 2009 but divergent views of members led to lack of progress. The Qingdao summit appropriately focussed on combating three evils 'terrorism, separatism and extremism'. A Joint Appeal by the Heads of SCO Member States for Prevention of Radicalisation of Youth; Programme of Cooperation in Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for the years 2019-21 among other

documents was adopted. The Appeal is not only timely, but gives India an opportunity to revive the Afghan-SCO Contact Group and through sustained effort build a coordinated approach to this critical issue. It may be noted that the percentage of young population in the SCO countries and Afghanistan is approximately 40 to 42 per cent. Prevention of radicalisation can be achieved through expanding employment opportunities, education, health care etc. and here India could meaningfully involve itself both, with member countries and countries with Observer status. The SCO is likely to be confronted with a changed geopolitical situation due to the agreement between the US and the Taliban stipulating the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan within 18 months. The future scenario is undoubtedly heading for further instability and possible turmoil. The SCO should be ready with its own plan of action. Indian association with the organisation will be useful to members.

Conclusion

India's membership of the SCO has given a big thrust to its regional policy. Indian policy is rooted in the region and has a regional outlook. Membership of the SCO has given a regional presence and an opportunity to observe trends in the region, particularly in the energy market and to involve in the connectivity issues. On the other hand, the Central Asian members have welcomed India's participation as they share a wide perception of common concerns and interests. An active role by India will strengthen their multi vector foreign policies and these countries perceive Indian role as a soft balancer in a region where geopolitical competition has started. It would be in Indian interest to enhance its engagement, particularly work on their aspiration of connecting in the southern direction. Similarly, India could activate the Afghan-SCO Contact Group and try to build up a consensus on the scourge of terrorism and extremism widely prevalent in Afghanistan. The issues are serious and the SCO is a forum which can set a positive discourse. A political will needs to be generated to tackle these issues.

Endnotes

¹ Media Statements by the Prime Minister, www.mea.gov.in.

² Text of Address by the Prime Minister at the Nazarbayev University, Astana, 7 July 2015.

³ Press Release, Media Centre Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 11-12 October 2018.

⁴ Article by Secretary General Zhang Deguang on the Fifth Anniversary of the SCO, www.secsco.org/eng/502.html, accessed 16 November 2006.

⁵ Dr. Alexander Lukin, "Should the SCO be enlarged?", *Russia in Global Affairs*, April-June 2011, p. 36.

⁶ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-accepted-as-full-member-of-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/articleshow/48022508.cms>

⁷ <https://www.mea.gov.in>, media briefing by Secretary (West) at Qingdao, June 10, 2018.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://jamestown.org/program/central-asia-ready-move-without-russia/>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ulanbaatar/MONTSAME/10 June 2018.

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