INDIAN COUNCIL
OF WORLD AFFAIRS

INDIA AND THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

THREE ESSAYS

Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, New Delhi

2020

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PREFACE

India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017. It will be hosting the SCO Heads of Government Summit in the near future. To contribute to the existing pool of knowledge and informed discussion about this important intergovernmental organization, the Council requested Shri Yogendra Kumar a former Ambassador to Tajikistan and Prof. P. Stobdan a former Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan to undertake an analytical study on the evolution of the SCO focussing on India's growing interface with the organization. Both authors are close observers of the SCO region and their essays give a detailed overview of the nuances, complexities and challenges of the different issues involved in the development of regional cooperative mechanisms in it. Prof. Stobdan has in addition also contributed a brief comment on regional security issues emerging from the situation in Afghanistan.

The ICWA hopes that these three papers will serve the intended purpose of expanding knowledge and widening debate about the SCO in the run up to the HOG Summit to be hosted by India.

The views, analysis and recommendations in these three essays are those of the authors alone.

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INDIA AND THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

Yogendra Kumar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- SCO, founded in 2001, has been developed at Chinese initiative having its genesis in the settlement of the country's borders with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Aiming at the management of China's periphery next to the sensitive Xinjiang region, it found common interests with Russia and the three Central Asian countries – and later Uzbekistan – to develop a 'non-West' organization as a building block of a 'multipolar global order' against a US-led 'unipolar world'.

- Embodying the "Shanghai Spirit" of "mutual respect of sovereignty", independence and territorial integrity and inviolability of state borders, non-aggression/interference, non-use of force/threat of force, "no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas", and peaceful settlement of disputes, the organization promotes cooperation among member states in politics, trade, economy, technology and culture, and joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region.

- As a multi-layered system, it has the Heads of State Council, Heads of Government Council, and heads of other state organs such as parliament, defence, national security, foreign affairs, disaster response et cetera as well as non-government forums for business and specific interactive purposes. It has a Secretariat based in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terror Structure in Tashkent which combats the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism and extremism.

- In 2017, India and Pakistan joined as members; their association almost mirrors deliberately that of China with the SAARC. It has Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia as Observer countries and Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Nepal as Dialogue Partners. It has established relations with UN, its affiliate bodies and other regional organizations in Eurasia and Africa. US application for Observer status was rejected in 2005. The Central Asian countries, pursuing their own 'hedging' strategies have developed relations with other countries, besides Russia and China, and several post-Cold War regional organizations. The most recent ones are there C5+1 (five Central Asian countries plus extra-regional country) dialogue process, which not only includes China but several other countries including India.

- Its evolution has been shaped by major geopolitical developments such as the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001), the US deployments of missile defence batteries in the Eurasian region (2007), and Trump Administration's New Strategy for Afghanistan (2017); despite an extensive network for multifarious agency interaction, its weak institutional design

allows greater elbowroom for big powers to shape the strategic milieu through their bilateral relationships. An informal Russia-China division of function between 'security' and 'economy' for the region is fraying due to the deepening strategic fluidity in Afghanistan. New challenges are arising in Central Asia due to COVID-19 pandemic, tepid economy, high indebtedness, and a growing anti-Chinese sentiment due to the Xinjiang situation.

- India has historical and civilisational linkages with Central Asia. It has interest in the nature of power equilibrium as also the interactive nature of strategic developments between Central Asia and Southwest Asia. Russia sees it as a balancer against China in the region and the latter takes 'balancing' moves against it in South Asia. India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy is aimed at strengthening security, economic and cultural cooperation. As an SCO member, the focus is on cooperation in energy, education, agriculture, security, minerals, capacity building, development partnership, and trade and investment. In oblique criticism of BRI, the Indian emphasis is on connectivity based on respect for sovereignty, inclusivity and sustainability. It is supportive of SCO's potential role in Afghanistan. During the pandemic, healthcare has become a significant component of its collaboration with the SCO member countries.

- The paper's key recommendations, in the context of altered regional geopolitics due to the pandemic and tensions on LAC and LOC, are to base Indian diplomacy through emphasis on accepted norms of international behaviour, including SCO's charter principles, and to promote a more equitable, sustainable post-COVID future for the region and beyond. This relates to both Chinese aggressiveness and its debt trap diplomacy. This can be done through collaboration with like-minded countries, including Russia, and focus on quick impact projects on sustainable development, involving grassroots' communities. There is a need for an effective media outreach policy for better perception management. It is important to have adequate personnel support for effective engagement with SCO's anti-terrorism structure and the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group.

ORIGIN AND INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

The origin and institutional evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can serve as benchmarks in the twists and turns of Eurasian heartland geopolitics since the end of the Cold War. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), India's strategic stakes have undergone critical transformation. Now more than ever with the darkening shadow of the pandemic, the balance of power in the Eurasian heartland, its impact on Central Asian regional geopolitics, and the ever-changing interrelationship in strategic developments between Central Asia and Afghanistan are being closely followed by the Indian policymakers. Until 1991, the overarching nature of the Indo-Soviet relations conditioned the Indian perspectives towards the region.

GENESIS OF A 'NON-WEST' ECOSYSTEM

With the changed favourable circumstances due to Soviet President Gorbachev's 'perestroika', a process of boundary negotiations between the Soviet Union and China, over which the two countries fought (1969) a sharp short conflict on the Ussuri River in the east and Xinjiang border in the west, was launched which continued after the emergence of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as independent states. The settlement of boundary was also accompanied by treaty arrangements for confidence building on their respective borders adjoining Xinjiang and led to the birth of Shanghai Five group in 1996. With the admission of Uzbekistan (2001), the grouping was renamed as Shanghai Cooperation Organization which adopted its Charter in 2002. With the preparation work already providing the foundation, this 'evolutionary' inflection point was a response to the US unilateralist human rights agenda. The US-led international coalition's intervention in Afghanistan (7 October 2001) was supported by the Central Asian countries; the coalition's expanded military presence, including bases/staging posts (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), whilst used as leverage for external balancing against Russia (and China), also concomitantly exacerbated anxieties over regime stability as exemplified in the 2005 Andijan (Uzbekistan) massacre and "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan. A 2005 SCO declaration asked the US for a clear timetable for withdrawing its troops from SCO member states and, later in the year, Uzbekistan shut down its base there. Even as the Russian and Chinese countermoves unfolded apace with the military operations in Afghanistan, the considerable US and western payments for transit/rents and other types of western assistance in infrastructure began to be overshadowed by the rapid Chinese investments in pipelines and railway projects and the strengthening economic linkages. The larger strategic objective was to develop the SCO as part of a

'non-West' ecosystem in the effort to create a 'multipolar global order' instead of the 'unipolar' one which came into existence with the disappearance of the Soviet Union.

EXPANSION AND GROWTH OF INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENTS

The same geopolitical objective underlay the expansion of its international role around that time. In 2005, India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan attended the SCO summit as Observers (non-voting participation in non-restricted meetings at all levels from heads of state downwards); the current Observer countries are Afghanistan (2012), Belarus (2015), Iran (2005), and Mongolia (2005). A category of Dialogue Partner (participation in relevant ministerial meetings and SCO+Dialogue Partner meeting, working groups, receipt of non-classified documents, cooperation agreements and non-participation in decision-making) was created in 2008; the current Dialogue Partners are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia (all three in 2008), Sri Lanka (2009), Turkey (2012) and Nepal (2015). India and Pakistan became members together in 2017; Pakistan joining the organization was at the instance of China which wanted to 'balance' India's presence whereas Russia, uneasy[1] about growing Chinese footprint in Central Asia, was keen on the Indian membership with the same objective. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Turkmenistan, and UN representatives join as guest attendees. The organization has established relations with the UN (2004), CIS (2005), ASEAN (2005), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, 2007)[2], Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO, 2007)[3], UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2011), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA, 2014)[4], UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2015), and the African Union (2018).

Amongst other countries interested in Observer status are reported to be Bangladesh, East Timor, Egypt, Syria, Israel, Maldives, Ukraine, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia whilst Bahrain and Qatar have expressed interest in membership.[5] Chinese President Xi Jinping announced, in January 2016, support for Iran's membership following the lifting of UN sanctions. The interest of various countries in participating under different categories reflects their own changing foreign policy outlooks at a specific point in time. The US application for Observer status was rejected in 2005.[6]

INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

Its declared goals[7] are "strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, research, technology and culture, as well as in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order." It is also relevant to refer to the organization's founding principles as spelt out in Article 2 of its Charter which include "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", equality among member states, and "peaceful settlement of disputes between member states."

The highest decision-making body is the Heads of State Council which meets once a year. The Heads of Government Council, also meeting once a year, discusses cooperation strategy, economic and other cooperation issues, and approves annual budget. In addition, there are meetings of heads of parliament; of national security advisers; of ministers of foreign affairs, defence, disaster response, economy, transport, culture, education, and healthcare; of heads of law enforcement agencies, supreme and arbitration courts; and of the prosecutors general. There is also a Council of National Coordinators. As will be clear from the Annexure-A (page 32), there are several ministerial working groups and institutions like the business council, interbank consortium as well as the SCO Forum (Track II).

It has two permanent bodies. A Secretariat, based in Beijing, is headed by a Secretary General on a non-extendable three-year term; it coordinates the activity of the organization, cooperation with Observer States and Dialogue Partners, collaborates with international operations and works with the NGOs. The other is the Tashkent-based Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)[8]; the latter came into existence in 2004 which coincided with the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as other Islamist radical and irredentist elements from the member countries. Combating the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism and extremism, it maintains "working contacts", including maintenance of databank, with member states through their resident permanent representatives, and aims to coordinate with UN Security Council and its Anti-Terrorist Committee, and international organizations, including participating in preparations for international legal documents.[9] RATS has also carried out exercises, such as a counter-nuclear terror exercise, and claimed capture or elimination of terrorist groups.[10] Between 2011 and 2015, for example, SCO member states managed to prevent 20 planned terrorist attacks, neutralised 440 terrorist training camps, extradited 213 terrorists/extremists, and 1700 members of terrorist organizations apart from interdiction of drug trafficking activities.[11]

SCO IN THE EURASIAN GEO-STRATEGIC SPACE (AND THE 'INDO-PACIFIC')

CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES' EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

The end of the Cold War significantly diminished the big power tensions in the Eurasian geo-strategic space but injected a different dynamic. Its security architecture

gave way to different type of institutions to manage this space which are jostling for influence as the newer ones emerge apace with rapidly changing circumstances; that is a resultant in considerable measure of the ongoing internal political consolidation in the new countries, shift in balance of power equations and the response to potential challenges arising mostly from the disturbed conditions in Afghanistan which shares an easily accessible border and ethnic communities with the Central Asian countries. The Central Asian leaders have always been wary of 'hegemon(s)' and the diversity of their relationships expands their manoeuvrability in their management. The following discussion would help situate the SCO in the wider geopolitical context.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, there was considerable warming towards the western European institutions which led to the countries joining the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe[12] (before conversion into "Organization" as OSCE in 1995), NATO's Partnership-for-Peace Programme[13] (PfP, 1994), and NATO-affiliated Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council[14] (1997). The Russia-led institutions in the post-Soviet territory were the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, 1991), "Tashkent Pact" or Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, 1992), Eurasian Economic Community (2000), and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU, 2015), whose membership kept varying depending upon the state of bilateral relationship between Russia and the concerned country. At the time of independence, several Central Asian countries joined the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO, 1985). Another organization which many countries joined is the Kazakhstan-initiated Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building In Asia (CICA, 1999). The Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) mechanism, set up in 2002 with "provisional" Secretariat in Kuwait, has been joined by China (2002), India (2002), Pakistan (2002), Kazakhstan (2003), Russia (2005), Tajikistan (2006), Uzbekistan (2006), and Kyrgyzstan (2008) and meets at the summit/ministerial level for cooperation in several areas such as trade and finance, connectivity, sustainable and inclusive development, and cultural cooperation. The Asia Council, set up in 2016 with headquarters in Tokyo, also has all Central Asian states, including Turkmenistan, as its members for addressing challenges in cooperation and security in Asia. Turkmenistan was the only country in the region which declared a policy of neutrality since inception and has stayed away – even if somewhat inconsistently – from membership of most of these organizations.

THE "SHANGHAI SPIRIT"

As the Chinese influence grew in the Eurasian heartland, the geopolitical salience of China-driven institutions and bilateral relationships also increased in this crowded space even if the Russian strategic presence remains unattenuated. Initiated as a response to instances of US military assertiveness (Taiwan Straits crisis of 1995), the "Shanghai Spirit", embodying principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and "cooperativeness" on issues of national

security, resulted in the founding of the SCO that came to represent for it the "New Outlook on Security" and "Harmonious World" by practising soft geopolitical balancing with emphasis on "less legalistic and more normative" basis for the organization.[15] Since the mid-1990s, besides its strong interest in the security situation and political stability in the countries on its sensitive periphery alongside Xinjiang, its need to tap the considerable hydrocarbon resources of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan as well as the attraction of Central Asian markets as export destinations gave a fillip to them. SCO provided a platform for putting the unique Chinese imprimatur on the pattern of regional economic cooperation with these countries. Another analyst states that the Chinese academia and policy think tanks "talk in unison" about the US pivot to Asia being a major rationale for President Xi Jinping's Silk Road Initiative.[16]

EXTERNAL STIMULUS TO SCO'S DEVELOPMENT

As described in the preceding paragraphs, a defence and security component with joint military exercises has developed, including participation on occasions of strategic bombers[17], since 2003 even though there is disavowal of making it into a military bloc. The initiative for a defence dimension came from China which met with some resistance from the Russian side which converted CSTO into a military alliance in 2002 as a responsive measure.[18] Following the tensions arising from proposed US missile defence deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic and talk of similar systems in the Far East, the 2007 SCO summit established relations with the CSTO at the Russian instance when, also, military drill type 'Peace Mission 2007' - distinct from counter-terrorism - exercise was launched.[19] With a view to create a security belt on the periphery against terrorism and drug trafficking, an Afghanistan Contact Group was set up in 2005, suspended in 2009, and revived in 2017 in the wake of the Trump Administration's New Strategy for Afghanistan; although Afghan presidents have been attending summits since 2004 even without an Observer status following the resurgence of Taliban attacks, this Group remains a forum for consultations about developments in Afghanistan but not an interlocutor in the dialogue process there.

SOUTH ASIAN GEOPOLITICS

Wider geopolitics, going beyond the Eurasian space, has been evident in respect of India-China relations too. With India gaining Observer status at SCO in 2005 along with Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan, Nepal insisted a few weeks afterwards at the Dhaka South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit that Afghanistan's membership would be contingent upon China's acceptance as Observer.[20] Thus, in 2006, China and Japan were accepted as Observers which framed the context in which Afghanistan was admitted as a member[21]; this is also the year when China backtracked from the agreed political framework on the India-China border settlement. At the SAARC Kathmandu summit in 2014, China expressed interest in its membership almost in parallel with

India's interest in the membership of SCO. Although there is general agreement that controversial issues are to be avoided at SCO forums, inter-State tensions such as the fraught relationship between India and Pakistan and between India and China can affect the organization's institutional cohesiveness. The Indian National Security Adviser was constrained to walk out, in September 2020, from a meeting of SCO National Security Advisers due to an unprecedented display by the Pakistani delegation of an objectionable map of his country. Whilst conscious efforts are required of all members to strengthen the organization, a development like this needs to be watched carefully as to the larger strategic intent behind such disruptive behaviour: there is a degree of coordination between China and Pakistan about the protracted LAC stand-off.

CHINA'S BROADER ENGAGEMENT AND SCO'S ECONOMIC COOPERATION DIMENSION

The enormous deployment of financial resources by China in the region has been a major strategic development since the early 2000s. Whilst giving significant leverage to China in its bilateral relations, it has also shaped the growth of the SCO. The development of overland connectivity infrastructure through to Western Europe and the Gulf region under the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) has subsumed the assorted post-Cold War infrastructure projects under the generic name of 'Silk Road'; most SCO infrastructure projects are funded by China. A distinct aspect of this ambitious programme is that, unlike the earlier Chinese initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the implementing and financing institutions, including arbitration forums, are Chinese without any foreign collaboration. As deliberate policy, the scale of economic cooperation within the SCO framework is not comparable to China's bilateral economic relationships; since 2004, plans have been formulated for economic cooperation amongst the SCO member states in areas such as joint energy projects ("Energy Club"), joint use of water resources, and a banking system to reduce dependence on western financial system. The thrust areas for economic cooperation within the SCO framework cover trade and economy, development of transit and other infrastructure, agriculture, ITC and technological modernisation. In a first in November 2016, at the Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) Heads of Government Meeting agreed for project listing for 2017-21 in areas of trade, economy, finance and banking cooperation, infrastructure development, and environment protection.

"DIVISION OF FUNCTIONS" AND ITS TENABILITY

Such regional institutional evolution also began to represent a kind of division of function between Russia and China with the former emerging as a security provider and the latter as the locomotive for the region's economic growth; yet, a 'division of functions' inherently remains untenable as each impacts on an existing balance of power equation as evident in the regional economic policies. The Chinese President has in 2006 proposed the idea of a free

trade zone and the Russian President has instituted the EAEU comprising, inter alia, three SCO member countries, namely, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Each power's economic priorities are pursued in a nuanced manner though; President Xi Jinping, in his 2018 Qingdao summit speech, spoke[22] of increasing "complementarity of our respective development strategies, continu(ing) to advance the Belt and Road cooperation" whilst President Putin, at the same summit, stressed[23] on increased coordination "through the EAEU and China's Belt and Road programme" as he referred to "several integration initiatives". The Central Asian countries nevertheless remain cautious about such coordination in whatever combination. The "division" with regard to regional security is covered in later paragraphs.

CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES-INITIATED PAN-REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The Central Asian republics have also taken hesitant steps towards regional structures almost since their independence.[24] A Central Asian Regional Cooperation Organization, excluding Turkmenistan, was set up in 1992 envisaging a common market and later a common economic space. An Inter-State Council, at the level of president and prime minister, was set up in 1994 which was joined by Tajikistan in 1997 after the end of its civil war. A Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) was set up in 1998 and a Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2002; the organization was merged, in 2005, with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community from which Uzbekistan withdrew in 2008 due to 'intra-regional strategic divergences': intra-regional ambitions have been a major roadblock in socio-economic integration which is a strong Soviet bequest though. With the assumption of office by the new president in Uzbekistan, regular meetings of Central Asian presidents have started since 2016.

"C5+1" DIALOGUES

Although not assuming the dimensions of regional organizations, there are several dialogue processes between the five Central Asian countries and certain key extra-regional powers; these "C5+1" dialogues also provide a basis for canvassing political convergence and direction for cooperation. Amongst the earliest were with Japan, coinciding with the SCO's wider international linkages, and South Korea. The European Union (EU) also participates in such a process. So does the US since 2015; Alice Wells, US Assistant Secretary of State, stated that the US "stands with the people of Central Asia as close friends and partners in support of their development as strong, sovereign, and independent states".[25] India launched its own process in 2019. Although China has such a forum focused on BRI and other forms of economic cooperation since 2012, it launched another forum at the foreign minister level in July 2020. Already, both the US and China have had their "virtual" meetings to discuss future direction of their respective relations as the countries are facing the potentially destabilising impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

CURRENT STRATEGIC SCENARIO IN CENTRAL ASIA

The Central Asian regional situation remains largely stable but all states experience domestic stresses from time to time which also impact the evolution of the regional institutions. Different countries are experiencing their own type of political succession or consolidation: both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have had a successful political succession and the May 2020 referendum in Russia has consolidated President Putin's power. Their subterranean political perturbations are nevertheless getting exacerbated currently as a result of the disruptive effect of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Even though most Central Asian countries are tending to under-report its severity, its impact on the regional economy has induced geopolitical flux due to the domestic political fragility in these countries. Most countries are dependent on external remittances from their diaspora in Kazakhstan, Russia, and other Eurasian countries besides being dependent on commodity, including hydrocarbons, exports which have declined significantly on account of collapse of their demand. The economic growth is either flat or in the negative. The majority of debt in these countries is owned by Chinese banks and they are approaching the Chinese government for restructuring those debts carrying high interest rates; the stronger negotiating power being with the Chinese, these loans are being used to secure collaterals in national assets such as mining and gas exploration rights. However, such leverage is also being exercised in overall bilateral relations with the concerned country.

The Chinese government itself has acknowledged that massive BRI programme has stalled due to the pandemic's domestic economic impact. Even as Chinese government has provided support to the regional governments to fight the pandemic and thereby opening up even newer opportunities for cooperation in the health sector, the resentment against China is also growing not only on account of its economic domination but also due to a more recent aggressiveness in its diplomacy. Chinese embassy's public warning to its citizens in Kazakhstan, in July 2020, against an "unknown pneumonia" outbreak, more deadly than COVID-19 resulting in large number of deaths, did not go down well with the government of Kazakhstan; there were large public protests in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan over the mass internment of mostly Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province but also including nationals from Central Asian countries.[26] A similar attitude is evident with Chinese media commentaries reviving irredentist territorial claims in Russia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan even though the boundaries have been successfully negotiated by China. The increasingly fluid situation in Afghanistan is also a matter of anxiety for the bordering Central Asian countries which could potentially aggravate the security threat from the entrenched Al Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) elements and China as many of them are Uzbeks, Tajiks and Uyghurs. According to a May 2020 UN report, the senior Taliban

leaders have regularly consulted with Al Qaeda leaders about their negotiations with the US and the latter have welcomed their agreement.[27] Even as both Russia and China are supportive of the current peace process despite lack of clarity about the implications of its eventual outcome, a fraying of the 'division of functions' between the two is emerging with the Chinese setting up their own defence-cum-intelligence facilities on the Tajik-Afghan and Afghan-China borders; China is supplying weapons to the Tajik Armed Forces and also carrying out joint training with them.

SALIENCE OF SCO IN CENTRAL ASIA

The above description of the shaping of multilateral mechanisms, under the impact of changing geopolitical dynamics, gives an insight into the institutional design of the SCO. A weaker organization provides for larger elbowroom to the big powers for leveraging their bilateral relationships for influencing the regional milieu whilst offering a common platform for the smaller member countries for developing institutional norms for regional cooperation. The Chinese use of the C5+1 dialogue format with the Central Asian countries is consistent with its approach towards its other neighbouring regions whilst it remains the most critical source of funding of projects and other investments; so also, the pattern of its economic relations with the adjoining countries being driven by the latter's stifling dependency through debt, trade basket, and infrastructure reorientation. C5+1 format reflects the interest of external powers to develop pan-Central Asian cooperation across the entire government-to-government relationship but it still remains a dialogue process and not a replacement for the SCO.

Bearing the name of a major Chinese city and identified with the country's first significant geopolitical move at an early phase of its growing multilateral heft, this organization has an enduring quality for the Chinese and usefulness for the others. Part of a larger scheme of an alternative multilateral vision, its complex institutional structure equips it to be the sole organization for Central Asia with a potential to cover the entire Eurasian heartland. It is expanding its reach in terms of membership, the geographical space, and increasing the number of non-regional countries/multilateral institutions as its interlocutors. It, therefore, remains an indispensable platform for a proactive Indian diplomacy and deepening engagement with the Central Asian countries.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

INDIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Apart from its historical and civilisational ties and an abiding goodwill since the Soviet period, the implications of the strategic developments there for Southwest Asia have been keenly followed by Indian security planners in recent times; by extension, the Central Asian power equilibrium has always interested them. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the consequent train of strategically disruptive events and the

aftermath of the Soviet troops withdrawal have fundamentally altered the strategic scenario for South Asia too. As the post-Soviet history of the region shows, the developments in Central Asia affect Afghanistan and vice versa. Although the Taliban had no interest in interfering in Central Asian developments, the disturbed conditions there provided a haven for Islamic radical elements – with the Taliban complicity or otherwise – which have wanted to upturn the political systems in these countries; many of these are fellow travellers of radical elements of concern to India. This is a threat which remains as potent as ever, if not more, given that most of them are battle hardened through fighting against professional armies in Syria and Iraq. Central Asian countries have faced these challenges before in the course of their post-Soviet journey and their capacity to handle these challenges is shaped by the political and economic conditions there; given the overlapping ethnic communities, namely, Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen, the strategic trends have a mutually reinforcing character and the Central Asian countries are also stakeholders, if somewhat overlooked amidst the high profile great power moves and countermoves, in the political process underway in Afghanistan.

CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS BETWEEN INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

Although handicapped due to the denial of overland access by Pakistan, in blatant disregard of its SCO obligations, India does see considerable potential for economic and project cooperation with Central Asian countries. Developing overland connectivity through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar (Iran) to Central Asia as well as Afghanistan is also seen by it as having strategic significance for both. Central Asia is rich in natural resources such as hydrocarbons and minerals which, in its view, are not well tapped. There is also considerable scope for developing all-round economic cooperation with these countries by leveraging its IT capabilities and aviation linkages; thus, stronger relationship can be developed in education, healthcare, tourism, services and culture. Recognising its non-hegemonic touch and non-ideological outlook towards them, the Central Asian leaders welcome a wider Indian presence in the region and closer security and military ties; they do, however, remain conscious that it might not lead to some kind of strategic rivalry with China and Pakistan although they also hope that their diplomatic interactions, within the SCO's institutional framework, might possibly lead to its diminution in their respective bilateral relations as well. Notwithstanding a shared realisation about the relationship being below par due to the constraints mentioned, both sides remain confident that their strengthening ties would help protect their common strategic interests in facing their common challenges.

SPECTRUM OF INDIA-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

As the pace of political events accelerated in Central Asia during Gorbachev's *perestroika* and following the dissolution of the Soviet

Union, India was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent Central Asian countries. This was accompanied by quick exchange of high-level visits to expand the gamut of bilateral relations under the radically altered but uncertain circumstances. The areas of ongoing collaboration include development cooperation in the form of concessional lines of credit, investment, transit corridors, energy (supply of uranium from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan after India's NSG exemption in 2008), education and training, supply of military transport and in-flight refuelling aircraft (from Uzbekistan), joint military exercises (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), anti-terrorism and narcotics dialogues et cetera. During Prime Minister Modi's first five-year term, 'Connect Central Asia Policy' was strengthened with his visit to all five Central Asian countries in 2015; India joined the Ashgabat Agreement, which includes Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, for facilitation of trade and transit. It also took the initiative to launch India-Central Asia Dialogue at the level of foreign ministers in 2019. Apart from strategic issues of common interest, this dialogue aims to explore newer areas for cooperation between the two sides. Drawing upon the traditional fund of goodwill, these relations, nevertheless, have grown steadily even as both sides recognise that a lot of ground still needs to be covered, especially in the current changed circumstances.

INDIA AND THE SCO

SCO'S EXPECTATIONS OF INDIA

The SCO secretary general, in an interview[28] to the Press Trust of India in June 2020, stated that, with Indian participation, SCO's role as "an important mechanism for shaping regional and global policies, ensuring security and sustainable development has been strengthened": "SCO's political, economic and humanitarian practices are the outlines of the geostrategic development of Eurasia." Describing India "as a dynamically developing economic power, a large state", Prime Minister Modi's visits to SCO countries have added not only to the development of bilateral relations but also to strengthen cooperation within the SCO. There are two-way opportunities for cooperation with India's huge market and capability for foreign investments. He pointed out Indian strengths in the pharmaceutical sector - especially important during the global COVID-19 crisis, contribution towards transport infrastructure and international transit corridors, involvement in digitalisation and new production technologies, and development of cheap solar energy. India actively participates in SCO's anti-terrorism mechanism and he expressed agreement with Prime Minister Modi's views on the Afghan peace process. At a recent conference (2 September 2020), he especially highlighted India's stewardship in capacity building for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the SCO member countries.

ROLE OF INDIA

As has been pointed out above, India is a member of various organizations which include the Central Asian countries. The SCO, however, has a stronger footprint in the region. Concomitant with other dialogue channels, it is critical that India should play an active role in this organization as well to enhance its regional impact. As the organization acquired greater geopolitical salience in the region in the wake of the US attack on the Taliban and the latter's resurgence due to flagging impact of US military operations, India joined as an Observer in 2005 and was able to speak as well as to observe – and engage in meetings on the sidelines/pull asides – at the summit level but could not participate in decision making.

The SCO Ufa (Russia) summit, in July 2015, decided to admit India as Member upgrading its status from that of Observer. At its Tashkent (Uzbekistan) summit, in June 2016, India signed the preparatory Memorandum of Obligations outlining the sequential obligations to be fulfilled following which it acceded to 34 SCO agreements, including its Charter and the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism; upon admission as Member, India has sent its diplomatic representatives to various SCO organs, including its Secretariat in Beijing.

PRIME MINISTER MODI'S ARTICULATION OF POLICY TOWARDS SCO

Prime Minister Modi, in his speech[29] at the SCO Astana Summit upon India becoming a member, noted that the organization represents 42% of global population, 20% of its GDP, and 22% of the land mass. He highlighted "(m)utual trust and goodwill" as the main pillars of India's political and economic cooperation with member countries where its SCO membership would take the cooperation to newer heights in the already existing areas of energy, education, agriculture, security, minerals, capacity building, development partnership, and trade and investment. Whilst pointing at India's involvement in connectivity-related cooperation with the region, he emphasised –in oblique criticism of BRI and CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) – the Indian approach being characterised by "respect for sovereignty and regional integrity" as also their "inclusivity and sustainability". He underlined the SCO's potential role in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan and suggested the organization's focus on environmental change in the global context. Appreciating SCO's efforts against terrorism and extremism, he emphasised the imperative necessity of coordinated efforts of the member countries on challenges of radicalisation, recruitment of terrorists, their training, or financing. In his SCO Qingdao (China) summit speech[30], "first time as a full member" on 11 June 2018, he spoke of cooperation in skill development, capacity-building and human resource development in several areas encapsulating them in the acronym SECURE (security of our citizens, economic development for all, connecting the region, unite our people, respect for sovereignty and integrity, and environment protection). At the same time,

he offered India's active role in the SCO's Contact Group for Afghanistan. At the SCO Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) summit, in June 2019, Prime Minister referred[31] to India's "positive contributions" to the SCO activities and suggested various specific issue-based areas of cooperation captured in the acronym HEALTH (healthcare cooperation, economic cooperation, alternate energy, literature and culture, terrorism free society, and humanitarian cooperation). He positively noted the "roadmap for further action of the SCO Afghanistan Contact Group".

COOPERATION PROGRAMMES OUTLINED BY MEA

The External Affairs Minister, in her intervention[32] at the Bishkek meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers on 22 May 2019, underlined the expanding mutually beneficial cooperation amongst the member states despite "a turbulent global scenario". She referred to Indian commitment to the SCO joint action plan for tourism (2019-20), to regional connectivity initiatives which are "inclusive, sustainable, transparent and (respecting of) the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity", to SCO Action Plan on environment protection (2019-21), and offered to share Indian expertise in agriculture, medicine, information technology, space, finance, and renewable energy. She expected SCO support for member countries' candidatures for non-permanent membership of UNSC (2021-22 and 2027-28) as she emphasised the imperative necessity of comprehensive reforms of the UN and the UNSC. Recalling the terrorist attack in Sri Lanka and the "still raw" wounds of the Pulwama attack, she called for ideas to make RATS more effective. She supported the role of the SCO Afghanistan Contact Group and its earliest finalisation of the roadmap for action. At a recent conference (2 September 2020), Secretary (West), Ministry of External Affairs, stated[33] that the Indian focus is on start-ups and innovation, traditional medicine, and science and technology; apart from facilitation of economic cooperation in MSMEs, agro-processing, digital economy, pharmaceuticals and green technologies et cetera, Indian plans include highlighting shared Buddhist heritage, translation of Indian regional classics into Russian and Chinese and strengthening youth contacts.

CURRENT ENGAGEMENTS WITH SCO

The Annexure-B (page 33) lists the various MoUs signed by India in different areas of cooperation which signify an active high-level participation, including that of the Prime Minister, in SCO meetings in a vast range of inter-governmental activities involving other member states. These cover economic cooperation, environment, law enforcement and security, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, environment, culture and tourism, and meetings of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group. These lists are indicative of an extensive collaboration amongst the member states. In a sign of recent tension between India and China, the former decided against sending a military contingent for the 'Peace Mission Exercise', convened under Russian leadership in Kazan, ostensibly due to COVID-related precautions but, in reality,

due to the reluctance to participate along with the Chinese contingent; however, the Indian Defence Minister attended the SCO defence ministers' in-person meeting in Moscow and had a bilateral meeting with his Chinese opposite number at the latter's instance. An important bilateral meeting also took place between the Indian and Chinese foreign ministers on the sidelines of the SCO meeting in Moscow. Due to its multiple forums, SCO offers a unique platform for meetings on the sidelines, as and when necessitated, for heads of various agencies, including the armed forces and intelligence, from member countries including China and Pakistan.

SUGGESTED APPROACH

Given the fluid regional geopolitics in the wake of the COVID-triggered developments, global uncertainties, domestic pressures on the leaderships in different countries, heightened tensions on Line of Actual Control (LAC) and Line Of Control (LOC), the Indian approach to the organization in view of its impending chairmanship may require a certain calibration even as the Indian programmes are pursued. The approach needs to be to present an adequately elaborated agenda at the meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government in New Delhi this year, which could be taken to fruition by the time India assumes the Chair of the Council of Heads of State. The SCO development strategy until 2025 covers all aspects of its functioning aiming to strengthen regional "peace, security and stability" which range from political, security (including extradition of terrorists and terror financing), economic and trade cooperation, cultural and humanitarian cooperation; significantly, it even envisages a role for itself under chapter VIII of the UN Charter dealing with regional organizations' participation in maintenance of international peace and security with the approval of the UN Security Council.

Political: India's broader political and diplomatic approach towards strengthening relations with the SCO may be along the following lines:

The extreme global and domestic fluidity constrains national leaders to take recourse to external hedging. India does not have to match dollar for dollar with other countries, especially China, due to COVID-induced financial constraints at least in the near term but to demonstrate steadiness of cooperation in areas of interest to the Central Asian leaders.

- Whilst China's relationship with the Central Asian countries has become even more asymmetrical to the latter's disadvantage, their mutual distrust is unlikely to get better in the foreseeable future nor would the level of economic cooperation effect any significant amelioration in the latter's situation. China's capacities would be plateauing due to its own COVID-related economic crunch more compounded by the fact that most Central Asian countries carry a heavy debt burden vis-à-vis China in the infrastructure sector. Possibilities increase for projecting an alternative

vision of the regional future through collaboration with other countries and a certain effort at perception management; this larger multi-pronged collaboration can also be done with other non-SCO member countries which have active – C5+1 – dialogue relationship with the Central Asian countries. The aggressiveness of such behaviour constitutes a pattern which is not only evident in the case of India but also the littoral countries of the South China Sea and other regions too. The smaller Central Asian countries are also falling into this pattern.

- External Affairs Minister's remarks, at the RIC foreign ministerial meeting (23 June 2020), reflect the new Indian approach in the current context. His remarks that today's challenge is "equally of their (concepts and norms of international relations) practice" where the "leading voices of the world must be exemplars in every way" need to be reiterated at every forum, in suitable phrasing, to emphasise that multilateral organizations cannot flourish, despite their dire necessity in today's world, with destruction of trust amongst their members through wanton disregard of international norms by recourse to aggressiveness in the resolution of bilateral disputes. Indeed, this approach is consistent with the founding principles of SCO, especially Article 2 of the SCO Charter's cited earlier.
- A certain pressure can be maintained through bilateral consultations on the sidelines of key SCO meetings. Tapping into their own concerns, such effort can be undertaken in consultation with the Russian delegation members; India's proactive approach in negotiating membership of EAEU would yield dividends as also signal a certain pro-Russia 'balancing' in the Eurasian space. SCO remains a useful forum for building opinions as it is attended by all influential regional leaders. Pakistan's recent behaviour at the SCO NSAs' meeting is indicative of its disruptive approach towards the functioning of this organization. We need to respond in such a manner so as to convey to the other member states, dialogue partners, and observers about our deep commitment to the organization's strengthened effectiveness in these fluid times.

ECONOMIC

Following steps may need to be taken to strengthen India's economic cooperation within the larger SCO framework.

- We can keep stronger focus on the SCO's non-traditional security agenda which also presents a challenge to the Central Asian leaders facing numerous domestic pressures where even inadequate health infrastructure, critical during the current pandemic, can contribute to state fragility. Most of the programmes mentioned by Prime Minister and other leaders can be reoriented with this objective in mind whether they relate

to governance, poverty alleviation through digitalisation of services, water conservation, healthcare, power shortage, humanitarian assistance and disaster response and suchlike. Capacity building would be a critical aspect as also grassroots' community mobilisation in support of all these programmes. Focus may be on quick impact projects.

- In all appropriate SCO forums, the Indian point of view on the core issue of connectivity needs to be suitably conveyed, including Pakistan's blocking off transit of Indian goods to Afghanistan and beyond into the Central Asian region. Our diplomacy can be geared towards the integration of the INSTC into the SCO's transit ecosystem.
- India should quickly nominate a corresponding Indian bank to the SCO's Interbank Consortium. Through this participation, special attention can be paid, as signature Indian contribution, for ensuring that various economic cooperation programmes conform to the benchmarks of economic viability, ecological sustainability, and transparency. It could preferably be a bank with special experience of agrarian financing, cooperative banking, servicing the needs of the poorer social groups, MSMEs and self-help groups. This would all add up to an alternate vision that the Prime Minister has projected at other multilateral forums, such as G-20.
- Essentially, the core relations being bilateral amongst all the SCO member countries, India can use this platform to advance its pan-Central Asian cooperation projects. If parallel "C5+1" format dialogue alongside SCO meetings is not in order, a separate setting – before or after SCO meetings – can be thought of where, as feasible, it can be held at the level of heads of state/ government. Through such parallel processes, the SCO forum meetings in different spheres of cooperation can provide the opportunity for finalising pan-Central Asian regional projects or single country projects with the regional impacts such as trans-shipment and logistics hubs.

CULTURAL COOPERATION INCLUDING PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

The Chinese 'soft power' diplomacy having proven to have been ineffective, a more outgoing external media projection of the nature of Indian cooperation with the Central Asian countries has considerable prospects. Fitting in largely with the Indian approach to the Central Asian countries drawing upon our enduring civilisational cultural links, such a media outreach would have a salutary effect in our efforts at better perception management. This essentially entails a better spread of our TV and radio signals with specially designed content in local languages with the help of local contributors. This outreach can also be dovetailed with jointly developed educational programmes, including joint degrees. A more modernised

outreach showcasing Indian capabilities in technology, education and health sectors can be successfully anchored in the abiding interest of the communities in salient aspects of our shared civilisational heritage. The sensitivities of these countries towards Islamic radicalism ensure for India a ready receptivity in these communities eager to modernise economically and technologically.

TERRORISM

Strengthening India's relations with the SCO member countries and its structures in the area of countering terrorism necessitates a more proactive role with the involvement of our professional diplomats along with agency representatives.

- Since terrorism is the common concern of the SCO as an organization and the individual member countries, India can highlight the growing threat of Al Qaeda and ISIS in south-west Asia and their well-known links with the Haqqani network. Since these elements are a matter of great concern to Central Asian states themselves, this approach can put Pakistan on the defensive. Their continuing linkages, which are used by the Pakistani agencies to shape the political settlement in Afghanistan, are of great concern to the Central Asian states. This factor, in combination with Pakistan's dismal record on terror financing, can be leveraged to pressurise it and the Pakistan-China nexus with regional ramifications and even beyond. This hard reality, which is going to menace the Central Asian and Afghan leaders even more, needs to be spotlighted in the SCO forums and meetings on the sidelines/pull asides.
    - Our specialised agencies can play a proactive role in the RATS activities. The international jihadist terror network has been studied by nearly all international agencies and analysts. Even if this agency may not be much help in regard to cross-border terrorism for India, the database on its international network can be tapped since some of these organizations are actively trying to spread their tentacles in India. The same would apply for drugs trafficking and terror financing networks. Indian diplomacy can help to strengthen its links with the FATF and the UN 1267 committee.
    - India's high-quality expertise in investigative, prosecutorial, and legislative dimensions of anti-terrorism action can be shared at the RATS and other corresponding platforms.

AFGHANISTAN

Conscious of their deep strategic stakes in the quality of the prospective political compromise at the ongoing Doha Afghanistan peace talks, the Central Asian states have concerns that their failure – or, even state collapse – would have significant impact on the future course of events in that country. Moreover, all three neighbouring Central Asian countries, namely, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and

Tajikistan, have significant ethnic links across the borders which would also shape in considerable measure the eventual outcome of the current negotiation process. From this point of view, our active participation in the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group and bilateral interactions on this issue with the other Central Asian countries can influence the political process there to a certain extent.

INDIAN DIPLOMATIC CAPACITY BUILDING

For an effective role by India at this crucial time, there is an urgent necessity to strengthen our diplomatic capacities in realising our objectives. SCO needs to add English as another working language in addition to Russian and Chinese languages for easier coordination and faster Indian government response, which would help in stronger inter-agency synergy at the whole-of-the-government level. This institutional strengthening may involve more diplomats with the requisite language skills and officials with other subject expertise.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The disruptive effect of the coronavirus pandemic combined with the heightened geopolitical uncertainty contributed, in part, by the Chinese aggressiveness in international politics has created a radically altered strategic scenario in Central Asia. Despite India's own financial constraints, its diplomacy can play an important role in generating a certain thought process as to what kind of post-COVID future can be striven for in the Central Asian region and the world at large. SCO, given its elaborate institutional structure, provides a useful platform for Indian diplomacy and its forthcoming Presidentship a unique opportunity. As the Central Asian region as well as the Eurasian space also have other platforms, Indian diplomacy can use them along with SCO for a more concerted impact. This widens the scope of diplomacy and allows for a certain degree of concordance with other powers including those which are not members of the SCO.

As recent trends indicate, Russia remains a useful partner in Eurasia and a potential one in the Indo-Pacific. A Russian analyst has stated that the "greater Chinese foreign policy assertiveness has also proved a robustness test for the SCO" as he underlined the growing importance of SCO for both Russia and India where both need to "carry out its (China's) 'mild taming'"[34].

Our larger objective needs to be to use the SCO and other related dialogue formats to underscore greater stability in the region with sustainable, equitable economic growth - to distinguish it from its current "cooperation model". India's proactive diplomacy, effective perception management, and a certain collaborative effort with other like-minded countries interested in the region would help in fostering such direction. With the forthcoming Indian presidencies of other prestigious multinational organizations, like the G-20, India has a unique opportunity to make its signature contribution towards the shaping of the post-COVID world.

Endnotes

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HIGH-LEVEL PARTICIPATION IN SCO MEETINGS

Prime Minister's participation in meeting of Heads of State

Minister of Home Affairs' participation in Heads of Emergency Prevention and Relief Agencies meeting

External Affairs Minister's participation in the Council of Foreign Ministers

Minister of State for Law and Justice's participation in Law Ministers' meeting

Commerce and Industry Minister's participation in meeting on external economic and trade

Chief Justice of India's participation in meeting of Chairmen of Supreme Courts

Additional Solicitor General's participation in meeting of prosecutor generals

External Affairs Minister's/Defence Minister's participation in meeting of Heads of Government

Defence Minister's participation in meeting of defence ministers

Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change's participation in meeting of environment ministers

Minister of State, Railways' participation in the meeting of railways ministers

Minister of State for Tourism's participation in meeting of tourism ministers

Minister of State for Culture's participation in meeting of culture ministers

Minister of State, Ministry of Human Resource Development's participation in meeting of education ministers

Secretary (West)'s participation in the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group meeting

Deputy National Security Adviser's participation in the meeting of National Security Advisers

Director General, Narcotics Control Bureau's participation in meeting of heads of agencies combating illegal drug trafficking

Director General, Border Security Force's participation in meeting of heads of border services

Indian participation in anti-terror drill

Indian Armed Forces contingents' participation in Peace Mission Exercise

Joint Urban Earthquake Rescue Exercise

Military Medicine Conference

MoUS SIGNED BY INDIA

Memorandum of Obligations (MoO) as a member

Acceding to 34 SCO agreements, including SCO Charter, Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, and 3 additional SCO agreements subsequently

Prevention of Narcotics Abuse

Environmental Protection

Fight against Threat of Epidemics

Trade Facilitation

Cooperation on MSMEs (medium, small, and macroeconomic sector)

Cooperation on Customs

Cooperation on Tourism

Protocol on the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group

Memorandum on Technical Cooperation in the Field of Joint Prevention and Control of Trans-Boundary Diseases

Cooperation in Digitisation and IT Technologies

Cooperation in Development of Inter-regional Cooperation

Cooperation in Mass Media

Cooperation in Physical Education and Sports

Cooperation in World Tourism Organization

Programme of Multilateral Trade-Economic Cooperation

OBJECTIVES AND RELEVANCE OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION FOR INDIA – AN ASSESSMENT

P. Stobdan

Eurasia has emerged as a critical geopolitical region both internally due to abrupt shift from a centralised control system and externally for being placed between two major geopolitical players – Russia and China. All major powers, including India have been seeking to strengthen their regional position with competing vision in this post-Soviet space. The SCO is an offshoot of Sino-Russian border negotiations, which were later joined by three Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It led to the formation of a loose regional alliance the "Shanghai Five" in 1996 to foster "confidence-building" for mutually settling the pending border delineation issues between China with its neighbouring former Soviet states.[1] It also initiated "confidence-building" for border demilitarisation that was followed by signing the "Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in the border areas" in 1997.[2]

The success of China's Shanghai Five format gave birth to the SCO, and in 2001, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin agreed to rename it as the SCO and added Uzbekistan in it to push the forum to foster collective security of Central Asia while adopting a common approach to combat terrorism, extremism and separatism.

Undoubtedly, the SCO's emergence is being considered as one of the remarkable developments in the Eurasian region in terms of its profile and global attention. However, the grouping has been described by critics as merely a synergistic tool of Russian and Chinese foreign policies to seek a strategic convergence in the post-Soviet Eurasia.

Since then the SCO remained rooted in Eurasia geopolitics – a critical space to regulate their shared interests and to keep the US out of the region while engaging in friendly relations with the countries of the region. It helped the Central Asian states protect their regimes and balance their equations in a geopolitical hedging with major powers, including with the US.

The SCO initially confined itself primarily with the rising regional security challenges and border control issues. It pledged to combat the "three evil forces" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism.[3] However, 9/11 incident and the consequent war against terrorism in Afghanistan exposed the weakness of the SCO that resulted in entry of US forces into Central Asia. The US military presence for over 12 years for a while altered the balance of power until the American troops left the region on June 3, 2014.

By 2002, the SCO aimed to grow stronger as a regional body to strengthen cooperation in economic, trade, cultural, environmental and technological areas among member states. It applied for UN recognition and sought to expand the grouping by reaching out to include Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Iran for prospective membership. The greater purpose of the SCO got widened to build regional security architecture to keep the Americans out of the region.[4]

THE SCO'S GROWTH AND LIMITATION

Certainly, the formation of the SCO was initially hyped as the most influential multilateral organization to counter the Western influence. However, in reality, there has been lack of clarity among the member states as to how the SCO can be made strong than a paper tiger. Any substantive progress in the SCO remained elusive because the member states, especially China and Russia, primarily envisaged achieving a degree of regional stability by seeking regime security rather than any change.

One of the factors was the internal differences and cold relations between the regional states that adversely impacted the SCO's growth. Conflict over water resources and land border continued to underscore the gravity of internal differences. Uzbekistan until 2016 resisted regional cooperation and opposed any mega hydro-projects being undertaken under the SCO auspices. Therefore, the SCO was kept afloat only by the financial incentives offered by China rather than through any collective spirit of cooperation.

While the SCO appeared like a broad regional body, in reality it served as a modus vivendi strategic arrangements to retain Sino-Russian control over Central Asia. Since the signing in June 2001 of the "Good-Neighbourly Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation", the SCO served as an engine to drive Russia-China bilateral relations, to cooperate on issues like trade and border demilitarisation, its activities were confined to exchange of scientists, and military officers for training and research.[5]

For the last three decades, Russia and China dominated the group while coercing the leaders of smaller members to endorse their policies on all issues of global and regional importance. China particularly sought to gain major policy concession from the Central Asian governments in terms of their consents to extradite wanted Uyghur separatists who had taken shelter in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Central Asian states on the other hand used the SCO for their domestic causes to wean off pressure from religious and political groups.[6] The Central Asian leaders, including Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev whole-heartedly welcomed the SCO's formation.[7] In return, the two big powers protected the regional autocratic regimes that repeatedly squashed internal opposition groups.

The SCO also had the intrinsic limitation to grow. It lacked the necessary evolutionary processes – political will, economic strength, and the organizational framework to emerge as an autonomous credible organization like the EU or ASEAN to strive for the collective interests of the region rather than as an organ dominated by one or two states.

INDIA'S STAKE IN THE SCO

The SCO essentially reflected a delicate equilibrium for the Eurasian geopolitics and India never featured in that dynamics. It is true though that the Central Asians

always perceived India's potential to be a countervailing factor in the region. This articulation found pronouncement both within and outside governments. At the same time, Central Asian states felt India conspicuously lacked an active framework to engage with the region.

From India's standpoint, the SCO was perceived as a perfect political and economic mechanism that fit into its security calculation to both containing destabilising situation in and around Afghanistan and Pakistan, and against the growing China's influence all around Asia. This was necessitated by the long held Western approach of discounting India's strategic interests vis-a-vis Pakistan in the region.

Even while, the Central Asian countries chose to remain within the Russian dominated regional setting, they also do undertake initiatives for regional integration albeit without much success. In a bit to balance their equations, they also made geopolitical hedging with major outside powers, including the US, India and Japan to widen their political and economic contacts. Broadly, they followed a multi-vector foreign policy as a way to balance the interests of major players. As mentioned above India was perceived by them as a potential countervailing factor in the region.

Against this backdrop, India felt it cannot afford to be left behind in the strategic Eurasian region where only SCO has emerged as an important geopolitical pole. Therefore, the logic demanded that it is better to be in than out of it.

The SCO also became diplomatically a relevant body. The SCO charter's stated aims, neatly packaged as the "Shanghai Spirit," of good-neighbourliness and joint solutions to regional problems proved attractive for India to be in.

Interest in boosting the goal of multi-polarity apart, India had stakes and direct potential gains to be a part of the SCO. These included the objective of expanding its economic and political ties with the Eurasian members, of finding ways to enhance connectivity and of leveraging the organization to promote its own security priorities, especially cooperation in combating terrorism. With these objectives in mind, New Delhi keenly pursued formal entry in the organization, became an observer of the grouping in 2005 despite the critics at home challenging the wisdom of joining a Chinese-led body as a junior member with lesser political voice.

Entry to the SCO was viewed as new opportunity for India to reconnect with Eurasia after a century of disruption. Joining the post-Soviet regional integration also became imperative for continuing the momentum of traditional Indo-Russian legacies albeit in a new multilateral format. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said at the Ufa summit that membership of SCO would be "a natural extension of India's ties with member countries."[8]

India's security imperatives loomed large within the region such as the spread of terrorism, the Afghan fallout and the growing footprint of ISIS in Central Asia. It had to be mindful of the SCO possibly becoming a forum for inimical forces to

drum up anti-India voices. The idea was to benefit by tapping into the SCO's RATS that shares key information and intelligence on the movement of terrorists and drug–trafficking. Similarly, participation in the SCO's counter-terror exercises and annually conducted military drills could benefit Indian armed forces to understand the operational tactics of other militaries which could also instil greater confidence at the regional level.

More critically, a presence in the forum was essential to ensure that India inimical forces do not manipulate the body to drum up anti-India stands in this critical region comprising of Muslim populated states. Direct stakes were also seen in gaining information such as on drug-trafficking control, cyber security threats, public information, mass media, educational, environmental, disaster management and water related issues of Eurasia that India knew little about.

As the situation in Afghanistan remained uncertain, the SCO, much as it wanted, found it difficult to ignore the South Asian countries. As against the US–Iranian antagonistic relationship, Indo-Afghan favourable relationship with the US became an important factor for the SCO.

First, for India, the membership was necessary to protect its own interests in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the withdrawal. Although, both SCO and CSTO were unlikely to play more than a "defensive" role, India could provide a value addition in terms of generating positive political environment for the Afghan peace. A power vacuum in Afghanistan was unlikely; however, negative forces inimical to India might pursue their interest through the SCO mechanism.

Second, Russia and Pakistan are increasingly building bridges, the contours of which are not clear yet, will affect India's interests in Central Asia. Pakistan could gain more political acceptance in the Eurasian region and it may use the forum as a smokescreen to cover up its support for anti-India activities. The US is likely to have its control whoever comes to power next in Afghanistan. India needs to see whether Kabul will be able to overcome American suspicions about the SCO and permit it to seek membership. Afghanistan so far remains cautious about aligning itself with SCO along with Mongolia.

Third, to an extent the SCO has been successful in containing the spread of extremism and terrorism in Central Asia primarily because of China's constant interests and engagement with these states. The region may become the next hotbed of sectarian conflict. It is the next emerging Muslim region. The existing SCO states have significant Muslim populations that too of Sunni/Salafi variants with affiliation to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Importantly, Chechnya, Ferghana and Xinjiang are likely to become the arc of future instability.

The SCO's common security threats are conceptualised in the form of fighting against the "Three-evils". Article 6 of RATS elucidates the key objectives and functions to act on the proposals and recommendations of relevant SCO bodies

and at the request of the parties to deal with three-evils. The RATS will play a vital role in observing trends in radical political Islam spreading in the Ferghana Valley and across the Amu Darya into Afghanistan and Pakistan. India needs to understand the emerging trends in the region and this can only be achieved by being in the SCO. India could gain from engagement with the RATS such as information on counter-terrorism efforts, regional and international security, etc. It seems RATS assists its members in sharing information during conference preparations, summit meetings, VIP visits, public meetings, sports events. The RATS' charter includes sharing of intelligence and compiling list of extremist groups, actors, individuals that pose threat to the region.

Its main tasks and duties include:

- Maintaining working relations with competent institutions of the member states and international organizations;
- Sharing of intelligence inputs;
- Assist in preparation of counter-terrorism exercises at the request of concerned member states, preparation and conduct of search operations;
- Joint drafting of international legal documents;
- Gathering and analysis of information, compiling list of extremist groups, actors, individuals for RATS data bank;
- Jointly respond to global challenges and threats;
- Holding of conferences and workshops and sharing of experience in the field.

The RATS seems to have made some achievements in terms of gathering information on terror networks, spread of ideology and propaganda, cross-border organised crime, and terrorist financing and money laundering. It has a defence cooperation mechanism to ensure cross-border crimes.

It regularly takes part in the meetings of the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (EAG) and other agencies working in the field. Cyber Security is a key institutional mechanism in RATS that interacts with competent authorities of member states. It holds technical experts meeting to create a Protected Information and Telecommunications Security System for SCO states. It conducts online counter-terrorism exercises such as "xiamen-2015" joint-command-post exercises on countering the use of internet by terror groups.

RATS has seemingly achieved tangible results: curbed over "500 terrorist crimes, eliminated over 440 training bases; caught 1050 members of international terrorist organizations, seized 654 improvised explosive devices, more than 5,000 firearms, 46 tons of explosives and more than 500 thousands of ammunition."[9]

The RATS's website shows that the SCO member states have averted 167 terrorist and extremist crimes in 2015 alone. Criminal charges were pressed against over 200 persons. 150 terrorists were liquidated, about a thousand abettors were apprehended, two hundred improvised explosive devices and 1500 weapons were

forfeited.[10] To strengthen international cooperation RATS has signed protocol and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the CIS Counter-Terrorist Centre and with CSTO. These ensure large-scale security cooperation arrangement in the common Eurasian space.

NEW ANTI-TERROR DRAFT STRATEGY

The SCO on March 31, 2017 adopted a draft convention on a single consolidated legal framework on terrorism, terrorist act and terrorist organizations. The earlier draft included the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (2001) and Convention against Terrorism (2009) that was primarily aimed at combating terror and drug-trafficking in Central Asia. The Astana Declaration of the Heads of State of the SCO said that the "member states will continue to cooperate in order to counteract the activities of individuals and legal entities related to the recruitment, training and utilisation of terrorists, public calls for terrorist activities or the justification of acts of terrorism, and financing terrorist activities."

ANNUAL "PEACE MISSION"

The SCO militarily cooperation includes regular conduct of its Annual "Peace Mission" or "anti-terrorist" exercises. The drills focus on the anti-terror command coordination operations and combat readiness. The planning and coordination of these joint exercises takes place within the framework of the SCO's annual defence ministerial meetings. During the June 2017 defence ministerial meeting a Protocol of Intent was signed for studying and preserving the historical and cultural heritage. It also approved the SCO Defence Ministries' Cooperation Plan for 2018-2019. The SCO Defence Ministries' award For Promoting Friendship and Cooperation has been conferred on people who contribute to strengthening better cooperation between the organization's defence ministries. Since 2014, SCO has been holding military music festival "*Trumpet of Peace*" with military bands participating from member states.

Russian has been the common operating language for these exercises, but in the recent years Chinese language has been added to improve interoperability. It needs to be seen whether English will be added to it with the entry of India and Pakistan. There has been much resistance against introducing English as one of the official languages of the SCO.

OTHER BENEFITS

Obviously, the impression was that the SCO in the long term would help India provide additional latitude for securing its energy interests – to invest in oilfields with an eye to get its way on the pipeline routes. The SCO could also change the way for Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline to see the light at the end of the tunnel, the viability of which had been threatened so far by a host of reasons.

There were other reasons to be a part of larger Eurasian integration process. For example, India was keen to build mutually

beneficial partnerships while sharing its techno–economic expertise, markets and financial commitment with region. For the Central Asia countries, India's experience in dealing with multi–cultural settings is an attraction as they also remain appreciative of Indian constructive efforts in Afghanistan.

On the connectivity front, India was mindful of the challenge posed by CPEC. A set of projects envisaged under BRI/CPEC was bound to transform the region in India's immediate vicinity having adverse impact on India.

Against these developments, India decided to commit investment to develop the Chabahar port in 2016 and planned to build a 610 km long railway from Chabahar to Zahedan in the north to connect with Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. In fact, the Chabahar announcement and the inauguration of the Friendship (Salma) Dam in Afghanistan in 2016 also signalled India's strong commitment to the regional integration process. In March 2016, India had requested for acceding to the Ashgabat Agreement. India's entry into Ashgabat Agreement especially came shortly after the inauguration of the first phase of the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar port in December 2017 which was financed by India (US$ 85 million). A greater prospect has opened for India to enlarge both the operational and practical scope of Chabahar to become a vital gateway and the shortest land route to access Central Asia.

China's aggressive and extensive posturing on its BRI projects in Eurasia probably prompted India sharply respond at finding ways to join Iran, Afghanistan, Russia and other states of the Caucasus to push the INSTC.

Apart from acceding to the Ashgabat Agreement, India also acceded (on June 19, 2017) to the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods Under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention, 1975) which is used for international carriage of goods. TIR Carnets provide the principal security for movement of transit cargo. It is an internationally recognised harmonised customs transit document that accompanies the truck driver and the cargo across customs points from origin to destination. The objective of these initiatives was to enhance India's connectivity within Eurasian region and synchronise it with other transport corridors within that region, including the INSTC.

It did appear initially that India wanted to fully exploit the opportunities under the SCO process, therefore joined the organization with a fresh mind without any ambiguity in 2017. To be sure, New Delhi was mindful of the geopolitical calculations underpinning these connectivity projects.

INDIA'S MEMBERSHIP

India had to wait for ten year before it could apply for full membership in 2014 when SCO cleared the legal procedure for new entrants. The prospect for formal entry became plausible after Russia invited PM Modi to the Ufa summit in July 2015. In fact, the expectation was that the membership would come through at the Ufa Summit. However, it turned out that the forum only took an

in-principle decision to set procedures for admitting India (and Pakistan). Thereafter, it took another two years for the formal entry – citing failure to set criteria, rules, procedures and a timeline that delayed India's entry into the regional grouping.

The entry documents were completed in 2016 but the two applicants, India and Pakistan, were required to adopt nearly 30 obligatory draft documents in accordance with SCO procedures through the signing of a 'memorandum on the commitments.' Of these, the key document relates to 'good neighbourhood' that had to be signed by the new applicants before being accepted as full members. In other words, India had to adhere to the SCO's expectations – equivalent of a 'peace treaty' between the neighbouring countries before it entered the SCO as a full member.

Clearly, the paperwork appeared to be merely a pretext for China to keep the SCO as its exclusive domain, one in which the inclusion of India was not a priority – or even a requirement. Though delaying India's entry meant doing the same for Pakistan and Iran, Beijing had other windows opened to deal with Islamabad and Tehran.

Others in the SCO had misgivings about the grouping getting mired in South Asian conflicts – the failure of the SAARC often used as an alibi. Former Uzbek President, Islam Karimov said during the Ufa summit that the inclusion of India and Pakistan into the grouping would change the very character of the SCO.[11]

The other reason for the expansion was the lack of achievements in the SCO activities. For over a decade, the SCO's progress remained spotty both in its efficacy and profile despite its high visibility. Its achievements were viewed more as an index of China's bilateral initiatives and its outside image was that of a 'club of autocrats' kept afloat by Chinese funding. However, things changed after Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013 unveiled the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) or the BRI – a plan to integrate Eurasia via economic and infrastructure connectivity.[12] The SCO also created that year a 6+2 format of interaction to discuss its long term strategy until 2025 and since then the expansion issue loomed large at its Summit meetings.

Therefore, what really spurred the expansion issue was China's push for enhancing connectivity and market integration. As a result, India suddenly featured high in President Xi Jinping's calculus who stated that improving India-China relations would be his "historic mission". A climate of normalcy and a sense of calmness along the border also prevailed.

The slow progress of SCO was also attributed to the deep undercurrent of competition between Russia and China. But the context changed in 2015 following the understanding reached between Putin and Xi for establishing complete synergy between Russia's EAEU and China's BRI.

Of course, the events in Ukraine have had a ripple effect in Central Asia. Besides, the ensuing fallout of Western sanctions on Russia and a whopping fall in oil prices had caused Eurasia to look for an outlet. The regional states were worried about Russia's

tendency for new imperialism and fear the loss of their sovereignty. Moreover, growing Sino-Russian proximity had created a degree of anxiety compelling regional states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to seek diversification beyond their immediate neighbourhood. In fact, these developments raised the question whether the SCO would grow without considering the involvement of India, Iran and others in practical areas of cooperation.

Further, the security concerns especially the prospect of the US drawdown from Afghanistan since 2014, ISIS's increasing footprints and the spate of terrorist incidents in China's Xinjiang province had become compelling factors for expanding the SCO.

GEOPOLITICAL BACKDROP

The SCO's expansion had come against the backdrop of intense global rebalancing games of big power rivalries from Eurasia to the 'Indo-Pacific'. Clearly, the SCO is mainly welded on Sino–Russian entente – intended both as a counterweight to the US-led global order and a key link in Beijing's new plans for connectivity since 2013. Whereas, Russia obviously viewed the grouping's utility in ideological terms as a counterpoise to the West. However, for China, it was a vehicle for expanding its geopolitical and geo-economic interests. For example, at the Tashkent ministerial meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi described the SCO as a paradigm of global and regional cooperation and as a model for economic and security cooperation.[13]

India desired to join the Eurasian group at a time when New Delhi had more decidedly aligned itself with the US's strategic vision of pivoting to the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region – now no longer a euphemism for China containment strategy.[14] However, Russia and others nonetheless wished to rope in India to provide fresh vitality, greater voice and prestige to the grouping, which had hitherto remained China-centric. The world's largest democracy joining the SCO meant lending greater legitimacy to the grouping, so far dominated exclusively by former communist states. India's geographical size, its 1.2 billion populations with over US$ 2 trillion economy made the SCO one of the biggest organizations in the world. But, it was Russia that initially pushed India's case for full membership. China on the other hand wanted to push for Pakistan's entry. Only Mongolia was welcomed as a member but was hesitant to join the Eurasian grouping. The UN sanctions obstructed Iran's entry. But Beijing eventually became more focussed on getting India and Pakistan into the SCO.[15] For a change, even the fraught Indo-Pak relations seemed no longer a problem but an opportunity to boost the SCO's profile and value. Chinese leadership though welcomed India's accession to the SCO when PM Modi visited China in 2015. For sure, China might have been unsure of India's full commitment to the SCO's raison d'etre and its charters. Beijing was ambivalent whether India under Narendra Modi was perusing friendship with Russia, a non-aligned country, or an ally of the US.

While the expansion issue has been debated, more positive views came to the fore in the

SCO in favour of the inclusion of the observer states that could also provide a greater voice to the SCO. Political considerations also underscored the importance of including other non-Eurasians states such as Belarus as an Observer. Further, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka as dialogue partners. All this has considerably changed the SCO's organizational texture by 2016-2017.

For India, a sense of clarity emerged after PM Modi in 2017 reposed full faith in the grouping and took the membership in a constructive spirit.[16] PM talked about deepening India's association with SCO as he also fine-tuned India's aspirations in the SCO, especially to benefit in economics, connectivity and counter-terrorism cooperation, of course emphasising on certain redlines – "respect territorial integrity, unite against terror".

Therefore, the SCO could certainly become a new frontier for India. As for the potential benefits for India, the practical implications of SCO are unlikely to be dramatic in the near term but in the longer run the grouping could create an environment for regional integration that would benefit India.

SCO AND INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY BALANCING

Indo–US ties have deepened further since India's membership in the SCO. Any ambiguities that may have existed so far in the Chinese minds probably have been removed after PM Modi's visit to Washington in June 2017. Given the range of military and technological cooperation agreements signed, bilateral ties were bound to grow to unprecedented levels.

For New Delhi, the growing ties with the US are not meant to target others indicating that its closer ties with Washington ought not to prevent it from boosting ties with Russia and China, for which India already has multiple avenues for engagement, such as Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS), Russia-India-China (RIC) and the SCO. India joined the China-led AIIB. Bilateral economic ties were unstoppably growing between India and China. Similarly, India and Russia are committed to strengthening the strategic partnership agreements and also agreed to sign a Free Trade Agreement with the Russia-led EAEU.

At the same time, New Delhi had its own reasons to harbour grudges against China's constant provocation along the border and making serious strategic moves to encircle India by enticing its neighbours. In fact, Chinese provocations gave sufficient reasons for India to build up its capabilities and counter moves, including its decision to sell the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile to Vietnam.

To be sure, India's own objective was not to play the interests of the US and China against each other but in building strong relations with both powers, as well as with Russia – to play the balancer role in the global strategic arena. It was expected then that once Iran joins the SCO, perhaps India will be in a better position to play a balancing role. However, the Indo-US entente was to grow beyond the military sphere to committing themselves for the promotion of shared values and interests in the Asian region. The US decision to push for virtual 'ally'

status for India and India's willingness to sign the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) had created many doubts over India's engagement in the SCO. Clearly, this was bound to contradict the SCO's aspiration of becoming a counterpoise to Western dominance. Obviously, India's task of navigating through the geopolitical space of SCO has become more challenging henceforth.

THE SCO'S ACHIEVEMENTS AND INDIA

So far, SCO achievements have been rather minimal except for blowing trumpet over how much population and territory it holds. Its declarative political aspects have been repeatedly ridiculed and criticised by the Western powers.

As for India, its joining so far largely remains a symbolic importance. There was and still is a lack of clarity about what it means for India – whether an opportunity or risk or even a trap. So far, public opinion has been rather mixed.

Years down the line, it also does appear that India needed to have better understanding of the Eurasian geopolitics and the role of SCO in it. New Delhi probably looked at the SCO from a narrow perspective of combating terrorism without considering China's larger interests in the SCO that extended beyond the agenda of setting borders with the new states to bring them under its strategic fold.

The trends so far indicate that China has adopted a policy scheme of replicating its Pakistan policy in Central Asia. A careful analysis indicates that China's conceptions have moved along a multiple but interrelated lines of thought: a) resolve its territorial problems and secure borders; b) preclude any possible threat to Xinjiang and keep its Uyghur diaspora in check; c) acquire a pivotal link to Eurasian markets.

In more recent years, Beijing used it as a critical instrument for promoting its grand strategy in limiting US influence in Eurasia, filling the Russian power vacuum in Central Asia, forestalling any Islamic threat to China's western borderlands and countering other powers such as India influencing the region.

Sceptics also wonder whether SCO has any consequence for India in terms of any specific functions and benefits. They suggest that joining a Chinese-led club is not a good idea as India will remain an odd one out in a club of ex-communist states.

CONTRADICTIONS ON TERRORISM

The SCO is likely to face many conflicting interests, from regional and global issues to combating international terrorism, and India's position may sometimes be at odds with that of other members. For example, China by its own assertion stands committed to fight against the "three evils" – terrorism, separatism and religious extremism – through the SCO. It has promised not to make use of internal conflict as a tool to sabotage the security of others and opposes applying double standards on terrorism. However, in practice Beijing's double-speak on terrorism has been quite evident.

It has used the SCO to fight only those cases of terror that fit with its own definition of terrorism. On the one hand, China describes Uyghur activism in Xinjiang as an act of terror and wants others to support its fight against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). It also refuses to oppose some terrorist groups that attack other countries. Beijing, for example, has been using Pakistan and its instruments of terror to expand its own geopolitical interests. Beijing repeatedly blocked India's bid to get Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Masood Azhar and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi banned by the UN.

Many analysts suggest that Chinese nationals are eventually getting exposed to a greater terror threat — and Beijing has no option but to seek cooperation from others. Three recent events have certainly influenced the Chinese thinking; a) The suicide bombing on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, on August 30, 2016 by Uyghur militant group, b) The video released by ISIS in March 2017 explicitly threatening China with attacks on its soil highlighted the expanding threat to China. The Islamic State video purportedly showing ethnic Uyghur returning from Iraq and threatening to shed "rivers of blood" has heightened the Chinese anxiety, and c) Internally, the situation in Xinjiang is tense with over a million Uyghur under detention in educational camps.

Notwithstanding all these, China seeks little coordination within the SCO grouping. In fact, China's approach to terrorism still remains a subtle one; to avoid attracting too much attention and becoming a target – the reason why China clubs terrorism with extremism and separatism ostensibly to convey that it not against Islam. This does not hide the fact China's repression in Xinjiang demonstrates the perils of large-scale anti-Muslim policies. So far, the Western countries have not fully endorsed the Chinese anti-terror policies in Xinjiang.

Clearly, China's current concept of "War on Terror" adopted after 9/11 has failed to mitigate the threat of terrorism. The casualties from terrorist attacks in China seem on the rise. More importantly, Xinjiang has become the focal point for terrorism in China after 9/11 despite repeated security crackdowns in the region. In fact, Xinjiang has seen an ideological shift from Uyghur ethno-nationalism to religious fundamentalism. Many analysts suspect that China's approach to terrorism may change as more Chinese nationals may get exposed to a greater terror risk across the globe.

COMBATING TERRORISM

Practically, the SCO has not come out with any military response to any terrorism-related issue in spite of its charter being to cater to the regional security threats. In fact, much to the chagrin of Moscow and Beijing, Central Asian members, particularly Uzbekistan, invited the US bases and military forces to be stationed on their soil.

For India, the gains from the SCO, so far, have proven lacklustre. India's active participation in the organization's RATS, military drills, for example, have not

prevented the February 2019 Pulwama-like terrorist attack sponsored by Pakistan-based terrorist group JeM.

The SCO's focus remains rather more about settling the Afghan conflict and thwarting the flow of ISIS into Central Asia and Xinjiang – not curbing Pakistan-sponsored jihadis. Instead, the member countries tend to recognise Pakistan's role in counter-terrorism. Because of the years of its experience in fighting against terror, they consider Pakistan as an important factor for combating terrorism if not one of the reasons for roping Pakistan into the grouping. Pakistan itself is eager to share its vast experience in countering violent extremism in the SCO.

So far, China has been using the SCO to garner support for its position on global issues such as on the South China Sea dispute. The SCO foreign ministers meeting 2016 sided with the Chinese stance. China under the auspices of the SCO has been coercing weaker Central Asian states for a long time to toe its line on major regional security issues. China also expects India to be in consonance with the SCO's position, no matter how difficult that may be. Not doing so would surely be dubbed as an unconstructive role on India's part.

While so far others have long chosen to hide their heads in the sand and never challenge China's double-dealings, but Beijing can no longer run with the hares and hunt with the hound on terror. India has already started using the SCO forum to press the point on combating terrorism. At the Astana Summit, PM expressed full faith that SCO would give a new push to fight against terrorism. Although, it remains unclear how India could benefit when Pakistan which is the source of terrorism remains protected by the SCO.

More often than not, the 'Shanghai Spirit' so far tended to reflect the Chinese viewpoints on terror. That is why New Delhi's gains from the SCO, so far, have proven minimal. Nevertheless, India could theoretically leverage the platform to obtain Beijing's cooperation on curbing Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.

PAKISTAN FACTOR

The bigger question and the down side of the SCO is the Pakistan factor which puts a spanner in India's goals in the grouping. Islamabad has been waiting in the wings to join the Eurasia body as a "historic occasion" and "an important milestone." Pakistan is expected to use the SCO for regulating its key regional security issues i.e. Afghanistan and Kashmir in addition to selling Gwadar deep seaport to Eurasian members, as well as to focus on CPEC as a regional integration agenda.In fact, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan had long crossed India's sovereignty red lines when they signed the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) with Pakistan in 1995 to Karakoram Highway (KKH) passing Gilgit-Baltistan as transit corridor. Tajikistan too lately joined the QTTA and Kazakhstan showed interest in joining CPEC. Potentially the CPEC and QTTA can strain India's ties with other SCO states.

Ironically, Russia and other SCO members while taking a cue from the Tashkent declaration of January 10, 1965 tend to contemplate SCO becoming a pivoting point to beget a gradual thawing of Indo–Pak tension. President Putin had said in 2015 that the SCO could become an "additional venue for finding compromises and solutions on disputed issues." Similar statements came from Chinese leaders who believed that "India and Pakistan's admission in SCO" will bring "improvement in their bilateral relations." Similar sentiments have been expressed by former Kazakh President Nazarbayev in the CICA meetings as well.

The SCO certainly provides a useful platform for dialogue process to help soften the tension between India and Pakistan. On the positive side, the SCO does facilitate large-scale diplomatic and security interactions at different levels including opportunity for the militaries of member states to engage in joint military drills where they coordinate on operational details and share intelligence. However, this does necessarily break up the Sino-Pak strategic nexus. Yet, given the deep differences on countering terrorism in addition to long drawn tradition of suspicion and rivalry, India's defence and security cooperation with Pakistan and China would become challenging. The SCO's regional dynamics hasn't reached to the level where the two countries are prepared to be guided by pragmatism.

Instead, Pakistan along with China is already starting to carry its anti-India rhetoric to blunt India's influence in Eurasia. For example, the recent incident of Pakistan "deliberately" putting a fictitious map on display at the SCO-National Security Advisor's meet chaired by Russia was not unsurprising. The incident led to India's NSA Ajit Doval to stage a walkout in protest from the meeting. Earlier, Pakistan Foreign Minister had pitched a campaign against New Delhi hosting the next SCO Heads of Government meeting in November citing COVID-19 spreading apace in India.

THE SCO'S RELEVANCE FOR INDIA

India's joining of the SCO format certainly opened up a new frontier to manoeuvre not only its Afghan policy but on all terror related issues. Benefits are seen ever since PM Modi in 2017 fine-tuned India's aspirations in the SCO to benefit in economics, connectivity and counter-terrorism cooperation, of course emphasising on certain redline – "*respect territorial integrity, unite against terror*". The June 2017 St. Petersburg Declaration also laid emphasis on the principles of respecting "sovereignty", transparency, sustainability and responsibility."

The SCO rather offers practical implications for India not only in terms of creating conducive environment of trust building but also real time opportunity for security cooperation. For example, the SCO's newly adopted draft convention on a single consolidated legal framework on terrorism, terrorist act and terrorist organizations – obligating "member states to act against activities of individuals and legal entities related to the recruitment, training and use of terrorists, public calls for terrorist activities or the justification of acts of

terrorism, and financing terrorist activities" fully meets the Indian requirements.

The SCO had banned LeT way back in 2007. Therefore, India is poised to gain from SCO-RATS in terms of gathering information on terror networks, spread of ideology and propaganda, cross-border organised crime, cyber security, terrorist financing and money laundering. Of course, much would depend on how much India can gain real time hard data on terrorist hideouts or sanctuaries in Af-Pak region.

THE KEY TO INDIA'S UTILITY IN SCO

To be sure, despite all the lofty goals and regional congruencies, prospect for real concurrence or a synergy among key stakeholders in the SCO remains minimal. The SCO also lacks a clear strategy except for annually making some abstract declarations. As India's External Affairs Minister said 'challenge remains not just of 'concepts and norms' but of 'practice.' So far, the grouping is still talking about principles and potentials rather than practical cooperation. In any case, contradictory views, especially India's strategic tilt towards the US will upset the regional balance of power within the SCO.

India's attempt at charting a new course at SCO seems only be achieved through Russia and Central Asian states. India's best is Russia, to exploit its geographical position as the centre of Eurasia to be an effective anchor in the SCO and build coalitions across the board.

In fact, it was Russia that brought India into the SCO as part of a Moscow's ploy to water-down the influence of China in its backyard. Ironically, this occurred just as Sino-Russian relations began to transform into a full-fledged strategic partnership. It is no longer clear where India fits in this "new era" of Sino-Russian relations. And Moscow, increasingly dependent on Beijing, is finding it harder and harder to resist Chinese strategic manoeuvres such as the stationing of troops in Tajikistan.

India needs to reverse the direction and it is possible while seeking better convergence with Russia and Central Asian members on regional issues. In fact, some of the on-going projects under consideration with Russia such as (India-EEU FTA) and transport connectivity (INSTC) need to be placed on fast-track.

There are certainly potentials to bring more dynamism in the bilateral ties between India and Russia, especially in areas that have not been explored yet. More importantly, India and Russia should take up joint projects in defence production by using the vast strategic assets in Central Asian republics.

A bigger imperative for India is to directly cooperate with Central Asian states. On the positive side, the Central Asian themselves are taking a fresh course which may prove to be transformational in due course. The region has witnessed a political transition in the recent years. New regional leaders have emerged with new visions and directions, which are seemingly moulding the region based on their traditional ties – at least new momentum of political will is developing for regional consolidation.

While India enters the Eurasian integration path, it needs to factor in the changing

political dynamics within Central Asia. Following the recent change of leadership in Tashkent, the nature of regional outlook is changing in favour of intra-regional cooperation. The new government in Uzbekistan, led by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, appears more open to boosting the country's relationships inside and outside the region. If the trend moves ahead, it would not be always easy for China to overcome the broader set of issues that come in the way for realising its BRI vision.

They share the Soviet legacies and the common bonds continue to exist. The differences among them are not allowed to cross certain threshold. For example, the recent cases of Uzbek-Kazakh, Uzbek-Kyrgyz, and Kyrgyz-Tajik border tensions are being managed internally without letting external powers mediating in the disputes.

Regional integration is now a strategic priority for both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. With trade between regional actors on the rise, regional 'consultative meetings' held regularly have serious resonance even outside the governments i.e. at political, academic and media circles.

At the regional security, Uzbekistan has adopted a robust policy on Afghanistan and is linked to the US's Central Asian strategy that can be encouraged further by India. In the years ahead their internal bonds would become increasingly strong and exceed any influences from external environment. India should also take advantage of Central Asia's current transformation and the SCO is the key to strengthen its regional bonds.

THE SCO AND INDIA-CHINA RELATION

The SCO certainly serves as a good venue for India to maintain dialogue with China. So far, despite differences, New Delhi and Beijing have come together at several multilateral forums such as in the BRICS. In the earlier SCO Summits, China and India had agreed to respect each other's core concerns. The SCO has recently provided a good platform (on the side-lines) in Moscow for the defence and foreign ministers of the countries to discuss the on-going border standoff in Eastern Ladakh. In the current context of tense bilateral relations any attempt at seeking convergence within the SCO seems difficult. Clearly, India-China cooperation dynamics has not reached to the level where the two countries are prepared to be guided by pragmatism like the one achieved between United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel.

The forum can be used for building better convergences with China that eventually might provide impetus for Indian military to interact with PLA and shed misgivings about each other. Of course, Russia, India and China have successfully worked together at several multilateral forums including RIC and BRICS. Clearly, SCO would add to better strategic convergences among three countries.

Moreover, India needs to see how the forum can be used for minimising the intensity of China-Pakistan alignment that actually undercut India's direct access to Eurasia. At the moment the SCO is fully aligned with China's vision. Chinese expectations would

be that SCO will provide a fresh impetus for China, India and Pakistan to talk about the connectivity issue and reduce India's objection over the CPEC project.

INDIA'S ASPIRATION IN THE SCO

The current conflation of global economic and strategic uncertainty is going to impact the SCO in an unprecedented way. In fact, the major power competition could get worst in the post-COVID scenario. China is not going to abandon its Eurasia vision, whereas US is seeking to contain China in the region. These are bound to impact the SCO in terms of its role, agenda and future trajectory.

Sadly, Central Asian members have suffered significant economic disruption due to COVID-19 pandemic. Their GDP declined over 5 per cent, drop in oil prices, drop in remittance from Russia by 50 per cent, migrants are stranded abroad et al have created myriad forms of social crisis. The negative impact is going to last long that is bound to create an ideal situation for China to exploit and even come up with an updated version of its BRI to shape the regional geopolitics.

Theoretically, the potential of the SCO remains immense, at least in spirit of its charters for being less confrontational and because of its consensus based decisions. The benefit of the SCO for India is to use the platform for retaining its strategic autonomy as an independent great power willing to regulate the global trend. However, India's future trajectory in the SCO would depend mostly on how India-China would weigh ties on security and economic calculations. Of course, India's strategic tilt towards the US will upset the regional balance of power within the SCO.

Joining the SCO will largely improve India's international influence provided India keeps a little low profile and not to get played into Pakistan's game. The grouping could help instil strategic trust among member states in the longer run. It could stir up new impulses for India's constructive, instead of confrontational, engagement with our two neighbours – China and Pakistan. More importantly, India will do well if it is able to avoid becoming a focal point of criticism.

India can certainly be a potential key stakeholder because of its history, geography, culture and its benign image of holding the balance of competing strategic interests. Clearly, there is also a case for India to strengthen Central Asian strategic autonomy vis-à-vis Russia and China. India's own direct interest lies in preventing Central Asia once again becoming a geopolitical chessboard of great game rivalries. For example, India's closer relationship with the US could be leveraged by them.

A high stake lies in preventing the region becoming a hub of terrorism and extremism – a political turmoil like the Arab Spring type is not desirable.

On the economic front, India's trade with Central Asia still stumbles along at just US$ 1 billion, with Russia accounting for a further US$ 10 billion. The bulk of India's trade with SCO members (90 percent) is with China - and the SCO is not necessary in achieving this. This needs to be addressed.

Considering the dramatic weakening of global governance, SCO can offer an alternative development and cooperation model for India in the post-COVID period as a platform to tackle common global challenges such as climate change and terrorism that are now being overlooked. India can certainly push back against binary great-power politics in Eurasia but to achieve that India needs a robust Eurasian strategy. The fight against COVID-19 has provided a model for India moving forward.

India's COVID-diplomacy of supplying medicines to SCO states has been a success. As India entered the new normal of living with COVID-19, most of the responses, nearly two-third of healthcare needs are coming from the public sector. Besides, most of the healthcare goods and drugs are supplied by the public sector. Until there are vaccines or alternative drugs are found, people have to continue with Non-Pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) and India has successfully made necessary modifications in dealing with the pandemic spread. India should share its private sector response for COVID-19 with the region. Russia is already seeking collaboration with India for manufacturing COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V. A more concerted effort is needed to promote Indian medical tourism with some modifications to suit the Eurasian requirements.

The pandemic has also induced some other positive outcomes for India. For example, Indian aviation industry during the course of COVID-19 repatriation flight has discovered a huge potential of aviation market in Central Asia – hitherto unexplored. The industry seems developing portfolio of traffic routes and cargo network into the Eurasian market – this would be worth pursuing. However, in the immediate term except for political rhetoric, member states will continue to function through bilateral and other multilateral engagements. In fact, China has been in favour of inclusion of bilateral contents in the SCO's ambit. To be sure, the SCO inherently remain a fragile regional grouping. Interests of Russia and China apart, the positions of the Central Asian states would also fluctuate in line with their interests. To be an effective member of the SCO, India needs to build its own leverages with these countries through bilateral means. Besides, it also provides an opportunity for India to display its independent foreign policy and diversify its partnerships.

In fact, the Central Asian states instinctively carry lots of expectations from India. They are sensitive and also pragmatic. They would start comparing India with China in terms of performances. If nothing else, the limited immediate benefits of joining SCO will be more than compensated for by improved defence cooperation with Central Asian states. India already has multi-faceted bilateral level defence cooperation relationship with all the SCO member states. The key components include military, training and assistance, joint military exercises, servicing and upgrading of military hardware, import of military equipment and spare parts.

In fact, the existing bilateral-level defence cooperation framework with individual member states should provide further impetus for enlarging this cooperation under the SCO framework in the following ways:

RUSSIA

Defence cooperation remains an important pillar of India-Russia strategic partnership – currently guided under the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military-Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-M & MTC). A clear roadmap exists to further boost bilateral defence cooperation ranging from developing futuristic weapon systems to upgrading of military-to-military ties.

KAZAKHSTAN

Cooperation with Kazakhstan is regulated under the India-Kazakhstan Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership (January 24, 2009), Agreement on Defence and Military Technical Cooperation (July 8, 2015) and India-Kazakhstan Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counter Terrorism (last held May 3, 2017).

KYRGYZSTAN

Cooperation with Kyrgyzstan is guided by MoU on Military-Technical Cooperation (1997). India provides instruction and training to Kyrgyz Armed Forces for UN Peacekeeping Missions, holds Joint Mountain training exercises "Khanjar" on regular basis.

TAJIKISTAN

The India-Tajikistan JWG on Defence Cooperation (2003), India-Tajikistan "Strategic Partnership" (2012) and India-Tajikistan JWG on Combating International Terrorism (last June 14, 2017) regulate our security cooperation. India helped Tajikistan upgrade its Gissar Military Aerodrome, Ayni in 2010; provides training to a large number of Tajik officers and cadets in India.

UZBEKISTAN

Agreement on Cooperation in Military and Military-Technical and JWG on Counter-Terrorism cooperation with Uzbekistan existed since 2005. Understanding for expanding cooperation in defence and cyber-security, law enforcement agencies and special services have been reached in July 2015.

CHINA

The defence cooperation and military engagement started soon after the establishment of JWG in December 1988, followed by Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC in September 1993. The Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2005), and Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) 2013 cover mechanisms for CBMs; holds joint military exercises.

Important components of cooperation include training of officers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at National Defence College (NDC), Defence Services Staff College (DSSC), Indian Military Academy (IMA), National Defence

Academy (NDA), Army Education Corps College, Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School, High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) and at the UN Training Centre; setting up of English Language Training and Computer Labs Centres for military personnel in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan; holding of Joint Army Mountaineering Expeditions with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The DRDO's Defence Institute of Physiology and Allied Sciences (DIPAS) run the Kyrgyz-India Mountain Bio-Medical Research Centre (KIMBMRC) in Bishkek to study mountain acclimatization procedures.

Areas of cooperation also include procurement of spares for thermal and electrical torpedoes from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

SCOPE FOR ENHANCING DEFENCE COOPERATION

- India should continue with the existing bilateral defence cooperation mechanisms to accelerate engagement in the SCO. China too follows a bilateral approach in the guise of promoting multilateral cooperation.
- Indian armed forces should actively participate in the SCO sponsored anti-terror and military drills. These might *provide a rare opportunity for the militaries of member states (including India and Pakistan) to work together* in coordinating operational details and sharing intelligence. These could be beneficial to Indian armed forces besides strengthening mil-to-mil relationship – an essential element of military diplomacy. India will have to push for induction of English language for interoperability.
- China intends to set up various manufacturing mechanisms in the SCO region by offering technology, equipment and contracting services including shifting its own factories to Central Asia for joint-production. Against this, India is in a better position to undertake joint production of weapon and equipment in Central Asia like it has done with Russia in the case of *BrahMos* supersonic ramjet cruise missiles.
- The commonalities of technologies (Russian origin) between India and Central Asia should be exploited. Excellent facilities such as the JSC National Company *Kazengineering* (Kazakhstan Engineering) – a conglomerate of 17 defence production units would offer huge prospects for Indian firms in joint-ventures.
- Some of the well-known defence-industrial units include ZIKSTO, PZTM, Zenith, Semey Engineering, Uralsk, and Kirov-Mash-Zavod that still manufacture quality weapons and repair equipment. Similarly, the JSC Dastan and JSC ULAN firms in Kyrgyzstan are involved in naval armament vehicles and are trying to modernise the Soviet origin technologies. The best part of these units is that they maintain research and designing centres for new weapons systems. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have facilities for overhauling T-72 Tanks and BMP-2s at Chemkent and Karabalta cities.

India should collaborate with them for production of weapons such as artillery guns, armoured vehicles, missiles, small-ships, aviation systems, naval equipment, etc. Quite clearly, prospects for Indian companies partnering with Kazakhstan in space programme, naval shipbuilding and airpower building are considerable.

- Russia still wields considerable influence in these countries, especially in respect of the region's military research facilities. Therefore, coordination with Moscow would be necessary when India considers taking up high-profile defence projects in Central Asia.
- India needs to strengthen cooperation with partner countries for capacity building of civilian crisis management and military rapid response. India could contribute to creating a crisis management structure for military missions in humanitarian aid, disaster relief and rescue operation under SCO banner.
- Another area of potential cooperation pertains to border management. India can offer the rich experience of its paramilitary forces for fostering cooperation between Border Guards – BSF/ITBP with the Central Asian Border Guard forces.
- It is imperative to step up regular high-level contact to enhance defence cooperation. Vast potential needs to be explored in both military technical field and mil-to-mil areas. The existing cooperation needs to be enlarged to include other areas such as:
  - Actively participating in the Russian *IntellTechExpo*, Russian Arms Expo, and Kazakhstan Defence Expo (*KADEX*) where the Chinese presence is generally thin. Conversely, India should also invite SCO members in its own defence exhibitions *Defexpo* and *AeroExpo-India,*
  - Holding regular military sports competitions relating to physical training, military combat skill, and professional proficiency of military action: land, sea and air,
  - Actively participating and also holding SCO Military Music Festival. The festivals should be tailored to cover educational and entertaining shows to introduce the best Indian military traditions to the key stakeholders including students,
  - To increase awareness, visibility and effectiveness of India's role in the SCO, India should institute regular strategic and security dialogue and conferences to discuss issues of common interests and identify priority actions for stronger cooperation. The Ladakh International Centre and Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) have already undertaken projects relating to India's role in the SCO.
- Since India already has Defence Attachés stationed in all the SCO member states, it is necessary that their tasks are reoriented to focus on collective security

framework under the SCO – from a strategic dimension.

- To evolve a structured policy and action plan a dedicated desk needs to be created in MoD to coordinate SCO related activities.
- An area of potential cooperation between India and SCO member states pertains to border management, especially with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which share long borders with China – Xinjiang Province. The Chinese fear is the presence of a substantial Uyghur population in the south Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, whose separatist movements have affiliations with the Uyghur in Xinjiang.
- The SCO Defence Ministerial level meetings should be leveraged to review the pressing international and regional security environment (threats and challenges) as well as coordinate action plans,

COOPERATION ON ANTI-TERRORISM

India has a well worked out mechanism and a common approach regarding combating the phenomenon of terrorism and radicalisation with SCO member states. The JWG on Combating International Terrorism with all the Central Asian states are held regularly. India offers special training courses on combating terrorism and information security to Central Asian specialists.

In general, India's multi-faceted relationship with the SCO member states have been though limited but the key components include the sharing of intelligence, training and assistance, the servicing and upgrading of military hardware, import of transport aircraft from Uzbekistan and torpedo parts from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The Indian Navy has been acquiring spare parts for thermal and electrical torpedoes from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and there is a good degree of collaboration with Kazakhstan on research and development of underwater naval armaments.

Significantly, the SCO had banned Pakistan based terrorist group LeT way back in Bishkek on July 30, 2007. Most of the SCO members have individually listed LeT in their banned terrorist organizations and its activities are prevented from taking place in their territories. We need to note that Pakistan had to put terrorist Hafiz Saeed-backed terror outfit *'Tehreek-e-Azaadi Jammu and Kashmir'*, a front for Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) on the list of "proscribed organizations" on June 8 - a day before Pakistan became a full member of the SCO on June 9, 2017 at Astana Summit. However, a list available on the website of Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority however said it was banned because of the decision of Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in Spain. According to a report in Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper, Pakistan was on the radar of FATF over concerns that it is not fully complying with curbs against entities listed with the UN.

Saeed himself has been now put under house arrest months before Pakistani membership case to come through in June 2017. His detention was extended for a further two months on August 1. It was against this

backdrop, the LeT launched a political party *Milli Muslim League* (MML) on August 7, 2017. India had pushed the SCO members at the summit to curb the financing of terrorist organizations and their fronts. But it needs to be noted that it is all about Pakistan's act of deceit. In 2016, Saeed was 'detained' within ten days of Trump's swearing in. But it was intended more to protect him against any possible American military strike, than to curb his activities.

India needs to ensure that no undesirable elements get a footing in the region that would be detrimental to its interest, for that working closely with RATS would be extremely important.

Similarly, in the past several undesirable and unwanted elements inimical to India have been looking at Central Asia as safe heaven to carry out anti-India activities. Therefore, India should ensure that such elements do not getting their footing in the region. Working closely with RATS would be therefore extremely important.

The SCO has already banned LeT in 2007. India's immediate attempts should include getting the chiefs of JeM, Masood Azhar and *Hizbul Mujahideen* (HM), Syed Salauddin designated as "global terrorists" by the SCO.

Importantly, soon after becoming full member of the SCO on June 9, 2017 India has raised its flag at SCO's RATS Headquarter in Tashkent on June 15, 2017. It would be important to have some of the brightest officers with language skills to be posted at RATS HQ in Tashkent.

From India's perspective, the SCO could be used as a neutral forum to discuss terrorism in a broader global and regional context. Surely, the decisions being arrived through the 'Shanghai Spirit' would also enable India to negotiate outcomes which serve its interests in securing regional peace and stability.

In fact, a key principle of the SCO Charter is "to jointly counteract terrorism, separatism and extremism". It is therefore important that the forum could be leveraged to obtain Beijing's cooperation on curbing Pakistan-sponsored terrorism or at least China does not unduly favour Pakistan on terrorism related issues.

Clearly, Beijing's endorsement of bracketing Pakistan-based LeT and JeM with global terror groups ISIS and al-Qaeda in the BRICS Summit declaration marked a significant shift of policy on counter-terrorism. Hopefully, this line of thinking henceforth will be repeated in the SCO summit as well.

Finally, given the current global and regional situation, the next SCO Summit agenda can't be anything but muted, perhaps adopting documents to deepen cooperation on fight against COVID-19. Nevertheless, India should use the gathering of the SCO's heads of government meeting in November to reinvent its political role in the Eurasian body to face these new challenges.

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THE SCO, AFGHANISTAN & REGIONAL SECURITY

P. Stobdan

From its inception in 2001, the SCO has been concerned about instability in Afghanistan; the sharing of common border with SCO members Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China make them vulnerable to the threats of terrorism, drug trafficking and other major and minor concerns spreading from Afghanistan. The SCO even claimed that Afghanistan was the main reason for its creation so that the member states could collectively respond to immediate threats posed to the region from the Afghan conflict in the late 1990s.[1]

Even prior to the 9/11, the Central Asian states and Russia always talked about the threat posed to the region from terrorists groups based in Afghanistan-Pakistan region such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), ETIM, Hizbut-Tahrir (HUT) and others whose goal was to destabilise the situation in Central Asia and topple the regimes to replace with Muslim Caliphates in the region.[2]

In fact, from the time SCO's signing of Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism on 15 June 2001, and the conclusion of the agreement on RATS in 2002, Afghanistan remained the key focus of attention in the SCO gatherings. When the interim Afghan government was set up under President Hamid Karzai, the SCO 2002 meeting at St. Petersburg formally welcomed "the creation of a new, stable Afghanistan, free of terror, war, drugs and poverty", and expressed readiness to "facilitate the process of forming broadly representative government in the interest of the entire Afghan people".[3]

In the subsequent SCO summits, the member states have invariably stressed on the need to make coordinated efforts in the fight against terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking, and, to create the necessary conditions for peaceful reconstruction in Afghanistan.[4] This consideration provided the basic rationale for SCO to engage along with the US/NATO forces in the stabilisation of Afghanistan.[5]

THE SCO-AFGHANISTAN CONTACT GROUP

By 2005, the SCO members felt it imperative to set up a formal group the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group to cooperate with Afghanistan to jointly fight against terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. Thereafter, the SCO's interest over Afghanistan continued. In 2009, the SCO organised a special conference on Afghanistan in Moscow with the participation of the UN Secretary General, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs and representatives from the EU, NATO, OSCE, CSTO, and OIC etc. The conference underscored the importance of sustained international efforts to achieve a stable, peaceful, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan.[6] The SCO and Afghanistan also called for the "adoption of a comprehensive convention on international terrorism".[7] However, in the interim, the effectiveness of the SCO efforts to deal with Afghan fallouts, especially relating the flow of drug trafficking has been disappointing. And, by

2009, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group ceased to exist.

The nature of the Afghan problem for Eurasia has undergone change following the US decision to withdraw its forces. This was accompanied by the fear of situation in West Asia (Syria and Iraq) especially the phenomenon of ISIS threat spilling over from West Asia to Eurasia. Since then, the SCO summits have been giving special attention to discussing the situations in Afghanistan. Almost every leader of the SCO members, including India, felt that the SCO could play an important role in stabilising Afghanistan, especially after the drawdown of foreign troops. Not just the Chinese but Russians also believed that the situation in Afghanistan has direct impact on the security situation of the region.[8] In fact, in 2012 the discussion on the SCO's expansion was linked to the escalation of violence in Afghanistan. Some of the SCO's joint military exercises adopted plans to pre-empt threats emanating from Afghanistan.

At the SCO Beijing summit in 2012, the Chinese president Hu Jintao announced the SCO's decision to grant Afghanistan observer status.[9] At the thirteenth SCO summit held in Bishkek, the focus was given on the impact of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan held an international conference on the situation in Afghanistan on October 10, 2013 that emphasised on "joint actions in the fight against terrorism, extremism, separatism, illegal drug trafficking and other transnational threats".[10] In fact, critics believed that it is Afghanistan and not India, Pakistan or Iran that will determine the SCO's actual relevance.

AFGHAN PERSPECTIVE OF SCO

However, Afghanistan by itself, despite being an Observer remained indifferent and unsure about its role and expectations in the SCO. This was perhaps more to do with its internal situation that made Kabul less enthusiastic about developments in its northern neighbours. Of course, there was the American policy priority to have held over the country which made Afghanistan, like Mongolia, less inclined towards joining the SCO. Possibly, Kabul also preferred to stay away from the SCO for it being a forum for high voltage geopolitics – a euphemism for US-China-Russia competition for influence in Eurasian.

From the Afghan point of view, engaging in cooperation in soft areas like the Silk Route projects would be another matter, but on the security front, the Afghans increasingly articulated the point that source of trouble for Afghanistan emanates less from internal sources but more from external sources mainly from the FATA (Pakistan), Ferghana (Central Asia), and Chechnya (Russia).[11] However, in the changed regional security environment especially in the wake of the 2014 Western troops' drawdown, Afghanistan's outlook towards the SCO also underwent a change. The influential Afghan circles also started to argue in favour of joining the SCO as a full member.[12]

From Afghanistan point of view, the never ending rivalry between two South Asian states Pakistan and India cause problem, but

it would also like to leverage its position in the SCO to regulate Central and South Asian regional politics, as such entry into the SCO is a desirable outcome for Afghanistan. Since then Afghanistan started to show interest in the SCO in a way to seek a regional solution to its own problem. It has been participating at the SCO summits and even started efforts for gaining full-fledged membership. In 2018, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani attended the SCO summit in Qingdao along high level of Afghan delegation.

On its part the SCO has been laying more stress on the economic and security situations in Afghanistan, especially on the rise of ISIS presence in Afghanistan. In 2015, President Ashraf Ghani put more importance on the regional countries to cooperate in combating terrorism.

Since then, the SCO states, especially Russia laid emphasis on the regional states playing a significant role in bringing Afghan government and the Taliban on the peace negotiation.[13] Russia even built contacts with the Taliban.

At the sixteenth SCO summit held in Tashkent in 2016, the members besides security matters discussed economic cooperation with Afghanistan to convert the country into trade and transit hub in the region to supply electricity and promote rail transport. Clearly by 2016, Afghanistan featured more in the SCO's scheme of thing while taking into consideration its close regional geographical proximity and the economic interdependence with Central Asia, China and South Asia. Therefore, Afghanistan is being factored into the regional security complex as also to find a common solution to the shared regional problems.

Considering the SCO's key goal of combating against the three evils of terrorism, separatism, extremism, as well as drug trafficking and to cooperate on economic development, the SCO members of Central Asia are increasingly looking at the Afghan issue as a subset of the phenomenon of regionalism and regional complexity. Therefore, the Afghan problem became a significant concern for the SCO and as such the need for Afghanistan to become a full member of the organization. This was necessary for the SCO to complement its regional agenda. Many analysts by then had begun to articulate the historical, ethnic, and shared cultural commonality between Afghanistan and Central Asia to foster a closer regional integration. Obviously, Russia and China also prefer to have a SCO driven solution for the Afghan problem.

While Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been seeking their separate engagement with Afghanistan including with the Taliban, China has been approaching the Afghan issue to embed in its own BRI and other economic projects. The Chinese railway now connects with Afghanistan's Mazar-e-Sharif through the Uzbek railway line.

REVIVAL OF CONTACT GROUP

Following the expansion of the organization in 2017, the SCO had to readjust its agenda and activities. This led to the revival of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group after a

gap of nine years. This revival came about after a change in Russia's Afghan policy in the midst of its strike against ISIS in Syria. Moscow saw the increasing ISIS presence in Afghanistan rather than the Taliban posing a serious threat to Central Asia and southern Russia. In 2017, President Putin therefore talked about coordination among Special Forces of the SCO to jointly tackle threats emanating from Afghanistan. Therefore, the need to revive the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was strongly felt. But, Moscow has also taken a view in favour of the Taliban joining the reconciliation process as both Russia and China seemingly recognised Pakistan's role in the regional counter-terrorism efforts.

Similarly, in 2017, President Xi Jinping also talked about the SCO playing a "bigger role in Afghanistan's peace and reconciliation process". This should be, of course, viewed in the context of China's protecting its BRI and CPEC projects passing through the vicinity of Afghanistan. Besides, China also started hedging its own bets by formulating a sub-regional security grouping involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. It also initiated the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan foreign ministers' dialogue mechanism to get the Afghan Taliban to join the reconciliation process. Afghanistan has also pledged closer cooperation on BRI. President Ghani cherishes Afghanistan's friendship with China.

Against this, the first meeting of the Contact Group was held at the level of deputy foreign ministers in Moscow on 11 October 2017. The group supported the Afghan government to settle the conflict through political consultations and dialogue. It was unanimously agreed to promote SCO-Afghanistan cooperation within the framework of this consultative body on rotation basis. The second meeting of the Contact Group was held 28 May 2018 in Beijing and the third in Bishkek in 2019. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group began to show interest in helping the Afghan peace process following the process of Afghan peace negotiation got accelerated in 2019.[14] The third meeting held in Bishkek discussed the draft roadmap for further actions of the Contact Group.[15]

Significantly, the SCO Secretariat held a roundtable discussion on Afghanistan on 9 January 2019 to review the role and achievements of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group towards establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan. Essentially, the Contact Group continues to watch and assess the situation in Afghanistan and prospects for the intra-Afghan dialogue.[16] SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov detailed the vision and agenda of the Contact Group that included:

- On the security situation in Afghanistan, the SCO observed that the number of terrorist attacks by local militants have increased in 2019. Of the special concern was the increasing number of armed opposition and groups along the Afghan border areas with Central and South Asian nationals. The SCO felt particularly concerned about radical elements getting concentrated in a number of provinces in northern Afghanistan with

a view to establish a bridgehead from where the extremists could penetrate into the countries of Central Asia like in the 1990s.

- The production of narcotics is reported to be steadily growing. Over 65 per cent of the revenue source of the terrorists is generated from drugs. The SCO believes that the role of RATS in curbing drug trafficking has considerably increased over the years.

- Against the ongoing changes taking place in Afghanistan i.e., the US-Taliban dialogue, the Intra-Afghan dialogue, the US troops' withdrawal, the SCO seems determined to uphold Afghanistan's sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and in its support for the Afghan Government and people to restore peace and stability.

- On the Afghan peace process, the SCO supports the various dialogue formats put forward by the member states, including the Moscow format of consultations, the Tashkent process, consultations with special representatives of Russia, China, the US and Pakistan, and other multilateral platforms.

- The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group approved a roadmap in 2018 that envisaged joint actions to enhance cooperation in security, trade, the economy as well as cultural and humanitarian ties.

- The experts in the SCO-Contact Group hold a general view that the Afghan situation continues to impact on the SCO countries and, in particular, on the Central Asian states and the on-going US efforts to settle the situation in Afghanistan are both costly and inefficient. They believe that political situation has deteriorated and Afghan society has become more radicalised.

- All in all, the SCO's common approach has been that there cannot be a military solution to the Afghan problem and that the SCO states must help Afghanistan achieve economic and political stability with the participation of Afghan people.

- The SCO began to articulate the point that Afghanistan is not a source of threats but a space of opportunities – the key element of which include the need for restoring the country's involvement in regional transport network of air, surface and railway connectivity line with the SCO initiatives of the 'Greater Eurasian' partnership, the BRI and in consonance with the national strategies of the member states. For instance, the existing Hairatan – Mazar-e-Sharif railway and the proposed Mazar-e-Sharif – Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif– Peshawar links are being envisaged as new trans-regional corridors to provide Eurasian nations direct access to ports in India, Iran and Pakistan.

- Essentially, the SCO is taking a policy approach to assist Afghanistan in its socio-economic development programme, creating opportunity for partnership in agricultural production,

engaging Afghan youth in a positive agenda and integrating Afghan industrial and infrastructure sectors with the wider Eurasian regional economy.

THE SCO, INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN

India has been working closely with the SCO member states, as it has legitimate stakes in bringing peace, prosperity and stability in Afghanistan. For that reason, it has been actively participating in the SCO activities after becoming full member of the SCO in 2017. India was quick to join the meeting of the first SCO-Contact Group on Afghanistan that has been revived after a gap of nine years in October 2017 where it shared its perspective on the Afghan situation and expressed its willingness to works closely with the SCO member States in efforts to bring prosperity in Afghanistan.

On its part, New Delhi has been quite clear about its position and the role in Afghanistan and that has consistently opposed engaging with terrorist groups that are seeking to oust the legitimate Afghan Government. India's approach has been that any settlement should be within the format of Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation. There is every possibility for India's stance on Afghanistan in the SCO to be at odds with that of others especially that of Pakistan and China. India cannot deviate itself away from its clear and consistent policy that it does not differentiate between good and bad Taliban.

India is opposed to sending its troops in Afghanistan but supports the SCO's efforts to face the challenges posed by terrorism and supports the idea of strengthening Afghan defence forces.[17] For that India is also working with both the US and Russia. India is deeply engaged in the ongoing efforts to bring a political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Indian officials have been interacting at different levels to further strengthen the peace initiative for achieving the shared objectives.

For decades, India followed a constructive approach towards Afghanistan. India is deeply committed to support Kabul in all international forums as well as continuing with its civilian reconstruction programmes in Afghanistan. It will continue to provide assistance for socio-economic development based on priorities of the people of Afghanistan, and for ensuring greater connectivity and regional integration for Afghanistan. Here, potentially, it might be possible for India, Russia and China to find the imperative to work together in a collaborative manner in Afghanistan – in the spirit of sharing labour.

India reiterated its support to the membership of Afghanistan in the SCO. But to what extent can India play a role to formulate the regional consensus on an Afghan peace under the SCO is an important issue. As for the other Central Asian members and Russia, they have sufficient mechanisms in place under the CSTO to counter the threats along the Afghanistan-Central Asian borders.

India's approach has to be within the format of Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation. From Indian perspective, the ISIS can easily be dealt militarily, but

any attempt at politically legitimatising the Taliban would risk having reverberating impact for the entire region of South and Central Asia. Moreover, India's position is that Pakistan is the main source of terrorism and has links with all the terrorist organizations. And, if the Taliban comes to power, Islamabad will foment several unregulated interests in the SCO to off-balance Indian interests in the region.

In a situation that remains in flux today and with Pakistan any plan to create a Northern-Alliances-type counter group for countering the Taliban is unlikely to fructify.

From India's perspective, Afghanistan gravitating towards the SCO would be a positive development but Afghanistan becoming the bridge between Central Asia and South Asia would remain as a slogan as long as Pakistan does not play a constructive role. It is possible that India and China might eventually find the imperative to work together in a collaborative manner in Afghanistan.

The challenge for India is to separate its strategic agenda from exploring new economic opportunities in Afghanistan that are linked with Central Asia. The prospective areas could be in manufacturing, transportation and construction. India could make an initiative for creating a cartel of dry-fruit supply-consumption chain to integrate Central Asian production centres with Afghanistan for onwards supply towards India and the world market.Separately, India needs to engage in rebuilding the Afghan agriculture and irrigation sectors.

In order not to get isolated on the Afghan issue within the SCO-Contact Group, India should establish greater understanding with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan (KUT), and Russia. The KUT can form a more reliable partner for India within the SCO.

India should be working with KUT within the RATS to regulate the body and to work out mechanisms/arrangements between the member states including Afghanistan to arrange (a) bilateral extradition agreements, (b) take stock of the radical extremists and terrorists operating actively in the region including in the FATA/Waziristan areas, (c) gather hard intelligence on their activities, (d) identify the sources of terror-financing and jointly work towards blocking these channels, and (e) jointly cooperate in de-radicalisation programmes through Islamic-Sufi clergy both in India, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

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