

INDIA IN SCO: CHALLENGES GALORE AMIDST REDUCING ELBOW ROOM

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Introduction

The later part of 2022 heralded a uniqueness in India's international engagements for a variety of reasons. India concurrently holding the presidency/chairmanship of two diverse multi-lateral organizations: G-20 and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) stood out amongst these. It added to India's international stature and responsibilities. While the G-20 has members from all continents, the SCO is more of a regional and geographically more compact grouping.

The end of the Cold War and break-up of USSR caused considerable geo-political upheaval especially in Eurasia. The birth of Central Asian Republics (CAR) namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which were rich in resources, but had to all along bear the brunt of being part of Soviet Union, created both opportunities and challenges. The CAR had genuine security concerns since they bordered Russia and China- two large and reasonably powerful nations. Adding to their concerns (and of Russia and China) was the turmoil in Afghanistan that took a turn for worse with the ascendancy of Taliban in mid-nineties. This further complicated the geo-political situation.

Genesis of SCO

A weakened Russia and the need to resolve the erstwhile Sino-Soviet border, that now included some independent nations of CAR led to a meeting between the Heads of States of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, and China in Shanghai on 26 April 1996. The agenda was to discuss security, resolve border disputes and institute Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). This meeting paved the way for the birth of a new grouping called Shanghai Five. In a meeting of Shanghai Five held on 15 June 2001, which Uzbekistan also attended, a new organization comprising of Shanghai Five plus Uzbekistan was created and christened SCO. The SCO charter was signed on 07 July 2002 and entered into force on 19 September 2003¹. The stated objective of SCO was to promote political, economic and security cooperation among

its members. Notwithstanding the stated objective, the underpinnings were not difficult to miss. A vital factor in its origin was the increased concern amongst Russia and China over growing influence of the US in Central Asia. Wanting to preserve its influence in its 'near abroad', Moscow teamed with Beijing to balance USA. On its part, China saw it as an instrument of exploiting economic opportunities in Central Asia. For both Russia and China, this was an instrument to keep NATO out of Central Asia.

About the SCO

Currently the SCO comprises nine member countries. India and Pakistan became the seventh and eighth full-fledged members in 2017. There are four observer states, namely Afghanistan, Belarus, and Mongolia. Another category called 'Dialogue Partners' includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Maldives, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, and Myanmar². Interestingly, the United States had applied for but was denied observer status in the SCO in 2005. The SCO has been an observer in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) since 2005³. The SCO secretariat has established partnerships with various UN bodies such as UNESCO, UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), to name a few. Since 2017, the department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) of UN has deployed a Liaison Officer to SCO in Beijing⁴. Apart from the UN, the SCO has established consultations and relations with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Conference on Interactions and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)⁵. The SCO Secretariat is based in Beijing and its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) is based in Tashkent. The population of the SCO member countries combined is 3.33 billion (2021), or 42.49% of the world's population. The combined GDP of the eight member states is US \$ 23.307 trillion (2021), or 24.2% of the global GDP (calculations based on the World Bank data for 2021 for eight permanent member states and Iran). Collectively, SCO members account for almost 20% of the world's oil reserves and 44% of its natural gas (calculations based on the BP data for 2021 for nine permanent member states)⁶. Trade among SCO members rose to US \$ 6 trillion in 2020 from US \$ 667 billion when the group was founded in 2001⁷.

Key Principles of SCO

Mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of states and inviolability of state borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas as well as equality of all member states⁸.

Run-Up to SCO 2023: An Overview of Activities

Around 170 meetings in India, covering foreign and security issues, defence, economy, trade, investment, new technologies, interregional cooperation, transport, health, environment, traditional medicine, education and people to people contacts were planned in the year long preparatory process for the 2023 Summit⁹. Till the end of May 2023, India had hosted a total of 134 meetings and events, including 14 Ministerial-level meetings¹⁰. India set up new pillars of cooperation under its Chairmanship - Startups and Innovation; Traditional Medicine; Digital Inclusion; Youth Empowerment; and Shared Buddhist Heritage. In addition, India worked towards fostering greater people to people ties that celebrate the historical and civilizational bonds between the SCO nations. These included various socio-cultural events in Varanasi under the framework of the first-ever SCO Cultural and Tourist Capital for 2022-23¹¹. The SCO has developed significant Action Plans for the Implementation of the SCO Development Strategy up to 2025 and for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the UN apart from an initiative for an Economic Development Strategy for the SCO region until 2030¹².

Since the 2022 SCO Summit at Samarkand was held 'in-person', it was expected that the 2023 Summit in New Delhi would also be held 'in-person'. However, the 2023 Summit was held in a virtual format on 04 July 2023¹³. The theme of the Summit was 'Towards a SECURE SCO'. Coined by India and articulated by PM Modi at the 2018 SCO Summit, SECURE stands for Security; Economy and Trade; Connectivity; Unity; Respect for Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity; and Environment. Iran was inducted as the ninth full-fledged member in the 2023 Summit. The virtually held SCO meet was quite a short one. One aspect that stood out was India's principled stance refusing to sign on the BRI statement that others had agreed upon.

India's Objectives and Advantages in Joining SCO

There was a considerable debate within the country on the issue of joining SCO. However, it was settled in favour of joining. Within the founding members of SCO, there was a broad consensus in admitting India amongst all except China. For a long time, China kept stalling India's entry and acquiesced only when it got its way in admitting Pakistan alongside India. In our domestic narrative the arguments put forth while joining SCO and to remain in it have focused largely on the ***perceived advantages*** that would help fulfil our foreign policy and security objectives. These are as follows:-

- Provide India greater visibility and opportunity in the affairs of the Eurasia- a strategically important region.
- India's major challenges continue to be continental in nature. Managing the constraints imposed by the continental north called for a substantive engagement with Eurasia¹⁴.
- Enable India, to address religious extremism and terrorism in the region¹⁵.
- Deepen ties with Russia, monitor and counter the influence of China & Pakistan and expand cooperation with CARs¹⁶.
- It was envisaged that by being part of SCO, India could ensure long term stability in Afghanistan and secure own interests, post the US withdrawal.
- Provide India with a forum where it could constructively engage both China and Pakistan¹⁷.
- Provide access to Eurasian markets and deepen economic ties.
- Ensure energy security and diversification of energy sources.
- Accord better leverage for CARs and Russia vis-a-vis China. Simultaneously India could use Russia to balance China.
- Access to Central Asia's minerals.
- India's belief that SCO could be a suitable forum to influence revival and commissioning of Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline.
- Constitute a consensus driven non-West organization that could focus on development, peace and stability.

A Critical Appraisal of SCOs Efficacy

Born as a non-West regional grouping, the fundamental inclination of Russia and China was always against the West, especially US. No wonder that eventually SCO led by Russia and China has been often seen as an anti-West (read US) organization. While India and the Central Asian members have been neutral in this Russia plus China, versus West narrative, the diplomatic pressures on India to prove its neutrality to both the camps has been immense. With Iran's entry into SCO and Belarus likely to follow soon, the anti-West character of the SCO will further strengthen. This makes India an outlier since the collective standpoint of the SCO will remain anti-West¹⁸.

In 2003, SCO leaders approved a programme for multilateral trade and economic cooperation setting out over 100 projects, including the intention to make the free movement of goods, capital, services, and technologies a reality within two decades¹⁹. Its implementation has so far shown little progress, one reason being that SCO has not yet developed any major institutions which can boost its agenda of economic cooperation. SCO energy and economic cooperation has also encountered major obstacles due to the sometimes strongly diverging national interests of SCO members and a lack of SCO funds to finance joint projects. Although SCO transport and infrastructure cooperation has been identified as an area of priority, the China-Pak nexus has stymied India's efforts in that direction. SCO has been unable to codify norms on connectivity. Consequently, it has failed to ensure India gains connectivity (transit) access to Afghanistan via Pakistan. Proposals for creation of a SCO Development Fund and SCO Development Bank have largely remained on paper. The lack of capacity amongst CAR members has also forestalled its potential realization of economic cooperation. The Russia proposed SCO Energy Club too has not made any impactful progress. Neither was the SCO successful in crafting a suitable response during the COVID pandemic nor could it hold China accountable for its dubious role in it.

RATS is frequently touted as a success story in SCO. Between 2011 and 2015, it successfully prevented 20 terror attacks, neutralised 1700, and arrested 2700 members of terror organisations. This anti-terrorism body also destroyed 440 terror

camps, saved member countries from 650 terror-related crimes, and seized 450,000 ammunition pieces and more than 52 tons of explosives from different terror organisations²⁰. These figures appear impressive but the reality is that RATS' prime focus has been to fight against Uighur groups for China, Chechen groups for Russia and Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Turkistan for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan²¹. The other targets are groups like East-Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Al-Qaeda, whereas groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network do not come under the ambit of the SCO anti-terror structure²². Despite consistently stressing the need to fight the threats of religious extremism, separatism and terrorism in its Summits, in reality it has been unable to ensure all member states follow it. Protagonists of SCO project it as an organisation that reflects a broad convergence on views amongst member states on issues such as cross border terrorism. While it may appear so in official statements, the actions of China, Russia and Pakistan vis-à-vis some of their neighbours prove otherwise.

Identified as one of its key concerns, Afghanistan remains an oxymoron for SCO. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group during its meeting in Dushanbe in July 2021 expressed support for the “political settlement process in Afghanistan, restoring Afghan peace, developing economy, combating terrorism, and establishing an inclusive political structure in Afghanistan”²³. For all the talk of SCO being the regional security arbiter, it was a direct deal between the US and Taliban that reshaped the Afghan dynamic²⁴. Despite all the statements, the SCO as an organization has been marginalized in Afghanistan and has miserably failed to either influence or force the Taliban regime to adhere to an inclusive governance model, respect for human rights and equal rights for women. Even earlier, SCO has been a mute spectator during regional security crises. The unjustified Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, wherein Russia went on to recognize the independence of breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia is one such example. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are other examples. Russian actions in 2008 and 2014 did not directly affect the other SCO members although they did cause some concern. However, the latest crisis brought out by the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the members of SCO directly and in a painful manner. It has destabilized trade and investment flows, exacerbated the problems of ensuring

food and energy security especially amongst the CAR. SCO members have been circumspect and despite privately being unhappy with Russia, have not been able to call it out. In the 11th special emergency session called by UN General Assembly (UNGA) held on 23 February 2023, demanding that Russia immediately withdraw its troops and end fighting, barring Russia all the other SCO members abstained²⁵. The fact that 141 countries voted in favour (including many from the global South), 32 (including seven SCO members) abstained and only seven (including Russia) voted against the resolution is evidence of the dissonance within SCO and the disconnect with its own stated principles. More evidence of the contradictions within SCO emerges when we realize a few hard truths. For all its talk about regional security, one member (Pakistan) has done the opposite of eliminating terrorism & instead exported it, one member (Russia) again invaded its neighbour last year, claiming that neighbour didn't have right to exist and one member (China) violated border agreements with another member (India)!! Two other members - Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have a legacy of disputed border. In the last decade there have been more than 140 border related conflicts between them²⁶. They fought in April 2021 and again along their undemarcated border in September 2022, even as the SCO Summit was taking place at Samarkand with both their Presidents in attendance! To make matters worse, a report by Human Rights Watch has revealed that both sides committed serious war crimes by targeting civilians on either side²⁷. Recent clashes between Iran and Afghanistan (one member and the other an observer) on one hand and Pakistan & Afghanistan on the other are further testimony to the failure of SCO to cope with intra-state and inter-state conflict amongst its members. Wilful violation by some members, of the SCO principles that seek to ensure stability, has become the norm.

India's Challenges & Pitfalls in SCO

The trajectory of SCO, its shortcomings, China's growing power, global geopolitical turmoil (ironically perpetrated by two SCO members) and incompatibility on values has once again generated an intense debate on India's continuance and benefits in SCO. The foremost challenge is China and its actions in using the forum to further its own power and influence while making no bones of limiting ours. China in tandem with Pakistan has and will continue to limit India's ability to shape the SCO agenda on terrorism and extremism²⁸. It has remorselessly been active in putting

technical holds on requests by US and India in the UN to designate known & proven terrorists (Pakistan sponsored ones) as 'UN Security Council designated terrorists'. China has been loath to even acknowledge Indian sensitivities in such matters, despite both countries sitting together bilaterally and in multilateral fora such as SCO, BRICS, RIC etc. A fundamental divergence between India and some members of SCO (read China and Russia mainly), is in the interpretation and understanding of terrorism. For many in SCO, terrorism implies regime destabilization, whereas for India it is related to state sponsored cross border terrorism. Chinese actions to integrate the region stretching from Iran to the CARs will inevitably and adversely impact Indian interests, even if some of the area's individual states remain invested in the Indian relationship²⁹. China is aggressively pushing its agenda through BRI rather than supporting the INSTC (that will benefit India). Undoubtedly, Beijing's increasing leverages with Moscow (largely due to Russia-Ukraine war) has and will only increase the adverse impact on New Delhi's plans for a greater profile in Central Asia. China has used the SCO to expand its national security narrative. This was once again evident in the Samarkand Summit (2022). Xi Jinping used the summit to push China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), first announced in April 2022 at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference³⁰. Chinese definition of national security is broadening and it uses organisations such as the SCO to further enhance its political capital. Benign moves announced during the summit such as Chinese commitment to train 2,000 law enforcement personnel for SCO member states in the next five years will undoubtedly endear itself to the members, further enhancing its influence.

In an erudite article, C Raja Mohan has written that India's engagement with SCO was premised on Russian primacy in the region and its support for India's regional interests³¹. Today, India is no position to ensure Russia's strategic autonomy from China. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu criticized Quad, which India is part of, while supporting China at the SCO Defence Ministers' meeting in New Delhi on 28 April 2023. A few days later in New Delhi, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov repeated the criticism of Quad during a session of Raisina Dialogues 2023. Such public criticism by Russia on Indian soil, of a group India is part of, would have been unthinkable some years ago. Another evidence of India's reduced leverage with Russia is that despite PM Modi's advice to President Putin that, "this is not an era of war", the Kremlin has paid scant heed and continued its war in Ukraine, not sparing

even civilians. It is evidence of a significantly changed power equation and has increased our challenge of staying relevant within SCO and maintaining our interests.

Some writings have alluded to India's historical, civilizational and cultural ties with the CAR³². These ties are lent an exaggerated weightage in so far as our ability to influence the region is concerned. Take the example of language. The only two official languages of SCO are Russian and Chinese. For long, India has been trying to get English included as an official language. Numerous impediments have been placed, mainly by China which wields a disproportionate influence in SCO. Thus, India's struggles within SCO continue. Under its chairmanship, one of the new pillars of cooperation set up by India is Shared Buddhist Heritage. A former diplomat has cautioned that Indian efforts to revive Buddhism amongst member states of SCO may at best find limited favour from China but not from other countries³³. The quid-pro-quo that China would expect from supporting it is anybody's guess! Worse, China may even push for inclusion of its (distorted) version of Buddhism.

An important metric of power and influence of a country is its economic prowess. It is essential to analyze the economic clout that India and China wield with other members of SCO mainly in terms of trade and commerce. Our bilateral trade figures with SCO members (except Iran and Pakistan) in 2021-22 are mentioned in Table 1. Bilateral trade of China in 2022 with SCO members is depicted in Table 2.

Table 1 : India's Bilateral trade With SCO Members³⁴

Country	Value of Indian Imports (Million US \$)	Value of Indian Exports (Million US \$)	Total Bilateral Trade (Million US \$)
Kazakhstan	325.77	235.12	560.89
Uzbekistan	71.35	271.18	342.53
Kyrgyzstan	1.79	32.89	34.68
Tajikistan	10.74	35.35	46.09
Russia	9869.99	3254.68	13124.67
China	94570.57	21259.79	115830.36

Table 2 : China's Bilateral Trade With SCO Members (except Iran & Pakistan)³⁵

Country	Value of Chinese Imports (Million US \$)	Value of Chinese Exports (Million US \$)	Total Bilateral Trade (Million US \$)
Kazakhstan	13200.00	11000.00	24200.00
Uzbekistan	1750.00	6320.00	8070.00
Kyrgyzstan	60.8	4070.00	4130.8
Tajikistan	30.65	680.00	710.65
Russia	114150.00	76120.00	190270.00
India	94570.57	21259.79	115830.36

From the two tables depicted above, it is discerned that the value of China's trade with SCO members (barring India, Iran and Pakistan) is a staggering 227.3814 billion dollars as against India's trade with SCO (barring China, Iran and Pakistan) that stood at 14.1088 billion dollars. Chinese trade is thus 16 times greater than India's. Consider the export figures in the period between 2017 and 2021. In this period India's exports to SCO (minus Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan) increased by US \$ 232 million while Chinese exports to SCO (minus India, Pakistan, Iran and Russia) increased by US \$ 8000 million, that is more than 34 times than India's³⁶. China's determined push to integrate the economies of the Eurasian region with a pro-China tilt has increased the dangerous possibility of India being shut out of the economies of the Eurasian region and being marginalised. It will take advantage of the Russia-Ukraine war to make inroads in terms of market share, exploitative investments or expansion of its digital infrastructure footprint. The economic factor along with easier Chinese connectivity into CAR gives it a significant advantage over India that is extremely difficult to match. Hence, we need to comprehend the reality and avoid hyping artificial leverages such as historical, cultural and civilizational ties that have for long lulled us into inaction.

There are some other aspects that also merit attention. Some SCO members have expressed unhappiness with India and alleged partisan treatment to G20 as compared to SCO. Russia and China, it is believed, also expressed unhappiness with host India for shifting the SCO summit by a month to allow the PM to visit the US³⁷.

China has ruthlessly pursued and forced SCO to adopt its 'One China' policy. However, it has been disdainful towards India's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The visit of Nancy Pelosi, then Speaker of US House of Representatives to Taiwan in August 2022 evoked a sharp comment from Zhang Ming, Secy Gen of SCO who said, "The SCO adheres to the one-China principle...."³⁸. The Indian divergence from SCO position on Pelosi's visit was evident during the weekly press briefing by MEA spokesperson who omitted any mention of 'one China' policy and called for maintaining status quo³⁹. On the issue of Kashmir, the position of Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) is well known. However, it is pertinent to note that six out of nine members of SCO are also members of OIC. It is inconceivable that they (and China) will support India on the Kashmir issue.

Conclusion

'To be or not to be' (in SCO) is a question that still rankles. Overwhelming evidence and facts point to India's gradual marginalization in SCO. The members of the SCO, except India are often referred to as the 'club of authoritarians'⁴⁰. India is the only democratic country in SCO and that lends the organization some credibility and respect. In spite of China's dominance, there appears to be a silver lining. China's progress in economic integration with the Central Asian region has not created a favourable image and Central Asians remain suspicious of China. According to the Central Asia Barometer Survey, a biannual large-scale research project that measures social, economic, and political atmospheres in the region, public sentiment toward China from respondents surveyed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan demonstrated a steady decline. Within Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respondents have shown an increasingly negative view of China from 2017 to 2021. The reasons for this attitude include violations of the human rights in Xinjiang, Chinese workers, and technology, which come with Chinese investments, and concerns of a debt trap⁴¹. India needs to seize opportunities that arise due to dissatisfaction with the Chinese. This can be done by teaming with countries such as US, France, Japan, Poland and Germany. To begin with they can be invited as observers in institutional mechanisms such as India-Central Asia Dialogue and India-Central Asia Summit. Regular meetings between National Security Advisers (NSA) of India and Central Asian countries are held to which the NSAs of the above countries could be invited. India can and should

expand ties with Central Asia independent of the SCO. So far, there is no evidence that SCO has added to India's profile in global politics. In an increasingly polarized world, it is more of a Damocles sword. The combination of geography and two bellicose neighbours makes it worse. Given the Indian foreign policy establishment's penchant for not 'hurting' Russian & Chinese sensitivities and an exaggerated ability to 'manage' the Chinese challenge, it seems improbable that India stays away from SCO, despite the writing on the wall. Even if we do stay in SCO, we must be mindful of our limited ability to shape the narrative and direction taken by SCO. We must therefore push for some of our good friends (US, UK, Germany, France or EU) and Central & East European Countries (CEEC) to become observers/ dialogue partners. 'Shanghai' in SCO gives it optics of a China-led and China directed organization. It is hence logical that we press for a change of name- from SCO to maybe Eurasian Cooperation Organization (ECO). The logic to invest our diplomatic capital in SCO may perhaps be influenced by Sun Tzu who said, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer". However, it is worth recalling the Rajamandala of Arthashastra. Correlating to existential realities in SCO, we can infer that India has two Ari (enemies), one Udasina (neutral king/state: Russia) but which is increasingly tending towards Arimitra (enemy's ally). The four central Asian countries are caught between a rock and a hard place. They will at best be Udasina. Sun Tzu notwithstanding, is it worth being part of such a mandala where there are a surfeit of enemies and no real friends? Can we not create a new mandala where there are mitra (friends) and mitra-mitra (ally's ally) in pursuit of our interests? We certainly can, provided we overcome past dogmas, embrace reality, and shed our inhibitions in establishing meaningful partnerships with those who can effectively counter-balance our biggest Ari. The present Rajmandala in SCO is most unfavourable for that to happen.

Endnotes

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