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Decoding India's Priorities at the SCO: Connectivity, Counterterrorism, and Afghanistan

Ayjaz Wani

Abstract

As an emerging power in the current multipolar global order, India can use the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to protect, promote, and project its geostrategic and geoeconomic interests. The SCO is also a platform for India to reaffirm its commitment to revive and deepen its centuries-old civilisational, spiritual, and cultural ties with other member countries. This paper explores India's priorities at the SCO, chiefly connectivity, counterterrorism, and Afghanistan. It also highlights the challenges the SCO faces from the China-Pakistan axis, and recommends ways in which New Delhi can leverage the regional multilateral organisation to further its goals.

The post-Cold War era saw the emergence of several multilateral forums, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Initially formed in 1996 as the ‘Shanghai Five’ (by China, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, and Tajikistan) for measured collaboration in Eurasia on regional geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic challenges, the grouping was renamed as the SCO in 2001 following the inclusion of Uzbekistan. In 2005, India, Pakistan, and Iran were granted observer status, with New India and Islamabad becoming full members in 2017. Since 2008, the SCO has inducted several countries—Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Maldives, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Myanmar—as dialogue partners under Article 14 of its charter.¹ Iran became a full member in 2023, making the SCO the world’s largest regional organisation with nine member states, spanning 60 percent of Eurasia, home to over three billion people, and accounting for a quarter of the global economy. Belarus, Mongolia, and Afghanistan currently have observer status and are also keen to accept full membership.²

Despite its scope and promise, the SCO is marred by divergences among the member countries on many pressing issues, including narcoterrorism, connectivity, border disputes, and regional stability. Bilateral friction between several SCO members has posed challenges for the grouping in fostering peace, prosperity, and stability in the wider Eurasia region. These constraints and pressure points have also restrained the SCO from pursuing its stated mandate of cooperation on regional security, development, and connectivity.

As an emerging power in the current multipolar global order, India needs access to various multilateral forums—including the SCO—to pursue its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in different geographies. The SCO provides New Delhi with an opportunity to protect, promote, and project its geostrategic and geoeconomic interests. It also provides India with a platform to reaffirm its commitment to revive and deepen its centuries-old civilisational, spiritual, and cultural ties with the other members of

the grouping.³ India's engagement with the SCO and other multilateral platforms must be viewed under the current government's proactive foreign policy to preserve India's strategic space in the rapidly changing geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts and considerations.⁴ In September 2022, India assumed the SCO's rotating presidency and hosted 134 events, including 14 ministerial-level meetings and the SCO Summit in July 2023.⁵

This paper analyses India's engagements with the SCO. It also highlights the SCO's challenges and recommends ways New Delhi can work to infuse cohesion and convergence in the regional multilateral organisation to achieve its priorities.

“Despite its scope and promise, the SCO is marred by divergences among the member countries on many pressing issues, including narcoterrorism, connectivity, border disputes, and regional stability.”

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Trade on the ancient Silk Road connected the Eastern and Western civilisations and was a significant factor in the development of the Eurasia region.⁶ In addition to trade, this 6,400-km transcontinental route⁷ also enabled intellectual and cultural exchanges, dating back to the first century AD when Buddhism spread from India to Central Asia, China, and other parts of Eurasia.⁸ Given its geographical location, Central Asia was the meeting ground of different civilisations and the hub of socioeconomic and political activities from ancient times. However, during the twentieth century, the Anglo-Russian rivalry, and the consequent emergence of nation-states with differing ideologies, stagnated the region's relations with India.⁹

India redesigned its ties with the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of the five independent Central Asian Republics (CARs).¹⁰ India adopted a constructivist approach,¹¹ providing much-needed financial aid of US\$10-15 million to the region and initiating programmes like Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation through capacity building and training programmes, study tours, and technology transfers. India inked many bilateral and multilateral agreements in defence and military technology, security cooperation, connectivity, and counterterrorism with these countries.¹² Indeed, New Delhi became an SCO member to strengthen cooperation in the areas of security, economy, and culture within the region and promote its constructivist strategic interests in the region.¹³

At the 2017 Astana Summit, where India became a full member, Prime Minister Narendra Modi defined the country's priorities based on a shared culture and the common future of the region. He stressed the need for better connectivity without violating the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the member states.¹⁴ He also emphasised cooperation in combating terrorism, radicalisation, and the fight against illicit narcotics trade,¹⁵ as codified in Article 1 of the SCO Charter since 1998,¹⁶ while highlighting the importance of peace, prosperity, and stability in Afghanistan for the region.¹⁷ At the 2018 Summit, Modi proposed the 'SECURE' concept to make the SCO more connected and safer.¹⁸ The acronym SECURE stands for 'security of the citizens', 'economic development for all', 'connecting

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the region’, ‘uniting the people’, ‘respect for sovereignty and integrity’, and ‘environmental protection’. These pillars are central to India’s SCO membership and have been repeatedly stressed at subsequent meetings (see Table 1).

Table 1: India’s Priorities at the SCO

Year	Place of meeting	India sought cooperation for
2017	Asthana, Kazakhstan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connectivity without violation of the sovereignty of member countries • Cooperation and coordination to fight against terrorism, radicalism, and illicit drugs • Peace and stability in Afghanistan
2018	Qingdao, China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connectivity with respect for sovereignty and integrity • Situation in Afghanistan • Consequences of terrorism and extremism on the SCO region
2019	Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for sovereignty, regional integrity, and transparency in connectivity projects • Terrorism-free society • Road map for Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled peace process in Afghanistan
2020	Virtual format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connectivity • Opposition to terrorism, Illegal arms smuggling, drugs, and money laundering in compliance with the SCO charter • Special Working Group on innovation and startups
2021	Dushanbe, Tajikistan (Hybrid format)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terrorism, radicalisation, and extremism • Trust deficit and Afghanistan • Emphasis on consultative, transparent connectivity to respect territorial integrity • Connecting young entrepreneurs and startups

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Year	Place of meeting	India sought cooperation for
2022	Samarkand, Uzbekistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reliable, resilient, and diversified supply chains that need better connectivity• Full rights to transit• Special Working Group on innovation and startups
2023	New Delhi, India	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cross border Terrorism.• Inclusive government in Afghanistan.• Connectivity but respect to sovereignty and territorial integrity of member countries.

Source: India's Chairmanship of SCO the SCO 2022-23¹⁹

Connectivity

Poor connectivity between India and the SCO region is the biggest hindrance to trade and development. Several connectivity projects initiated by India and a few other SCO member countries have been marred by Eurasia's fractured geopolitical and volatile security situation. Divergent interests and trust deficit among the SCO members have added to the region's volatility, with some countries using the organisation for their parochial and hegemonic interests. For example, under China's influence, Pakistan has stonewalled India's attempts to pursue its cultural, strategic, and economic interests²⁰ by not allowing any regional connectivity via its territory. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, which promises to meet the increased energy demands of a fast-growing Indian economy, has been stalled since 2006.²¹ Conversely, China has used the hostility between Pakistan and India for its hegemonic pursuits in the SCO region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), BRI's flagship programme that aims to build infrastructure projects within Pakistan with Chinese investments of more than US\$62 billion, violates India's sovereignty and integrity in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.²²

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After the Soviet Union's collapse, China and Russia pursued 'cooperative hegemony' in the newly formed Eurasian countries. Over the past three decades, China and Russia have spread their sphere of influence in Eurasia, with Moscow becoming the region's security provider and Beijing emerging as its primary investor and economic power.²³ However, the BRI is neither consultative nor transparent, and is being pursued by China to achieve its hegemonic interests in Eurasia. All BRI agreements in the region mandate that recipient countries transfer greater control over the assets to Beijing if they default on the repayment of loans.²⁴ Such stringent loan conditions have led many countries, including Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Iran, Russia, and Pakistan, into China's BRI 'debt trap'.

On the other hand, New Delhi has pursued a constructivist outreach to establish direct connectivity to revive its historical cultural and trade ties with the hydrocarbon-rich and strategic Eurasian region. In September 2002, India, Russia, and Iran agreed to construct the 7,200-km long International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC),²⁵ which includes sea routes, and road and railway links connecting Saint Petersburg (Russia) with Mumbai (India). Ratified by 13 countries,^a the INSTC will decrease transit time by 40 percent and freight cost by 30 percent compared to the Suez Canal route.²⁶ However, work on INSTC stalled due to harsher sanctions on Iran following the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018. The INSTC has made slow and steady progress amid numerous challenges and setbacks. In July 2022, the first shipment via this corridor reached Mumbai's Jawaharlal Nehru Port from Russia's Astrakhan Port.²⁷

New Delhi has also invested heavily in Chabahar Port in Iran's Sistan Baluchistan province to gain direct connectivity with Eurasia. The memorandum of understanding for the port was signed in 2015.²⁸ The port started operations in 2018, and handled 1.8 tonnes of bulk and general cargo between 2019 and 2021.²⁹ By 2022, the Chabahar terminal handled 4.8 tonnes of bulk cargo, including transshipments from Bangladesh,

a Russia, India, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Oman, Tajikistan, and Ukraine.

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Australia, UAE, Germany, Russia, and Brazil.³⁰ New Delhi also invested heavily to connect the strategic Chabahar Port with the conflict-marred Afghanistan, investing an estimated US\$3 billion in civic infrastructure, including the 218-km long Zalrang-Delaram highway. The highway connects Afghanistan with the Chabahar Port via Malik in Iran.³¹ Similarly, Uzbekistan, a double landlocked country,^b invested US\$500 million in constructing a 650-km railway line from the Uzbek-Afghan border to Chabahar-Zahedan in Iran, and has also repeatedly sought collaboration with India on this project.³² Furthermore, Uzbekistan established a trilateral working group with Iran and India in 2020 to examine the convergence between the Chabahar Port, INSTC, and other connectivity projects for greater intra-Eurasian connectivity.³³

India also joined the Ashgabat Agreement in 2018 to facilitate connectivity within Eurasia and synchronise it with other transport corridors, including the INSTC, to facilitate regional trade and commerce. Signed in 2011, the Ashgabat Agreement is currently endorsed by Turkmenistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Oman, and India.³⁴ It has paved the way for the 928-km Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (KTI) railway line running east of the Caspian Sea. The KTI became operational in 2014,³⁵ giving landlocked Central Asian countries access to Iranian seaports. Kazakhstan is willing to construct a railway line between Chabahar and the Iranian railway network that will connect with the KTI line upon completion.³⁶

INSTC and Chabahar are consultive, transparent, economical, reliable, and based on a strong civilisational connection. As a result, while New Delhi has promoted the Chabahar and the INSTC, the SCO countries have explored bilateral options to be part of these India-led strategic connectivity projects. For example, in May 2023, Russia and Iran signed a deal to construct the 162-km long Rasht-Astara railway line³⁷ at an estimated cost of US\$2 billion, which will be a key link to the INSTC.³⁸ Upon completion, it will provide more convenient connectivity between Gulf and Europe.

b A country that is surrounded by landlocked countries.

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Given the immense potential of trade between South Asia and Eurasia, some SCO member countries, especially the CARs, have also sought to enhance connectivity with India bilaterally and multilaterally. In 2020, New Delhi provided a US\$1 billion line of credit to Central Asian countries to develop infrastructure projects³⁹ and even started many infrastructure projects within the region (for example, Tajikistan's Dushanbe-Chortut highway).⁴⁰

All SCO countries barring China and Pakistan have generally responded positively to India's convergence-based institutionalisation of the constructive approach based on shared historical and cultural connections. At the 2021 meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, the member states stressed expanding regional transport connectivity,⁴¹ concurring with India's view that interconnectedness between Central Asia (Eurasia) and South Asia will contribute to the common goal of prosperity and security and strengthen the dialogue between civilisations.⁴²

During the first India-Central Asia summit in 2022, it was proposed that the Chabahar Port and Turkmenistan's Turkmenbashi Port be included in the INSTC to facilitate direct trade with India.⁴³ The participating countries also stressed transparency, focusing on local priorities, and upholding their sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁴ In April 2023, India and Central Asia also formed a joint working group (JWG) on the Chabahar Port, and the group's next meeting will be held in Iran with private-sector participation.⁴⁵ During the meeting, the Managing Director of Indian Ports Global Limited demonstrated operations and facilities at the Chabahar Port. The JWG also expressed its commitment to implement international standards for facilitating large-scale private investments, and noted the port's role in delivering humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.⁴⁶

Counterterrorism and Afghanistan

Peace and security are prerequisites for connectivity, trade, and socioeconomic development. Since 1991, terror organisations based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) region—such as the Islamic Movement of

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Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and Jamaat Ansarullah—have repeatedly posed security threats to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic,⁴⁷ given their 2,387-km long porous border with Afghanistan. Thousands of IMU and IJU fighters in the AfPak region⁴⁸ have organised more than 19 attacks in Central Asia between 2008 and 2018, killing 138 people. Since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks were sidelined from the group's leadership and forced to join the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISKP).⁴⁹ In 2022, the ISKP and other groups carried out rocket attacks on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from their bases in northern Afghanistan.⁵⁰ In April 2023, Tajikistan forces killed two terrorists at the volatile Tajik-Afghan border and seized a huge cache of automatic weapons.⁵¹ As such, the presence of terrorists in the AfPak region is a key worry for Central Asian leaders.

China, too, faces separatism and centrifugal tendencies in restive Xinjiang owing to the socio-cultural mistreatment of Uyghur Muslims and exploitation of the region's resources. The ill-treatment of Uyghur Muslims has made China a target of terror groups such as Tahreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), ISKP, and al Qaeda. Since 2021, there has been an uptick in attacks against Chinese workers in Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵²

The AfPak region has been a hotbed for terrorism and extremism since the 1980s, exporting this menace to Eurasia. Terrorism emanating from AfPak is a concern for all neighbouring countries, given its impact on regional connectivity, security, and economic development.

The AfPak region has become a cradle of terrorism because of Pakistan's state policy that uses terrorism and terror for geostrategic and geopolitical interests. Indeed, Islamabad has used state-sponsored terrorism against New Delhi in Jammu and Kashmir since 1989 and has supported radical elements in Eurasia.

Pakistan has also helped the Taliban with recruitment⁵³ and donations for geostrategic reasons,⁵⁴ and reportedly sent over 10,000 trained terrorists to help the group capture power in Afghanistan.⁵⁵ Islamabad also adopted a selective policy to support terrorists who helped pursue its anti-India and anti-Afghan policy to operate freely while cracking down on others like

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TTP.⁵⁶ But the use of terrorism as a foreign policy tool and distortion of *hadith* (sayings and traditions attributed to Prophet Mohammad) to propel terrorism in Eurasia and against India has also had disastrous domestic consequences in Pakistan. For instance, the TTP has increased its offensive within Pakistan, killing 433 civilians and security personnel in 250 attacks between August 2021 to August 2022 alone.⁵⁷

This, coupled with the SCO countries' changing geostrategic and geopolitical interests, has complicated the grouping's counterterrorism potential. For instance, although once opposed to the Taliban government, Iran and Russia have helped the Taliban since 2019 on the pretext of countering ISIS affiliates in Afghanistan and allegedly 'settle scores' with the US.⁵⁸

Given Pakistan's state-sponsored terrorism and the presence of other terror outfits in the AfPak region, the erstwhile Shanghai Five prioritised the fight against terrorism, extremism, and separatism in 1998,⁵⁹ codifying it in Article 1 of the SCO Charter. At the 2001 SCO Summit, the AfPak region was referred to as the "cradle of terrorism, extremism and separatism",⁶⁰ and strengthening and rebuilding the counterterrorism grid of SCO member countries based on a non-intervention agenda has remained the core principle of the organisation. Indeed, since 2001, the SCO countries have signed several agreements and released joint communiqués against terrorism (see Table 3).

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Table 3: SCO counterterrorism documents

Month-Year	Place	Declaration/ Joint Communique
June 2001	Shanghai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shanghai Convention of Counterterrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism.
June 2002	St. Peterburg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement over Counterterrorism
June 2004	Tashkent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement over Counterterrorism Database
June 2006	Shanghai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperation Guideline of Counterterrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism, 2007–2009
June 2007	Bishkek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement over military exercise
August 2008	Dushanbe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement on counter terrorism exercise, cracking down smuggling of weapons, explosives and ammunition
March 2009	Tashkent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperation Guideline of Counterterrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism, 2010–2012; agreement with Afghanistan over Cracking Down Drugs Smuggling, Terrorism and Organized Crimes. Agreement over Counterterrorism Training
June 2011	Astana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Astana Declaration
June 2012	Beijing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperation Guideline of Counterterrorism 2013-2015
June 2017	Astana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint Counteraction to International Terrorism
June 2019	Bishkek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bishkek Declaration
November 2020	Moscow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moscow declaration

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Month-Year	Place	Declaration/ Joint Communiqué
September 2021	Dushanbe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of the SCO Counterterrorism Centre in Dushanbe as a separate permanent body. Establishment of the SCO Information Security Centre. Establishment of SCO Centre against International Organised Crime in Bishkek. Programme of Cooperation of the SCO Member States in Countering Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for 2022-2024. Prioritise the Programme of Cooperation of the SCO Member States in countering Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for 2022-2024.
2022	Samarkand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistent implementation of the Program of Cooperation of The SCO Member States in Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism for 2022-2024.
2023	New Delhi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop common approaches to form a unified list of terrorist, separatist and extremist organisations. Cooperation between competent authorities in countering terrorism, separatism and extremism, including the implementation of the relevant programme for 2022-2024.

Source: SCO, Ministry of External Affairs, India⁶¹

The SCO's counterterrorism policy was consolidated and institutionalised through the executive committee of the Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS). RATS works per the SCO charter, and maintains an information-gathering relationship with member countries and other global

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organisations. RATS also train the security forces of SCO member countries in counterterrorism operations, drills, and search operations.⁶² Between 2011 to 2015, RATS prevented 20 terror attacks, averted 650 terror-related crimes, destructed 440 terror training camps, arrested 2,700 members of extremist groups and neutralised 1,700 others across the member countries. The SCO member countries also recovered huge hauls of weapons, including 3,250 improvised explosive devices, 450,000 ammunition pieces and 52 tons of explosives.⁶³ Similarly, in 2021, the organisation successfully thwarted 40 terror attacks and more than 480 terror-related crimes, and blocking 26 global international funding channels.⁶⁴

India is a strong advocate of convergence on counterterrorism in the SCO region, and has successfully raised state-sponsored terrorism issues at the SCO, albeit with limited outcomes against Pakistan-based terror groups. In 2018, New Delhi successfully garnered SCO support for the draft of the UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT). The CCIT is currently being discussed by the UN's sixth ad hoc committee on international terrorism to restrain such organisations from receiving "support, sustenance and safe haven in another country".⁶⁵

The SCO's working languages are Russian and Mandarin, and the RATS database on suspected terrorists and terror organisations exposes the centrality of Russian and Chinese interests. China has successfully used RATS to stabilise its Western frontier province of Xinjiang. India considers the RATS an effective mechanism but has expressed concerns over its opacity because of language barriers. India has pushed for using English as one of the main SCO languages for better communication on counterterrorism,⁶⁶ as terror organisations and terrorists now also use digital and internet-based strategies for crime and anti-state activities. In October 2021, New Delhi assumed the SCO-RATS's directorship for one year and tried to diversify the group's counterterrorism agenda by calling for synergy in RATS' operations on cyberterrorism, digital forensics, and ransomware.⁶⁷

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Afghanistan

Afghanistan is central to the Eurasian region's peace, prosperity, and socioeconomic development. The SCO created the Afghanistan Contact Group (ACG) in 2005,^c but it became defunct with the escalation of violence in West Asia and the emergence of more violent terror outfits like ISIS.⁶⁸ Afghanistan joined the SCO as an observer in 2012 and signed the protocol on counterterrorism with RATS in 2015.⁶⁹ After Moscow changed in policy towards the Taliban, the ACG was revived in 2017 and started playing a role in reconciliation and peace through diplomatic channels between the Taliban and the civilian government in Kabul. However, the trust deficit and mistrust among SCO members helped the Taliban to adopt a more ruthless approach towards ethnic minorities and women in Afghanistan. The evolving situation in Afghanistan drove many SCO member countries to use the country and the Taliban to further their own geostrategic and geoeconomic interests against the West and each other. This worked in the Taliban's favour. For example, before 2021, Russia and Iran helped the Taliban on the pretext of defeating ISIS affiliates in Afghanistan, but this was a way to settle scores with the US.⁷⁰ Without any inclusive government in place, in February 2023, the Chinese state-owned China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) struck a multimillion-dollar investment deal with the Taliban to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin. Under this deal, the CNPC will invest US\$150 million in the first year and US\$540 million in the next three years.⁷¹

At the 2021 SCO Heads of State Council, held virtually, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that the group must “step up coordination, make full use of platforms such as the SCO-ACG, and facilitate a smooth transition in Afghanistan”.⁷² The 2021 Dushanbe Declaration also stressed the need for an inclusive government in Afghanistan that represents all religious, ethnic, and political groups.⁷³ However, despite the rhetoric, the Dushanbe meeting did not have a separate ACG meeting, as internal disagreements and divergences created by the China-Pakistan axis blunted efforts to counter the growing security and humanitarian risks of a fragile

c The Afghanistan Contact Group was created to cooperate with the country on issues of mutual interest, including the circulation of narcotics, organised crime, and counterterrorism.

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Afghanistan. Divergent and antagonistic views within the SCO have only strengthened the presence of the ISKP, al Qaeda, TTP, IMU, and IJU terrorists in Afghanistan. Additionally, a belligerent Taliban has rescinded their assurance of forming an inclusive government, ensuring girls' education, and upholding women's rights.

India's official position even after the Taliban's return to power has been for "an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan".⁷⁴ Sticking to its neutral position, New Delhi provided US\$650–750 million as humanitarian and economic aid to Afghanistan before the Taliban took over. New Delhi also invested US\$3 billion for the welfare of the Afghan people and undertaken 500 projects in critical areas of power, water supply, road connectivity, healthcare, education, agriculture and capacity building.⁷⁵ In the 2023-24 budget, India also pledged to provide US\$25 million in development aid to Afghanistan, a move welcomed by the Taliban.⁷⁶ Steady investments and aid have won India many friends within the Afghan government, and even the Taliban has recognised India's constructive and people-friendly approach, welcoming India's proposed (in the 2023-24 Budget) US\$25 million developmental aid package for Afghanistan.⁷⁷

In November 2021, India hosted the third regional security summit on Afghanistan and invited all SCO members, including Iran.⁷⁸ However, Pakistan and China did not attend. Islamabad even deplored these consultations as a "futile attempt" and called New Delhi "a spoiler" that "cannot be a peacemaker".⁷⁹ Instead, Pakistan and China held the 'Troika Plus' talks with the US and Russia on Afghanistan in November 2021.⁸⁰

Achievements and the Way Forward

The SCO is a China-created, China-dominated, and China-led multilateral forum used by Beijing for its parochial geostrategic, geoeconomic, and security interests in Eurasia. Russia wanted India in the SCO to balance China's hegemonic dominance and belligerent pursuits. The Russian media considers India's presence in the Eurasian region as a counterbalance to "growing Chinese influence and prevent the southern part of the [Commonwealth of Independent States] CIS from turning into a region of undivided domination of Beijing".⁸¹ India's membership has lent the SCO a democratic character, since it is otherwise packed with authoritarian leaders. The SCO has provided India with a platform to pursue its interests in Eurasia. India has used the SCO to strengthen its diplomatic ties and intellectual capital, and bring a progressive agenda on connectivity, counterterrorism, and Afghanistan. On the other hand, the China-Pakistan axis has always used the SCO against India's regional interests. Consequently, certain SCO priorities related to security and connectivity are witnessing more collaboration from some member countries through bilateral arrangements.

Still, India has had many achievements as part of the SCO:

- India became the leader of the INSTC, and stressed the importance of reliable, consultative, and transparent connectivity projects with total rights of transit within the SCO region. India used the SCO to persuade member countries, including the CARs and Russia, to create multilateral and bilateral working groups on INSTC and Chabahar. India also got a special waiver from the US's unilateral sanctions against Iran and avoided 'secondary sanctions', which could have adversely impacted these projects. The CARs are trying to diversify their foreign policies to minimise China's economic and Russia's political influence. Given the trade potential with India, Central Asian leaders have used the SCO platform to deepen their engagement with New Delhi more openly. The 2022 virtual summit between Central Asian leaders and India paved the way for the inclusion of the Chabahar and Turkmenbashi ports into the INSTC. India and Central Asia also formed a joint working group on the Chabahar Port to boost regional connectivity and trade.

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- India joined the SCO to ensure peace and security in its extended neighbourhood, and pitched strong mechanisms of counterterrorism under the SCO-RATS mechanism but has faced opposition from the China-Pakistan axis. In November 2021, all SCO member countries, barring China and Pakistan, participated in a regional summit to discuss Afghanistan. However, despite such limitations, India has successfully strengthened its ties with the CARs. The Central Asian leaders skipped the Organisation of Islamic Countries conference on Afghanistan in December 2021 hosted by Pakistan and instead came to New Delhi for the Third India-Central Asia Dialogue to discuss terrorism and the evolving security situation in Afghanistan.
- Divergent and antagonistic views within the SCO have increased the presence of ISKP, al Qaeda, TTP, IMU, and IJU terrorists in Afghanistan. These groups have launched repeated attacks in Central Asia, Pakistan, and on Chinese projects in the AfPak region. Against this backdrop, India's anti-terrorism agenda within the SCO is hailed by CARs.⁸² Through the SCO, the CARs have endorsed and supported India's position for "an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled" peace process in Afghanistan. Additionally, agreements on counterterrorism, security cooperation, and defence between India and the CARs showcase the deep inroads made by New Delhi through the SCO.
- India is a fast-growing economy and an emerging pole in the current multipolar global order. In the changed geopolitical context, India's regional security and economic interests have remained forefront of New Delhi's SCO membership. India has used the SCO forum to raise the issue of Chinese ingress and the belligerent approach towards its neighbours. New Delhi has stressed a "respect for territorial integrity" under the SCO's "Shanghai Spirit".⁸³

Despite these achievements, India needs to use the SCO to push its priorities, such as connectivity and combating the issues of extremism and narcoterrorism for peace and prosperity in the northern borders. India and other member countries need to remind China that the 'Shanghai Spirit' should be the guiding principle for SCO. After independence,

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the Central Asian countries also faced border ingress from a belligerent China and were forced to cede some territories to Beijing.⁸⁴ Beijing used the economic and political instability of Central Asian countries to rectify border treaties with Kazakhstan (1994), the Kyrgyz Republic (1996) and Tajikistan (2002). However, in 2020, Chinese news websites republished an article by Chinese journalist-historian Cho Yao Lu stating that the “entire Pamir region in Tajikistan belonged to China and should be returned”.⁸⁵ The report further highlighted that after the demise of the Soviet Union, some territories were handed back to China. Similarly, another article, titled “Why is Kazakhstan eager to return to China?”, also displayed China’s assertive hegemonic and imperialistic efforts. The Kazakh foreign ministry summoned the Chinese ambassador to protest against the article, and the offending pieces were deleted.⁸⁶ Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar also reminded his Chinese counterpart during the SCO foreign ministers’ meeting in Goa, India, that bilateral ties were “not normal and cannot be normal if peace and tranquillity along the border areas are disturbed”.⁸⁷

“India needs to use the SCO to push its priorities, such as connectivity and combating the issues of extremism and narcoterrorism for peace and prosperity in the northern borders.”

Conclusion

Concerned by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the CARs are trying to reduce their traditional security dependence on Moscow, which is now increasingly seen as threatening regional stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty.⁸⁸ Given India's increased economic and political standing globally, the CARs are looking towards New Delhi as a reliable partner in the coming decades. The SCO has provided New Delhi with a platform that needs to be leveraged to meet its geopolitical and geostrategic goals. In this regard, India must expedite the INSTC and Chabahar Port projects, and policymakers must view these investments as a strategic counter to China's growing regional influence. India must use the India-Central Asia Dialogue to jointly develop and strengthen its cooperation with the CARs and Iran, making it more development and security oriented. India has already expressed its displeasure against the China-Pakistan axis at the SCO. Additionally, China has used the RATS mechanism for its vested security interests in Xinjiang and has driven the platform for its hegemonic agenda. India needs to work closely with other likeminded members to make real progress on the SCO's focus on counterterrorism and a peaceful Afghanistan. 

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