



The wider reach of SCO

For India, the summit paved the way for enhancing its profile in Eurasia and Central Asia

BY INVITATION
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The recently concluded Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) annual summit in Qingdao in China was the first SCO summit since its expansion when India and Pakistan were included as full members at the Astana summit in Kazakhstan last year. Member nations of the SCO are China, India, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan, and countries with observer status in the bloc include Afghanistan, Iran, Mongolia, and Belarus. The SCO began in 2001 as a forum for addressing border disputes in Central Asia and has been expanding ever since to include more countries and cover other issues like trade. This year's summit was special for India as it tried to engage the wider Central Asian region through the SCO as a full member of the grouping.

From India's perspective, the Qingdao declaration's focus on the fight against terrorism was a welcome development. The declaration condemned all forms of terrorism and underlined that interference in the domestic affairs of other states on the pretence of fighting terrorism and extremism was unacceptable. Targeting the West, the declaration asserted that "interference in the domestic affairs of other states under the pretence of combating terrorism and extremism is unacceptable, as well as the use of terrorist, extremist and radical groups for one's own purposes."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi used the platform to enhance India's regional outreach to wider Eurasia. Coining another acronym SECURE in order to facilitate comprehensive security in the SCO region, Modi argued that "there are six dimensions summed up in the English word secure. S stands for the security of citizens, E for economic development for all, C is for connecting the region, U is for uniting our people, R is for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and E is for environmental protection." He also pushed for greater people to people engagement between India and other members of the SCO and underlined India's desire to double the number of tourists from the region. New Delhi is planning to organise a food festival of cuisines of SCO countries as well as a shared Buddhist heritage exhibition in India.

India managed to strike an independent voice when it refused to endorse China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at the SCO. India was not part of the section of Qingdao declaration that referred to the BRI. According to the declaration, "the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz



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Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan reaffirmed their support for the 'Belt and Road Initiative' proposed by China and affirmed that all parties should implement the 'Belt and Road Initiative' to promote the 'Belt and Road initiative.' Modi made it clear that New Delhi is supportive of connectivity projects, but only those that respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations. "Connectivity in SCO region and in our neighbouring countries is a priority for India. We welcome such new connectivity projects that are inclusive, sustainable and transparent and which respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations," Modi said in his plenary address of the SCO summit.

This was interesting as Indian Prime Minister and Chinese President Xi Jinping managed to take the Wuhan spirit forward in their bilateral interactions and even managed to sign two key agreements. After a year of strained ties, during which Beijing refused to share hydrological data on the Brahmaputra river, the two sides reached a pact to share the hydrological data in 2018. Sino-Indian economic ties got a boost with New Delhi agreeing to the opening of a Bank of China branch in Mumbai and China agreeing to let Indian pharmaceutical companies register for high-quality pharma products in the Chinese market,

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as well as to allowing India to export non-Basmati rice to China. The Chinese President will also be visiting India for an informal summit in 2019, accepting Indian Prime Minister's invite.

For India, this was largely an attempt to enhance its profile in wider Eurasia and Central Asia in particular. New Delhi would also be keen to enhance regional cooperation for countering terrorism, religious extremism and separatism. India's engagement in Afghanistan is also key in this regard. Modi highlighted this when he suggested that "the situation in Afghanistan is an unfortunate example of terrorism and extremism in our region... It is our responsibility to ensure that causes that threatened Afghan unity, sovereignty, integrity, diversity, and democracy in the past are not repeated."

While the security and economic co-

operation generated by the SCO has been rather limited so far, and the platform remained mostly symbolic, its importance has increased at a time when the West remains divided and the US under Donald Trump is charting a unilateral course. The Qingdao statement "stressed the importance of consistently strengthening and developing the multilateral trade system," underscoring the role of world leaders such as Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi as defenders of global free trade. This was against the backdrop of a bickering G-7 where the US refused to endorse a joint communique with its closest allies in Quebec. With his announcement of tariffs, the Trump administration is challenging the very foundation of the global economic order, which America itself had created post World War II.

At a time when America is looking inward, and Europe is struggling to come to terms with multiple domestic crises, major powers are looking at multiple coalitions to manage an international order in a high degree of fluidity. New Delhi is no exception. India's substantive engagement with wider Central Asia will be key to its growing aspirations in a rapidly evolving Eurasian landscape.

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