

SCO summit and India's expectations

As Modi today joins the summit in Qingdao, its 'Shanghai Spirit' offers a new beginning to the region.

KV PRASAD

A new chapter in India's diplomatic outreach begins formally this Saturday when Prime Minister Narendra Modi joins leaders at the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a five-member grouping that at the start of the millennium centred around security concerns but gradually expanded to encompass wider interests of over 40 per cent the world's population.

PM Modi will be at the summit for the first time after India and Pakistan were last year admitted as full-fledged members to the multi-nation group driven by Beijing. From the initial five members — China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan — the SCO now stands at eight with Uzbekistan added ahead of New Delhi and Islamabad. In addition, four countries — Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia — have observer status while six countries — Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka — are its dialogue partners.

The summit at Qingdao, a picturesque coastal city in Shandong province of China, should offer India a closer look at and soak in the "Shanghai Spirit" that Chinese President Xi Jinping hopes to promote. The "Shanghai Spirit" is characterised as mutual trust and benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilisations and pursuit of common development. At present, the SCO is working in six areas: politics, economy, security, people-to-people and official exchanges and mechanism-building.

Addressing the SCO National Security Council in April in Beijing, Xi noted that after its membership expansion, the grouping enjoys greater potential for security



A woman takes a picture in front of a sign of the SCO in Qingdao, China. AFP

cooperation and taking greater responsibilities, keeping in mind the expectations of the people from all countries in the region and the international community.

Stressing that at present the security situation in the region enjoys overall stability, Xi remarked there were still challenges posed by "three forces", including drug trafficking and organised transnational crimes, that require member-states to enhance awareness of potential crisis, think calmly, judge accurately and handle properly. China, Xi said, would continue to integrate its own security with that of the regional countries, and work with other member-states to build a new type of international relations, featuring mutual trust, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation in a bid to promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

India is not new to the SCO. New Delhi

enjoyed observer status for a decade before being admitted at the Astana Summit in 2017. Recently, in an interview to the Chinese media, former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao said that while the SCO is a "viable regional organisation with definite potential to enhance cooperation among its members in security, trade, culture and education, its record so far has been relatively modest, but any regional cooperation organisation, going by examples from other areas of the world, takes time to evolve and acquire optimal dimensions of achievement. Consensus-building among members should be emphasised."

Rao, a former Ambassador of India in China, said much work needed to be done within the SCO framework in areas like energy and trade, as well as diplomacy to enhance mutual understanding and manage sensitive issues of member countries.

What does the SCO mean to New Delhi?

India has its own set of expectations from the summit:

1 One, it should open the possibility of greater connectivity since the SCO covers some 60 per cent of the Eurasia landmass. India does not enjoy direct links to the region and only recently was it admitted to the International Transport and Transit Corridor that touches Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

2 Second, the non-protectionist trade agenda is another major pull around a time when the US is altering the trade rules as President Donald Trump intends to fulfill his election promise of America First.

3 Third, strict action against terrorism, increase in energy security with the region, estimated to have 17 per cent of oil and 50 per cent of gas reserves, besides scouting for uranium from Uzbekistan.

4 For the present, there is concern over the signature move of President Xi — the Belt and Road Initiative — that New Delhi is not part of, unlike the others in the SCO. Beijing's stand on Pakistan-based terrorists has to be kept aside. The SCO charter has no room for bilateral concerns to be placed on the table.

For India, the SCO summit comes in the backdrop of the two standalone informal summits PM Modi had: with President Xi and President Vladimir Putin of Russia without the burden of having to arrive at a formal declaration of intent at its conclusion. Can India participating in the SCO be interpreted as a balancing act or pragmatic diplomacy at a time New Delhi is actively engaged in another grouping — Quad or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the Australia, Japan and the US?

Interestingly, India is now at ease to refer to the Asia-Pacific as Indo-Pacific, a military-strategic nomenclature constructed

by the US. New Delhi's vision for the Indo-Pacific region was outlined by Modi at the Shangri La dialogue in Singapore where Col Zhou Bo of China's Peoples' Liberation Army underscored that if the Pacific Ocean can accommodate China and the US, the Indian Ocean can accommodate both China and India, steering away from the debate of possible friction points.

The Maritime Silk Road that China is proposing, he underscored, passes through the Indian Ocean, pointing out that the navies of both Beijing and New Delhi were fighting piracy together in the area for nearly a decade, recalling that in 2011, the Indian Navy helped in relieving the "Full City", a Chinese ship, when it came under attack by pirates. Colonel Zhou maintained that be it the Pacific or the Indian Ocean, there was "no competition" between India and China, noting that while 55 per cent of Indian trade passes through South China Sea, the country, like other maritime trade in the area, does not face obstacles.

To take forward the SCO "Shanghai Spirit" will require all-round work, including the manner in which developments in member-countries is projected both within and to the outside world. To refocus from largely western constructs, on June 1, Beijing hosted the first SCO media summit in which 110 delegates from 18 countries attended. The media event, proposed by Xi at Astana, was on the theme of upholding the "Shanghai Spirit" for a new era of media cooperation among the SCO countries. In his message, Xi said media plays an important role in connecting hearts and minds of the people in today's world where information is moving rapidly. Qingdao hopes to offer a new beginning to the region.