



Shanghai Cooperation Organisation & India

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This article is based on “**Regional priorities: On the SCO summit**” which was published in The Hindu on 02/12/2020. It talks about the opportunities posted in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a grouping for India.

Recently, India for the first time hosted the heads of governments (HoG) meeting of **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)**, three years after joining the eight-nation group. The focus of this virtual conference was in developing a plan to overcome the socio-economic consequences of **Covid-19** in the region.

In less than two decades, SCO has emerged as a key regional organisation in the Eurasian space. It accounts for over 60% of Eurasia's territory, more than 40% of the world's population, and almost a quarter of the world's GDP.

Given the increasing role and significance of the SCO in the Eurasian region and beyond, India is likely to benefit more in the long-term by joining the organisation. Therefore, SCO provides the opportunity for India to fulfil its national interest while cautiously navigating through challenges.

Opportunities For India

- **Regional Security:** SCO will enable India, as an integral part of the Eurasian security grouping, to neutralise centrifugal forces arising from religious extremism and terrorism in the region.
The drawdown of Western forces from Afghanistan and the rise of Islamic State (IS) with its stated intention to create ‘Khorasan’ have added a new explosive dimension to the region's security landscape.
- **Embracing Regionalism:** The SCO is one of the few regional structures India is a part of now, given a decline in its engagement with **SAARC**, **BBIN** and the **RCEP**.
More importantly, cooperation in three critical areas— energy, building trade and transportation links, and dealing with traditional and non-traditional security threats— can be facilitated through the SCO mechanism.
- **Connect With Central Asia:** SCO is also a potential platform to advance India's **Connect Central Asia policy**.
 - India's ongoing engagement with SCO can be seen through the prism of reconnecting and re-energising ties with a region with which India has shared civilizational linkages, and is considered the country's extended neighbourhood.
 - The SCO provides India with a convenient channel for its outreach — trade and strategic ties — to Central Asian countries.

Note:

The foundation of India's economic outreach to Central Asia is based on its 2012 Connect Central Asia Policy with its focus on the 4 C's - Commerce, Connectivity, Consular and Community.

- **Dealing With Pakistan & China:** SCO provides India with a forum where it can constructively engage both China and Pakistan in a regional context and project India's security interests.
While the government has eschewed meetings with Pakistan for the last five years, it has used the SCO for talks with China, including this year amidst the LAC stand-off.
- **Bringing Stability in Afghanistan:** SCO also an alternative regional platform to delve into the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan and the centrifugal forces arising from religious extremism and terrorism in the region which threaten India's security and development.
- **Strategic Balancing:** Above all, the SCO has been seen as a grouping worth pursuing as it retains India's geopolitical balance, a useful counterpoint to New Delhi's otherwise much more robust relations with the western world.
- **Foundational Dimensions of SECURE:** Acknowledging the strategic importance emanating from the region and SCO, the Indian Prime Minister had articulated the foundational dimension of Eurasia being '**SECURE**'. The letters in the word SECURE are:
 - S for Security of our citizens,
 - E for Economic development for all,
 - C for Connecting the region,
 - U for Unite our people,
 - R for Respect for Sovereignty and Integrity, and
 - E for Environment protection.

Challenges That India Needs to Navigate

- **Denial Of Direct Land Connectivity:** A major impediment in India's expanded engagement with Eurasia remains the strategic denial of direct land connectivity between India and Afghanistan and beyond by Pakistan.
 - It is due to this, India's bilateral trade with Central Asia stands at about \$2 billion and with Russia about \$10 billion in 2017.
 - In contrast, China's trade with Russia has crossed \$100 billion in 2018 while the bilateral figures for Central Asia stand at over \$50 billion.
 - The lack of connectivity has also hampered the development of energy ties between the hydrocarbon-rich region and India
- **Growing Russia-China Convergence:** One of the major factors for Russia pushing India's inclusion into the SCO was to balance China's power.
 - However, today the challenge India faces is the growing closeness of Russia and China, even as India has promoted better relations with the US.
 - Further, the new equation of growing Russia — China — Pakistan triangular convergence of interests is a challenge that needs to be navigated.
- **Difference Over BRI:** While India has made its opposition to **BRI** clear, all other SCO members have embraced the Chinese project.
- **India-Pakistan Rivalry:** SCO members have, in the past, expressed fears of the organisation being held hostage to India's and Pakistan's adversarial relationship, and their fears would likely have worsened in recent times.

Way Forward

- **Improving Connectivity With Central Asia:** India can seek to capitalise on Russian concerns about China exercising disproportionate influence in Central Asia. Moreover, Central Asian states are also keen for India to play a bigger role in the region.
 - However, in order to succeed, India would first have to improve its own standing in the region.
 - In this context, the opening of **Chabahar port** and entry into **Ashgabat agreement** should be utilized for a stronger presence in Eurasia besides a clear focus on operationalising **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**.
- **Improving Relations With China:** It is imperative that India and China set up a modus vivendi (agreement allowing conflicting parties to coexist peacefully) for the 21st century to be viewed through the lens of an Asia century.

This sentiment was aptly reflected in Prime Minister Modi's statement at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue wherein he stated: "**Asia of rivalry will hold us all back. Asia of cooperation will shape this century.**"
- **Improving Relation With Pakistan:** SCO's emphasis on promoting economic cooperation, trade, energy and regional connectivity should be leveraged to improve relations with Pakistan and persuade it to unblock India's access to Eurasia and provide a fillip to projects like **TAPI**.
- **Strengthening Military Corporation:** In the context of increasing terrorism in the region, it is imperative for SCO countries to develop a 'cooperative and sustainable security' framework and make the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure more effective.

Conclusion

An evolving objective of SCO now appears to increase not just its regional but also its global strategic and economic profile. In this scenario, India, as a new member of SCO, will need to formulate an appropriate Eurasian strategy.

This strategy should serve India's regional interests to ensuring sustainable nation-building through development partnerships, maintaining sovereignty, preventing the region from being a hub of terrorism and extremism. At the same time, it is also in India's interest that this region does not evolve into a geopolitical chessboard of new great game rivalries.

Member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation



Drishti Mains Question

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) provides the opportunity for India to fulfil its national interest while cautiously navigating through challenges. Discuss.



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This editorial is based on **“Donald Trump’s last push in West Asia”** which was published in The Hindustan Times on November 30th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.
