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# SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION IN EVOLVING GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL ASIAN REGION: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

ANADI

## INTRODUCTION

After the emergence of new world order in the post-World War II era, regional organisations multiplied as a balance between nationalism and internationalism. As their importance and usefulness increased over time, many regional configurations emerged, ranging from those concerned with security issues to those centred on commercial engagement, and eventually expanding to common language/ethnic and religious organisations. The primary focus of these groups was on achieving the goals of reconciliation, economic cooperation, and security development. Particularly the newly independent states of Africa, the Caribbean and Asia were inclined towards these regional organisations.

On June 15, 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an intergovernmental organisation, was established in Shanghai.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Bandana Upadhyay, "India's SCO Membership: Prospects & Constraints", Indian Council of World Affairs, August 12, 2016, at [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=603&lid=545](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=603&lid=545). Accessed on January 21, 2023.

The leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an eight-member multinational organisation, on June 15, 2001 in Shanghai, China. With the exception of Uzbekistan, these countries were a part of the Shanghai Five group, which was established on April 26, 1996, with the signing of the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions.<sup>2</sup> Uzbekistan was originally admitted into the Shanghai Five mechanism in 2001, during the annual summit in Shanghai, turning it into the Shanghai Six. Further, the *Declaration of Shanghai Cooperation Organization* and SCO Charter, which outlined the group's goals, guiding principles, organisational structure, and modes of operation, were subsequently signed on June 15, 2001, and June 22, 2002, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, India, Iran, and Pakistan were given Observer status during the Astana Summit in July 2005. The SCO resolved to admit India and Pakistan as full members in July 2015 at Ufa, Russia. In Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in June 2016, India and Pakistan signed the memorandum of obligations, beginning the formal process of becoming full members of the SCO. At the historic summit in Astana on June 9, 2017, Pakistan and India were formally admitted as full members of the SCO.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, the SCO consists of eight Member States (China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), four Observer States (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia) that are interested in obtaining full membership, and six "Dialogue Partners" (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey).<sup>5</sup> Further, in 2021, it was decided to begin the process of Iran becoming a full member of the SCO, and Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia were made dialogue partners.<sup>6</sup> Since 2005, the

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2. Ministry of External Affairs, "Brief on SCO", at [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/SCO\\_Brief\\_September\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/SCO_Brief_September_2022.pdf). Accessed on January 21, 2023.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. "Political and Peacebuilding Affairs", Shanghai Cooperation Organization, at <https://dppa.un.org/en/shanghai-cooperation-organization>. Accessed on January 21, 2023.

6. Ibid.

SCO has participated as an observer at the UN General Assembly.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, a Joint Declaration on Cooperation was signed by the Secretariats of the UN and SCO in April 2010.<sup>8</sup> Along with ongoing collaborations with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and the UN Office on Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), the SCO Secretariat has also established partnerships with the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).<sup>9</sup>

The main goals of the SCO are: to improve relations between members; to encourage collaboration in political, economic, and trade spheres, as well as in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and in the fields of energy, transportation, tourism, and environmental protection; to maintain regional peace, security, and stability; and to establish a democratic, equitable global political and economic order.<sup>10</sup> Further, building mutual trust and good neighbourly ties among the member nations is also one of the SCO's primary objectives.<sup>11</sup> In keeping with the "Shanghai Spirit", the SCO conducts its internal policy in accordance with the values of reciprocal trust, mutual cooperation, equality, appreciation for cultural diversity, and promoting shared growth and development while conducting its external policy in accordance with the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting anyone, and inclusivity.<sup>12</sup>

### **POTENTIAL OF SCO AS A REGIONAL ORGANISATION**

Rather than just acting as a provider of regional security and stability, the SCO has developed over time as a platform. The SCO,

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7. "India at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Walking a fine line", *The Times of India*, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-walking-a-fine-line/articleshow/94212941.cms>. Accessed on January 21, 2023.

8. "General Information", Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, at <http://eng.sectsc.org/cooperation/20170110/192193.html>. Accessed on January 21, 2023.

9. Ministry of External Affairs, n. 2.

10. "Frequently Asked Questions", Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, at <http://eng.sectsc.org/docs/about/faq.html>. Accessed on January 21, 2023.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

as an intergovernmental organisation, provides avenues to start a constructive discourse about regional cooperation. It also provides a platform to promote discussion on extremism and terrorism, and foster regional cooperation, in view of the region's rapid increase in religious extremism and terrorism. Further, the "Shanghai Spirit" that the SCO promotes diverges significantly from the principles of earlier Western-led international organisations. The Shanghai Spirit's fundamental principles are "mutual trust, reciprocal benefit, equality, consultation, respect for the diversity of cultures, and pursuit of shared growth". During the time of the "Shanghai Five", the "Shanghai Spirit" was formed.<sup>13</sup> The "five viewpoints" promoted by the SCO have gained widespread acceptance and recognition among the member states. The zero-sum strategy, the Cold War mentality, and the "clash of civilisations" are conventional beliefs and ways of thinking about international relations that the SCO contradicts. The SCO has been motivated by the Shanghai Spirit, which includes the "five viewpoints" at its core, to create a new approach to international affairs that prioritises cooperation over allegiance and partnership over war.<sup>14</sup>

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has actively built a network of multilateral partners over the past 20 years while remaining open to the outside world and governed by a new kind of state-to-state ties. An essential factor promoting the development of SCO collaboration is the new form of state-to-state relations that emphasise mutual respect and win-win cooperation.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of size or strength, the SCO member states uphold equality, mutual respect, fairness, and justice. Traditional and non-traditional security challenges are resolved through communication and consultation. They seek to promote development and prosperity in the region through transparency, cooperation, mutual benefit and win-win

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13. R. Rowden, "The Rise and Rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", Global Economy Brief, University of Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, Interdisciplinary Centre of the Social Sciences, 2018, pp. 1-13.

14. M. Fredholm (ed.), *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Geopolitics: New Directions, Perspectives, and Challenges* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2013), pp. 1-324.

15. Yang Jiechi, "A New Type of International Relations: Writing a New Chapter of Win-Win Cooperation", *Horizons*, no. 4, 2015, pp. 12-19.

outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Further, the SCO member countries, as well as the observer and partner countries, aspire to respect one another, consult on an equal footing, vigorously pursue their shared interests, and achieve regional security, stability, and prosperity.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the SCO has consistently supported the legitimacy of the United Nations (UN) over the past 20 years, actively cultivated new forms of international relations, and cooperated and developed links with the UN and its branches. All things considered, it can be argued that mutual respect, openness, inclusivity, and mutual benefit underpin all forms of collaboration inside the SCO, as well as with the UN and other international organisations, giving the SCO an unending source of momentum for growth.

The SCO has a lot of potential to advance the interests of its member states on a global scale. By acknowledging the difficulties Central Asian countries face in their domestic matters, it becomes more pertinent to Central Asian countries that are vying for political maturity and economic growth. China and Russia bear a significant amount of responsibility in this regard. When it comes to this organisation's defence capabilities, the SCO can be rated as a security alliance rather than a military alliance.<sup>18</sup> Both China and Russia have referred to the SCO as a "partnership instead of alliance", in contrast to the design and goals of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Moreover, the SCO is an effective forum for underdeveloped member countries to seek answers to their domestic difficulties, and is also a key venue for economic integration through trade and investment because it includes two significant regional powers, China and Russia, as members.

### **IMPEDIMENTS OF SCO**

The ongoing turbulent geopolitical flux may have an impact on how the SCO operates. It includes the Ukraine War, which has upset

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16. Y. Xue and B. Makengo, "Twenty Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Achievements, Challenges and Prospects", *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 10, October 2021, pp. 184-200.

17. Ibid.

18. S. F. Hasnat and Z. Awan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential", *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 21, 2016, pp. 83-100.

regional harmony and the balance of ties between the two main SCO protagonists, China and Russia. Moreover, the possibility that the SCO will change from being a non-Western organisation to one that is anti-Western amid the changing geopolitical scenario in the region, may cause some of its members who value multi-alignment to lose sight of what the organisation stands for.<sup>19</sup> Further, the formation of mini-coalitions within the SCO and bilateral disputes between its members also provide unique strategic difficulties. Due to China's hegemonic economic position in the region, the ambitious SCO objective of building inclusive economic and connectivity ties throughout Eurasia has not gained much traction. Notably, there is also a trust gap among a few SCO members. Some members are not living up to their promises of supporting the lofty Shanghai Spirit, as evidenced by China's unilateralism on the India-China border, Pakistan's refusal to allow India access by land to reach Central Asia, and the China-Pakistan alliance harming India's interests in Eurasia. It is interesting to note that even the Central Asian Republics (CARs) see China and Russia with suspicion and terror. This has encouraged them to diversify their alliances in order to increase their strategic autonomy. Meanwhile, views of the SCO's "double standards" have tarnished its strong track record in combating its top security goals, the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism.<sup>20</sup> It is seen in the SCO taking a far more aggressive stance against the risks that its founding members confront in Eurasia compared to the South Asian region. Due to China's protection of its "all-weather friend," the SCO has been unable to come to an agreement on Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, which has further aggravated the already existing compartmentalisation in the organisation.

Even if the "Shanghai Spirit" and the SCO community with a shared future serve as the organisation's guiding principles, there is still a lack of sense of community among the members. The SCO's sense of unity has been somewhat diminished by the game between China, Russia, and India. The three largest countries, in terms of

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19. "India and SCO: Navigating new equations", *Financial Express*, at <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-and-sco-navigating-new-equations/2667951/>. Accessed on January 22, 2023.

20. *Ibid.*

both military and economic, in the region are China, Russia, and India. They are all attempting to increase their status and influence within the SCO and aim to assume a substantial leadership role in the growth of the SCO. Moreover, the five small and medium-sized SCO countries' national agendas are more concerned with their own growth and development. The four member states of Central Asia, who became independent after the fall of the Soviet Union, treasure their hard-won status as sovereign countries. They do not intend to prioritise anything other than their own interests, and they have no desire to give the SCO additional authority. All of these factors prevent the SCO from developing a shared identity and achieving its objectives.<sup>21</sup> The SCO's organisational structure has, in some ways, limited the sense of community. The "consensus" decision-making process that the SCO currently uses severely restricts its ability to act and make decisions. Consequently, it is difficult for the SCO to respond to its members and key regional political developments quickly and efficiently.<sup>22</sup>

### INDIA AND SCO

There are diverse opinions about India's membership of SCO and its assistance in the promotion of India's foreign policy goals in the region. According to one viewpoint, the Russian Federation already had a foothold in Eurasia. They are significant actors in the area and have developed a strategic partnership.<sup>23</sup> Both have started their own, ambitious initiatives in the region: China has started its massive Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), also known as the Belt and Road Initiative, while Russia has started the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These initiatives cover the territory of the other four SCO members, namely, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Importantly, while India lacks a direct land border with these landlocked countries, Russia and China are adjacent to Central Asia. Therefore, given

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21. D. Hao, "SCO Political Cooperation: Progress, Challenges and Future Paths," *International Studies*, no. 3, 2021, pp. 47-66.

22. Xue and Makengo, n. 16.

23. Nirmala Joshi, "India's Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", The United Service Institution of India, at <https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/indias-role-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/>. Accessed on January 22, 2023.

the current geopolitical situation, there is growing concern about whether the two major players, Russia and China, will share the Eurasian space with India. On the other hand, a significant number of scholars had advocated India's membership to SCO since it would present a chance to enhance its strategic interests in the region. Further, the membership has attained even more significance since the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are seen to be a part of India's extended neighbourhood. It is suggested that being a member of the SCO is crucial for India's foreign policy since it will significantly advance its "Look North" strategy.<sup>24</sup> India can contribute to the SCO in a positive way, despite the fact that China and Russia are pursuing an aggressive foreign policy in the area. It is suggested to look into potential areas for beneficial Indian engagement.

Developments in Eurasia, which is nearby India, inevitably have a direct impact on India's geostrategic calculations. Thus, the SCO offers an ideal forum for India to address a number of its continental interests and concerns. This includes enhancing India's efforts to engage CARs countries, which too have attempted to expand their ties beyond China and Russia.<sup>25</sup> The CARs have considered India to be a friendly nation without any ulterior motives. Consequently, they have backed India's SCO membership. The assistance of CARs is equally crucial in light of the region's recent fundamental changes and the developing geopolitical rivalry between China and Russia for space in Central Asia. The CARs are concerned that they might face pressure as they pursue their individual objectives. Without a question, Central Asia is crucial to the success of Chinese and Russian ambitions. According to the CARs, India's presence in the region will support their multifaceted foreign strategies. They believed that India might alter the narrative and give more weight to their claim that "No Single Power Shall Dominate Central Asia".<sup>26</sup>

Further, the SCO's ongoing efforts to stabilise Afghanistan are also important. Beyond keeping India from being marginalised in the area, participating in the dialogue on Afghanistan would probably

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24. Ibid.

25. "India's role and perspective related to SCO", CESCUBE, at <https://www.cescube.com/vp-india-s-role-and-perspectives-related-to-sco>. Accessed on January 22, 2023.

26. Fredholm, n. 14.

give insights about the developing regional dynamics. Moreover, given the possibility of spillover into South Asia and the resulting arc of regional instability, SCO is also a platform to track the “evils” in Eurasia. It even gives India a platform to keep up the pressure on the SCO to take a unified stance against terrorism. In the meantime, multipolarity in Eurasia is strengthened by India’s membership in the SCO. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which is the cornerstone of India’s emphasis on open, inclusive, and transparent connectivity projects, offers countries in the region an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Further, the SCO gives India a platform to interact bilaterally with both China and Pakistan on the sidelines of SCO gatherings. Moreover, the aspiration of the CARs countries can be fulfilled with realisation of faster economic growth. Even though these countries are still in the transformational phase of their development, their economies are fairly advanced and capable of incorporating cutting-edge technologies, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing.<sup>27</sup> They require trade, investment, and transit infrastructure in this regard. They are looking for a passage in the southern Indian Ocean. Due to the fact that all are landlocked, the issue of connection is intertwined with trade, transit, and investments. Hence, India can support them in their aspirations. Additionally, India can contribute significantly to the modernisation and improvement of the infrastructure, facilitating both intra- and inter-regional trade.

India is considered as a ‘balancer’ in the context of current global geopolitics.<sup>28</sup> India, for instance, has been a permanent member of the SCO since 2017 and a member of the Quad, which includes the US, Australia, and Japan. This demonstrates how effectively India has pursued its goal of “Strategic Autonomy” in world affairs. As India has steadily advanced to become a significant actor at the regional and international level in the time of shifting global order, participation in the SCO meetings is yet another illustration of its

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27. P. Goble, “Central Asia Ready to Move on Without Russia”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 15, issue 42, March 20, 2018, at <https://jamestown.org/program/central-asia-ready-move-without-russia/>. Accessed on January 22, 2023.

28. “India’s Role in the Evolving Geopolitical Dynamics of SCO”, USANAS Foundation, at <https://usanasfoundation.com/indias-role-in-the-evolving-geopolitical-dynamics-of-sco>. Accessed on January 22, 2023.

dedication to the diplomatic route.<sup>29</sup> This has also required adopting a long-term foreign policy strategy, which includes maintaining consistent communication with other major powers to advance national interests and resolving bilateral disputes via peaceful dialogue to support stability and development.<sup>30</sup> Further, India's goal of gaining energy security might be better served by tighter cooperation in the SCO with Russia and Kazakhstan, two of the main non-OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) producers of energy.<sup>31</sup> India can utilise the platform of SCO for more open and thorough discussions about geopolitical matters. India can help to improve regional stability by collaborating with the other SCO members.

## CONCLUSION

The SCO promotes regional peace and stability among its member states, as well as internal peace, tolerance, and respect for various worldviews and ideologies. It offers economic integration, cultural connectivity, geopolitical cooperation, geostrategic partnership, and commitment from statesmen. The economic might of China and India, the military might of Russia, and the abundant oil and gas reserves of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Iran are expected to increase the SCO's socio-economic power and its geopolitical and geostrategic participation in domestic and global politics. The SCO has numerous intricate interregional and intraregional components because of the shifting geopolitical and geostrategic environment. In the functioning of the SCO member countries, regional aspirations, geopolitical imperatives, geostrategic objectives, and, most importantly, socio-economic necessities, all play a significant role. However, to make SCO a more effective regional forum, certain actions need to be taken. To more efficiently manage regional issues, detailed laws and policies must be developed. However, the effective operation of its many institutions must play a supporting role for this to succeed. The SCO needs to focus its efforts

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29. Ministry of External Affairs, "India at the SCO", at [https://www.indiaperspectives.gov.in/en\\_US/india-at-the-sco/](https://www.indiaperspectives.gov.in/en_US/india-at-the-sco/). Accessed on January 22, 2023.

30. Ibid.

31. Nivedita Das Kundu, "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Significance for India", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2009, pp. 91-101.

on achieving its main goal of ensuring regional security by coming up with a plan to deal with both conventional and unconventional threats to the area. Above all, the organisation must pay close attention to the ongoing disagreements among the member states and exert all of its efforts to reach a satisfactory resolution. The SCO needs to understand that maintaining both a peaceful environment and stringent security requirements is necessary for the region's economic integration and cross-cultural ties. Therefore, effective economic and security cooperation, as well as managing or lowering current as well as potential tensions within the regional framework, are necessary for the integration and development of this regional organisation. Further, India may regularly communicate with its neighbours in the region through the SCO on a range of regional, security, and political issues. India must, however, take a much more active part in the coalition if it is to have a bigger impact. For instance, to compete with China in the area, India can take advantage of its long-standing civilisational ties with Central Asia. In addition to CARs countries, India can gain from its ties to Russia and Iran. In addition, India can strengthen its position within the group by using both its burgeoning economic importance and its youthful population.

