



INDIAN COUNCIL OF WORLD AFFAIRS

VIEWPOINT

India and SCO Summit 2019: An Overview

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Abstract:

The 19th SCO meeting was held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. It was the second time that India participated as a full member. The meeting focussed on ways to enhance cooperation in economic matters and in counter terrorism.

The 19th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit meeting was held on June 13 – 14, 2019 at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and the participating countries signed 14 agreements covering sports, healthcare and environment. At the conclusion Russia took over the presidency of the SCO. The next summit is scheduled to take place in Russia and will focus on counter-terrorism and on managing the crises in Afghanistan and Syria. It would also mark the celebrations of the 75th anniversary of victory over Nazism.¹

This was only the second time when India participated in the SCO summit as a full member. Terrorism and economic opportunities are two major issues which New Delhi has been pursuing at the SCO. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra (PM) Modi while addressing the summit emphasised the



Source: Hindustan Times at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/at-sco-india-refuses-to-endorse-china-s-belt-and-road-project/story-JuSx8Vs4as2HISv1p6nViM.html>

¹“Russia assumes the Presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. President of Russia Vladimir Putin presents the priorities and guidelines of the SCO member states’ joint work in 2019-2020’ ROSCONGRESS, June 15, 2019 at <https://roscongress.org/en/news/russia-assumes-the-presidency-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-president-of-russia-vladimir-putin-presents-the-priorities-and-guidelines-of-the-sco-member-states-joint-work-in-2019-2020/>, (accessed June 17, 2019).

template of HEALTH to boost regional cooperation. In his speech he argued that SCO should look for ways to further increase the cooperation with the idea of H for Health Care Cooperation, E for Economic Cooperation, A for Alternate Energy, L for Literature and Culture, T for Terrorism free Society and H for Humanitarian Cooperation.² Focussing on ‘T’, the PM also made a subtle reference to Pakistan for its continued support terrorism. He argued, “Countries responsible for aiding, supporting and providing financial assistance to terrorists should be held accountable. SCO members should also effectively explore the capacity of Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (SCO-RATS) to eliminate terrorism. India calls for an international conference to combat the scourge of terrorism”.³ This underscores the argument that terrorism has always been one of the major agendas discussed at the SCO Summits and this year was no different. It was no surprise that the member states signed a joint declaration which projected a very strong approach towards terrorism, according to the official statement from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.⁴

On the sidelines of the Summit, PM Modi met with the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, President Khaltmaagiin Battulga of Mongolia, President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. During these meetings the primary focus was to look for ways to further strengthen the bilateral relationships. Modi could not meet the President Hassan Rouhani of Iran due to scheduling issues.⁵

In the meeting with Xi Jinping, both sides discussed ways to further strengthen the economic relationship. Xi emphasised that, “the two sides to stick to the fundamental judgement that China and India offer to each other chances for development, and do not pose each other threats, and called on the two countries to keep deepening mutual trust, focusing on cooperation, and properly handling their disputes so as to turn the bilateral relationship into a positive element for their respective development”.⁶ This growing relationship has been apparent with rising bilateral trade figures that touched to 95 billion dollars in 2018 and is projected to cross 100

²“Translation of Prime Minister's intervention at the SCO Summit 2019 (June 14, 2019)” Ministry of External Affairs, June 15, 2019 at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31442/Translation_of_Prime_Ministers_intervention_at_the_SCO_Summit_2019_June_14_2019, (accessed June 17, 2019).

³“Translation of Prime Minister's intervention at the SCO Summit 2019 (June 14, 2019)” Ministry of External Affairs, June 15, 2019 at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31442/Translation_of_Prime_Ministers_intervention_at_the_SCO_Summit_2019_June_14_2019, (accessed June 17, 2019).

⁴“Transcript of Media Briefing by Secretary (West) at SCO Summit 2019 in Bishkek (June 14, 2019)” Ministry of External Affairs, June 15, 2019 at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/31446/Transcript_of_Media_Briefing_by_Secretary_West_at_SCO_Summit_2019_in_Bishkek_June_14_2019, (accessed June 17, 2019).

⁵“PM Modi, Iranian Prez Rouhani unable to meet due to scheduling issues” The Economic Times, June 14, 2019 at http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/69792001.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (accessed June 17, 2019).

⁶“China ready to join India for closer development partnership” Xinhua, June 14, 2019 at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/14/c_138141074.htm, (accessed June 17, 2019).

billion dollars in 2019.⁷ The Indian side reiterated its stand on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan endorsed their support for the BRI while India was not a part of this list.⁸ India also expressed its concerns regarding the transparency of investments and argued that sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries should be respected.⁹

There was no meeting with the Pakistani PM Imran Khan, though the PM Modi did exchange pleasantries with him, when they came face to face at the leaders' lounge. Imran Khan congratulated Modi on his recent win. However, the two sides had avoided each other at all the other prior engagements. Reports bring out that the Pakistani side had written to India requesting for resumption of the bilateral talks. Ahead of the SCO Summit these requests were made by Imran Khan and Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood.¹⁰

The call for strengthening the economic dynamics of SCO cooperation which was raised by India was strongly supported by Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev expressed the need for an Economic Forum of the SCO members, which can meet annually. The President asserted that, "In order to intensify contacts of the business circles of our countries, we are in favour of holding the SCO Economic Forum on a regular basis, including in a regional format."¹¹

The recently concluded SCO Summit provides New Delhi with one more platform to interact with the Central Asian region, discuss counter terrorism and major global issues. The Central Asian member countries indicated their desire to strengthen the discussion on economic cooperation among the SCO members, with the backdrop that they do not have access to any other major economic grouping. The 2019 meeting had strong undertone of economic concerns because of the ongoing trade war and the weakening of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) system. One interesting aspect to watch will be how the SCO meetings influence developments in Afghanistan and Iran. However, for the SCO to become more successful the member states will have to work their way around the existing bilateral issues, and the organisation as a whole will have to find creative ways to internally balance Russia and China while strengthening its Central Asian voice.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

⁷"PM Modi meets Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of SCO summit in Bishkek" The Hindu, June 13, 2019 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-meets-xi-putin-at-sco-summit-in-bishkek/article27899666.ece>, (accessed June 17, 2019).

⁸"Bishkek Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's Heads of State Council" Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat, June 13, 2019, at <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>, (accessed June 18, 2019).

⁹"India Snubs China Yet Again, Rejects Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative at SCO Summit" News 18, June 16, 2019 at <https://www.news18.com/news/india/pm-narendra-modi-india-denies-to-endorse-china-belt-and-road-initiative-at-sco-summit-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-2189189.html>, (accessed June 17, 2019).

¹⁰"Imran Khan and Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi had written separate letters to their Indian counterparts, ahead of the SCO summit," NDTV, June 15, 2019 at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-narendra-modi-imran-khan-exchange-pleasantries-at-sco-summit-in-bishkek-sources-2053485>, (accessed June 17, 2019).

¹¹"Uzbekistan join ranks with India to make SCO economically vibrant" The Economic Times, June 16, 2019 at [//economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/69811184.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cpst](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/69811184.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cpst), (accessed June 17, 2019).