



India's Balancing with SCO

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This article is based on the editorial "Navigations in Bishkek" which appeared in The Hindu on 13th June 2019. It talks about, challenges and opportunities present to India in its engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The Prime Minister of India will be in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for 19th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit.

At SCO, India will have to **balance between contradictory imperatives as regional aspirations of Central Asian countries contradict with India's goals:**

- India has to act as a willing partner of regional cooperation that is led by China and Russia while assuring that India doesn't reflect its increasing strategic convergence with the USA.
- Also, engagement with SCO is like a paradox for India as India wants to fight against terrorism through a body that includes states that pose the biggest threats to Indian security i.e. Pakistan.

What is SCO?

- The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), or Shanghai Pact is a Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance, its creation was announced on June 15, 2001, in Shanghai, China.
- Its member countries China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan (India and Pakistan joined SCO as full members on 9 June 2017 at SCO's Astana summit, Kazakhstan.)
- The SCO is widely regarded as the "**Alliance of the East**", due to its growing centrality in Asia-Pacific, and has been the primary security pillar of the region.
- It is the largest regional organisation in the world in terms of geographical coverage and population, covering three-fifths of the Eurasian continent and nearly half of the human population.

How regional aspirations of Central Asian countries contradict with India's goals?

- Russia and Central Asian countries are likely to express **“broad support” for China** in the wake of trade war against U.S. India is equally concerned about this trade war, but is in a dilemma in view of openly slamming U.S. protectionism.
- It is also notable that all SCO members, barring India, are enthusiastic **supporters of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**.
- Also, the other agenda of the summit would be to sell the **Gwadar Port and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** as a potential passage to landlocked Central Asian states. But CPEC passes through territory over which India claims its sovereignty.
- **Terrorism** is likely to be approached from the angle of improving the situation in Afghanistan and not necessarily of curbing the terrorist elements emanating from Pakistan.
- Also through **BRI and SCO**, China will be successful in uniting Eurasia to challenge a united Europe. This scenario will prompt China and Russia to enter into a new era of global strategic partnership. This might not be in India's strategic interest.

What are opportunities for India in the context of SCO?

- **China:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with President Xi on the sidelines of the summit will be critical.
 - As this meeting comes after China's decision to withdraw its technical hold on the **listing of Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar** as a global terrorist at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)
 - Also, the key concern for the two leaders is the **impact of the U.S.-China trade war**.
- **Russia:** PM Modi meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin is very important to save the **S-400 Triumph anti-missile defence deal** against USA's threat to act under CAATSA (**Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act**)
 - Also, India and Russia have an ambitious economic agenda drawn up for 2019, also Russia has invited PM Modi to be the chief guest at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September.
 - India can explore Russia's Far East region not just for developing economic cooperation but also for exploring the prospects of transferring skilled labourers to offset Chinese demographic threats in the region.
 - Russia is also keen that India joins the Arctic: Territory of Dialogue Forum.

What is CAATSA?

- Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) is a legislation

introduced in the United States that aims to counter anti-US aggression displayed by countries like Iran, North Korea and Russia through a series of punitive measures.

- Among the provisions of CAATSA are secondary sanctions on countries that are found to be dealing with the Russian defence and intelligence sectors.

What is S-400 Triumph?

S-400 Triumph is one of the world's most advanced air defence systems that can simultaneously track numerous incoming objects — all kinds of aircraft, missiles and UAVs — in a radius of a few hundred kilometres and launch appropriate missiles to neutralise them.

- **Pakistan:** It would be a first formal meeting of Pakistan's new PM Imran Khan and India's PM. Already new Pakistani PM has demonstrated that he wants better relations with India and is ready to talk on all the issues.

Clearly, this may give diplomacy a chance at the margins of the SCO meet for restarting of talks between India and Pakistan.

- **Multilateral cooperation:** India seems committed to working with the SCO to develop a 'cooperative and sustainable security' framework, to make the **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure** more effective, and participate in efforts to bring about **stability in Afghanistan**.
 - Central Asian countries back India's proposal for a **Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism**.
 - Also, the SCO is relevant for India to garner **support for reforms of the UNSC** to make the latter more representative and effective. India has been lending support to the member countries' candidatures for non-permanent membership of the UNSC for a long time.

SCO is a potential platform to **advance India's Connect Central Asia policy**. However, there are some constraints with India's engagement with the region, for example:

- India's bilateral trade with Central Asia stands at about \$2 billion and with Russia about \$10 billion in 2017. In contrast, China's trade with Russia has crossed \$100 billion in 2018 while the bilateral figures for Central Asia stand at over \$50 billion.
- The lack of connectivity has also hampered the development of energy ties between the hydrocarbon-rich region and India.

In this situation, India will have to clearly identify and promote its interests to enhance its presence in the Eurasian region for this accelerating progress on the International North-South Transport Corridor, the Chabahar Port, the Ashgabat Agreement and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway should be very much on the cards.

Drishti input:

Analyse how SCO as a regional organisation presents both challenges and opportunity for India. Also, discuss the measures that India must take for strategic balancing with respect to SCO?