



Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and India's Strategic Options in Central Asia



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Background

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was formed on June 15, 2001 in Shanghai, China, as an entity to promote political, security and economic alliances among the nations of Eurasia. It was created at the initiative of the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India's process of acquiring the SCO's permanent membership had begun way back in 2015.

The cardinal aims of SCO included establishing cooperation among the members mainly with regards to security-related concerns, the resolution of border issues, military cooperation, intelligence sharing, countering terrorism and the US hegemony in the Central Asian Region (CAR).

SCO membership was important for India in so far as it was expected to help India in combating terrorism through regional geopolitical and economic alliances.

A significant milestone in India's relationship with CAR was marked by an indication by the SCO at its session in Tashkent on June 23-24, 2016 towards including India and Pakistan as fulltime members. As expected, China has been found creating obstacles to hinder India's membership in the SCO. However, with an effective diplomacy, India ultimately triumphed by joining as a full-time member of SCO.¹

1 | <https://capsindia.org/>

Recently, Russia and China have been seen coming closer in the SCO, especially during the course of the Ukraine war. Apart from this, the present geopolitical situation brings home a point that China is exercising an incredible sway on the SCO by influencing the important decisions. This raises a question mark on the prospects and rationale of India's continued presence in the SCO.² In fact, the significance of Central Asia has increased for India, especially with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. This is for the simple reason that any development taking place in Central Asia has cascading effects on Russia-China combine and finally on India³.

As a matter of fact, in the near past, with an enhanced focus of India on China and Pakistan, the attention towards Central Asian republics seems to have taken a sort of back seat, despite a number of bilateral visits between Indian and Central Asian leadership.

Considering the constantly volatile geopolitical situation in the region, there may be two ways of looking at the matter. One is whether India should continue as a member of SCO, and the other is whether Indian diplomacy would be capable of tackling the geopolitics in the CAR on its own given its forward-looking approach. It would also be significant to see if India can achieve this without having to bank upon the support of any other big power in the region. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to examine these diverse lines of thinking.

Should India Remain an SCO Member?

The guiding principle for this line of thought is that the Eurasian region and Central Asia are India's near neighbours. It is also because, India possesses enormous energy interests in Central Asia that need to be safeguarded at all costs. Further, India has also enjoyed good ties with CAR since time immemorial, and therefore there is every reason to keep these links alive.

Another guiding factor is that, in view of the prevailing global geopolitical dynamics, Russia and China, in all likelihood, may join hands with each other to keep Central Asia out of US influence at all costs. This has been, perhaps perceived as their biggest strategic aim for a long time. The most significant reason for this is that since the Russian disintegration, the USA has been trying to make inroads into CAR, which Russia and China were never comfortable with. Amidst these volatile international equations, India has massive energy stakes in the CAR and has also invested huge sum of funds in the development of logistics infrastructure in the CAR, especially in and around Chabahar Port.

The regional security scenario and the geopolitical situation around India are in a state of constant flux, especially in face of extant internal conflicts within Pakistan and the Taliban having usurped the power in Afghanistan. India, far-sightedly enough, has neither supported nor denounced the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Similarly, the Taliban, too, has not shown any hostility towards India to date perhaps due to the Taliban's stated pursuit for international recognition. However, notwithstanding this, India has reasons to guard against even remotely possible Taliban resistance to our strategic presence in the CAR.

Also, as a constant sufferer of the terrorist menace, India has an irrefutable need to tackle the escalating religious fundamentalism amidst Islamic radicalisation in the region and its cascading effects on India's national security. India's entry into SCO is understood to have been steered by its ambition to enhance its clout in CAR.

However, this ambition of India appears to be restricted to a large extent, largely in face of India's multitude of dissensions with Pakistan and China coupled with persistent Chinese territorial misadventures in face of China's dominant position in the SCO.

To complicate it further, even Russia, a long-standing friend of India, now seems to be leaning closer to its doctrinal ally, the communist China, with the singular agenda of neutralising the rising US influence in the CAR.⁴

Going by this approach, India should consider continuing as a member of the SCO and strive to fulfil its national interests and global ambitions.

Should India withdraw from the SCO and Tackle Central Asian Geopolitics alone?

The other thought process gains relevance from the fact that India already enjoys close ties with Russia and therefore has the capability and better prospects to foster and sustain good relations with CARs even without formally associating itself with the SCO.

India's multipronged foreign policy places India in a better diplomatic position with brighter prospects to further its cherished national interests in the CAR or for that matter with any other country by virtue of its charismatic leadership by practising a forward-looking diplomacy. It is strongly supported by the fact that India practises a forceful diplomacy emanating from its charismatic leadership with a virtually forward-looking approach.

This is also supported by the transformation of India into a favourable place for inward foreign investments, backed with India's proven track record of the diplomacy having a personal touch towards big as well as even the small nations. This has placed India on a path where we are fast moving in the direction of becoming the *Vishwa Guru* on account of India practising diplomacy largely through its soft power. The soft power approach as practised by India includes *yoga*, *ayurveda*, culture, films, Covid vaccine diplomacy, humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) operations as and when required and so many other soft power drivers of Indian foreign policy.

This thought process of India has been exhibited equally evidently in India's hard power framework of effectively responding to the misadventures of the adversary with an iron fist albeit in a velvet glove. It was showcased in India's heavy handed military response to its proclaimed adversary and at the same time being ready to send the HADR as and when required.

India's charismatic foreign policy approach and clout at the international level came to the fore also when even Ukraine and some other world powers showed inclination that India should intervene to facilitate Ukrainian peace with Russia.

Given the constantly dynamic geopolitical scenario, there is also a likelihood that, due to a largely anti-West profile of SCO the tension between the USA and other western block countries on one hand and China & Russia flanked by other east European countries on the other may increase. In such an eventuality India, with its rising diplomatic influence in the international politics, may be put into a situation in the future where it may even have to take sides.

Considering this perspective, it may be equally desirable for India to consciously detach itself from SCO and instead consider enhancing its clout even among the countries that are outside the ambit of SCO through the conscious utilisation of a judicious combination of hard and soft diplomatic approaches. In any case, India needs to pursue a farsighted path so as to strengthen its position in CAR further and acquire a greater capability to shape the world order.

Concluding comments

It is worth mentioning here, that in order to become a world power and wield greater influence to handle bilateral and multilateral issues India has to protect and safeguard its national aspirations and strategic interests with respect to Central Asia. To achieve this, India needs to adopt an all-inclusive diplomatic approach that may eventually embrace the entire spectrum of economic

reforms, geopolitical sway, military capabilities, diplomatic relationships, technological advancements and finally powerfully utilising its soft power.

Notwithstanding whether or not to be with SCO, India presently with a proactive diplomacy and playing on the front foot, is already emerging as a regional power. It by now can be seen having acquired significant global influence, particularly in South Asia as well as CAR. India's present engagement in the QUAD, ongoing presidency of the G-20 and membership of G-7, all taken together place it strongly in a dominant position in the international politics with brighter prospects of playing a more prominent role in influencing and shaping the global order.

Notwithstanding the above, whatever it takes, India should realistically evaluate the entire dynamics of the CAR before taking a conscious decision on whether or not to remain associated with SCO. While doing so, India also needs to, duly consider China's potential to steer the actions of SCO by virtue of its recently rising influential position therein.

The idea of organising meaningful deliberations through an ascribed body comprising national media, academia, diplomatic echelons and other relevant stakeholders under the national leadership of India, certainly merits a positive consideration. This would be beneficial in so far as to meaningfully ideate on the issue and develop a well-calibrated approach that can best facilitate the attainment of India's strategic interests in Central Asia.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

¹"Brief on SCO", Ministry of External Affairs, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Division, September 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/SCO_Brief_September_2022.pdf. Accessed on May 11, 2023.

² "Is India Wasting Time in The SCO, Where China Calls The Shots?", *Outlook*, May 04, 2023, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/is-india-wasting-time-in-the-sco-where-china-calls-the-shots--news-283697>. Accessed on May 11, 2023.

³ Mishra Saaranish, "India on the right track to bolster relations with Central Asia", *Observer Research Foundation*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-on-the-right-track-to-bolster-relations-with-central-asia/>. Accessed on May 17, 2023.

⁴ "What Does India Gain from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *The Diplomat*, May 01, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/what-does-india-gain-from-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>. Accessed on May 11, 2023.