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The Big Picture - SCO Summit 2020

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Heads of Government meeting is set to be held in India at the end of this year (2020). Invitations have been sent to all the member countries including Pakistan for the summit. However, there are apprehensions regarding Pakistan's Prime Minister presence at the SCO summit.

- In lieu of Pakistan sponsored terrorist activities in the country, India has scrapped all bilateral meetings with Pakistan and has held the neighbouring country responsible for such attacks in Kashmir.
- India and Pakistan became full-time members of the SCO in **2017**. It is the first time that India is hosting an SCO summit.

Invitation to Pakistan

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- In 2014, former Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif had visited India after an invitation from Indian Prime Minister in his swearing-in ceremony (which was sent to all Heads of **SAARC** countries). Since then no Pakistan Prime Minister has visited India.
 - Any bilateral meeting between India and Pakistan on the sidelines of the SCO summit would be crucial.
 - However, India has taken a **constructive lead** by sending the invitation to Pakistan, as **SCO is important for India** in maintaining its leading role in the Eurasia region.

Also, there are more concerning issues which India needs to address like connectivity via **Chabahar port** in geopolitically turbulent West Asia, China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, etc. as compared to pondering about invitation to Pakistan.

SCO as an Organization

- **Geographic Extent:** **SCO** is a significant organization that has a **vast geographic expanse** and is important for Central Asia, South-Asia and Asia-Pacific region.
It is a major **Eurasian organization** that represents half of the world's population.
- **Member-states:** The SCO has **eight** members namely **India**, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and **four observer** states - Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia.
India joined SCO in 2017 at the insistence of Russia, and China balanced India's entry with the entry of Pakistan.
- **Significance:** The organization comprises four **major nuclear powers** operating in the area viz. India, Russia, China, and Pakistan.
It has the capacity to counterbalance **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**, therefore, it is sometimes considered as "**alliance of the East**", i.e, the Eastern complementary of NATO.
- **Mandate:** SCO has an **evolving mandate** which started off by being an economic, political, cultural and regional security organization. But with time, the security (military coordination, cyber coordination, etc.) aspect gained prominence. Its mandate includes:
 - Promoting mutual trust and cooperation in politics, trade, economy, research, technology and culture amongst the member states.
 - Enhancing ties in areas like education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection and healthcare.
 - Maintaining and ensuring peace, security and stability in the region.
 - Moving towards the establishment of democratic, fair and rational international political and economic order.

Significance for India

- **Historical Significance:** India has always been seen as a benign (friendly) territory to countries that formed part of the erstwhile USSR. India since the past has invested in these countries, but due to **lack of accessibility**, India's connection to these countries was restricted.

Also, these countries have apprehensions regarding the growing dominating role of Russia and China. Hence, in light of these developments, India can play a key role in the region.
- **Diplomatic Ties:** SCO provides a **platform to exchange ideas with world leaders** like Russia. Hence, India looks for **positive engagement with the member nations** of this organization.
- **Military:** SCO's joint military exercises, **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure** (RATS is a structural institution that focuses on terrorism- a common threat affecting nations) inter alia, are significant to India. India can rally down the neighbouring countries acting as the hub of terrorism at these platforms.

The main functions of SCO-RATS are **coordination and information sharing**. As a member nation, India has actively participated in its activities.
- **Connectivity:** Through this forum, India can seek another route to **Eurasia and Central Asia via China** (through its Xinjiang province).
- **Economic Factor:** Through this platform, **new markets** could be explored by India for selling Indian goods and **tapping foreign resources**, thereby benefiting the Indian industries (which are already facing the brunt of **economic slowdown**).

Challenges

- **Associated Projects: Developmental cooperation-** including large-scale projects like telecommunication, infrastructure connectivity, etc. between the associated nations is neutral and can be continued. However, **energy concerns** pose a serious challenge that demands India's urgent attention in the prevailing political turmoil between the **USA and Iran & Iraq**.
- **Regional Influence:** In lieu of close relations between **Russia-China** (due to trade of worth over \$100billion) or **China-Pakistan** (due to **China Pakistan Economic Corridor**, Belt Road Initiative), India needs to manage its association and tensions with China so as to peacefully maintain the economic, territorial and cultural relations.

- **Accessibility:** According to **Mackinder’s Theory of Heartland**, “the core of global influence lies in the area known as the Heartland- a region of the world situated in **Eurasia** (due to its sheer size, a wealth of resources, and huge population).”
 - Mackinder stated that the **nation in control of the Heartland** had the potential to “**command the world**”, but at the same time, also highlighted the **great natural barriers** which surrounded the Heartland.
 - India faces a challenge in **harnessing and getting access** to the Eurasian heartland because of prevailing geopolitical tensions in the concerned region.
- **Geopolitical Concerns:** According to **Spykman’s Rimland Theory**, the **coastal areas or littorals** of Eurasia are vital in controlling the World and not the Heartland.
 - In the light of this theory, the **rimland nations** like Pakistan and Iran, therefore, play a major role in restricting India’s growing hegemony in the region.
 - Also, how India manages a balance between these two theories will determine India’s leading role in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean region.



Way Forward

- **Military:** China sees itself as a hegemonic power which wants to create a **China-centric global order**. India needs to contain this asymmetric power balance by **building friendly relations** with other countries, **strengthening its defence** capabilities, and **managing the territorial disputes** with China in a peaceful way.
- **Economic:** India also needs to **foster & expand its economic engagement** with China. Traditionally, the demands of Western China including Xinjiang province were once fulfilled by India.
 - For instance, until the 1960s, India supplied foodgrains to Tibet.
 - Therefore, **by opening new avenues for accessing Chinese resources**, India could balance its current trade deficit with China in a better way.
- **Ideologically:** As now the ideological war between **Communist China and Democratic India** is over, the only prevailing border disputes could be effectively managed by continuous bilateral dialogues.

In this regard, India's **soft power** could be harnessed so as to end the mysterious perception that is prevalent in the hinterland areas of China regarding India's aura.
- **Russia's Angle:** India needs to **allay Russian fears** in the lieu of growing Indo-American ties. Russia holds a significant position for India be it historically, culturally, diplomatically or militarily. Therefore, India needs to increase its engagement with Russia through bilateral and multi-fora dialogues like on the sidelines of SCO.