

RENEWING THE SHANGHAI SPIRIT

India's Presidency of
Shanghai Cooperation Organization



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Preface

India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017. It has been participating in the SCO programmes actively and extensively. New Delhi hosted the SCO Heads of Government Council Summit in November 2020. Due to the pandemic, it was held virtually. India is scheduled to take over the Chairmanship of the SCO for the period of 2022-23. In view of the expansion of the Organization and certain critical developments in the SCO area and its neighbourhood, it is poised to be a pivotal Presidential term.

To commemorate India's Chairmanship of the SCO and to further create awareness about its engagement with the Eurasian organization, ICWA has commissioned papers on the theme by acclaimed Indian experts from diplomacy and academia. Amb. D. B. Venkatesh Varma, former Ambassador of India to the Russian Federation, gives his perspective on the evolution of the SCO from its initial priorities focusing more on political and security issues to broader areas of economic, technological and cultural issues. He underlines that members need to conform to the letter and spirit of the founding documents of the SCO and the 'Shanghai Spirit'. Prof. K. Warikoo in his analysis presents a holistic view of SCO and its activities. He terms it a non-Western organization providing a vast scope of convergence among members. He also makes significant recommendations to boost regional cooperation. Prof. Sanjay K. Pandey discusses regional and global geopolitics behind the emergence of the SCO. He analyses India's objectives vis a vis SCO while discussing the prospects and challenges.

The distinguished contributors have shared their rich knowledge and experience in three distinct articles covering facets of the Organization and India's perceptions and aspirations of engagement with Eurasia and beyond. ICWA hopes that these papers will serve the objective of expanding knowledge on the subject and contribute to the informed debate about the SCO, particularly in the period of India's Chairmanship of the organization.

Vijay Thakur Singh

Director General

Indian Council of World Affairs

Sapru House

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India and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

LOOKING FORWARD TO THE 2023 SUMMIT

D. B. Venkatesh Varma

In 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will host the leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for its 23rd Summit. Since India joined as a full member in 2017, at the Ufa Summit in Russia, PM Modi has attended the Qingdao Summit in China in 2018 and the Bishkek Summit in 2019. The 2020 Summit hosted by Russia was held in virtual mode due to the Covid Pandemic. The Heads of Government Council (HoGs) meeting of the SCO was chaired by our Vice President on 30 November 2020. The 2022 Summit of the SCO will be hosted by Uzbekistan in Samarkand. In 2023, India will be hosting the SCO Summit for the first time. It will also be hosting the G20 Summit during the year, a mark of India's increased stature in the international community.

The SCO has now been in existence for more than two decades. Its genesis lay in the common desire of both Russia and China to establish a regional organization aimed at creating a dialogue platform on mutual concerns on border issues and to reassure each other that neither would seek unilateral advantage in their common periphery in Central Asia. They also had a common interest in reducing the space

for expansion of US and EU influence on the Eurasian landmass. The young and fledgling states of Central Asia – initially Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and later joined by Uzbekistan saw merit in the SCO as a platform to seek benefits in various fields from the two big members but also use the organization to moderate competition amongst them in the Central Asian region.

The developments in Afghanistan, the threat of terrorism, extremism and separatism in the broader region as well as the presence of extra-regional military forces of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had an impact on the SCO. While there was interest amongst other regional countries – India, Pakistan, Mongolia and Iran to be observers in SCO as early as 2004-2005, it was not until the 2016 Ufa Summit that a decision was taken to admit India and Pakistan as full members. Iran is expected to complete the formalities for full membership in 2023, during India's chairmanship of the SCO.

There is considerable interest amongst other states in the SCO. Belarus which has been an observer since 2010 is now

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In 2018, PM Modi had stated our priorities in the acronym – SECURE – Security, Economic cooperation, Connectivity, Unity, Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and Environmental protection. This essentially captures the comprehensive and forward-looking priorities for the 2023 Summit that can add new momentum to SCO activities in the years to come.

interested in full membership. Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia may join as dialogue partners, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Cambodia, Azerbaijan, Nepal and Armenia which already have this status with the SCO. The SCO has established cooperative relations with major international organizations including the United Nations (UN), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Conference on Interactions and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and others. Its Secretariat is based in Beijing and its Regional Anti-Terrorism Centre is based in Tashkent.

India will be taking over the chair of the SCO on 17th September 2022 following the Samarkand Summit. The year long preparatory process for the 2023 Summit will involve more than 170 meetings in India, covering the full range of cooperation now on the SCO agenda – foreign and security issues, defence, economic, trade, investment, new technologies, inter-regional cooperation, transport, health,

environment, traditional medicine, education and people to people contacts.

It is significant that the SCO has evolved from its initial priorities which focussed more on political and security issues to broader areas of economic, technological and cultural issues that have more to do with impact on people rather than being limited to regulating relations amongst states. In 2018, PM Modi had stated our priorities in the acronym – **SECURE** – Security, Economic cooperation, **Connectivity, Unity, Respect** for sovereignty and territorial integrity and **Environmental** protection. This essentially captures the comprehensive and forward-looking priorities for the 2023 Summit that can add new momentum to SCO activities in the years to come.

The increasing complex international situation will add to the challenges of holding a successful SCO Summit. Chinese assertive behaviour in Ladakh and the large military build-up on the border do not conform to the letter and spirit of the founding documents of the SCO, which apart from underlining the need for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity

Chinese assertive behaviour in Ladakh and the large military build-up on the border do not conform to the letter and spirit of the founding documents of the SCO, which apart from underlining the need for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity also stress non-use or threat of use of military force and renunciation of unilateral military superiority in neighbouring areas.

Decision making in the SCO should stick to the principle of consensus rather than resort to majority decision making that will erode support over long term. This will be all the more important with increased SCO membership.

also stress non-use or threat of use of military force and renunciation of unilateral military superiority in neighbouring areas.¹ It also calls into question adherence to the 'Shanghai Spirit', namely mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, joint consultations, respect for cultural diversity and aspiration for collective development, that Chinese actions seem to contradict not just in its relations with India but with other neighbouring countries. The inherent potential for cooperation cannot be fully

realized if member states of SCO have a trust deficit in their mutual relations. Decision making in the SCO should stick to the principle of consensus rather than resort to majority decision making that will erode support over long term. This will be all the more important with increased SCO membership.

Anti-Russia measures imposed by the West would impinge on the stability of the SCO region. Key factors of instability are already visible in Afghanistan and various Central Asian states. These will have a direct bearing on the SCO.

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine will cast a shadow on the SCO deliberations, raising in the minds of member states concerns regarding

¹ Declaration on the establishment of the SCO, 15 June 2001, para 5.

protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, a key principle of not just of the SCO but also of the United Nations Charter and at the same time the international consequences of the military and economic response of US and NATO not just in the conflict areas but on global stability as a whole. Anti-Russia measures imposed by the West would impinge on the stability of the SCO region. Key factors of instability are already visible in Afghanistan and various Central Asian states. These will have a direct bearing on the SCO.

Russia as also Belarus, may see the SCO as providing breather in terms of otherwise restricted international space due to the massive sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. Russia is too large a country to be disconnected from the international system but ongoing efforts in that direction will have significant destabilizing implications for Eurasia. Our approach in the SCO, in particular on issues such as greater use of national currencies or work of the SCO Interbank Consortium will need to factor in our close bilateral relations with Russia.

The ensuing economic downturn in the economies of SCO states may create opportunities for China to fill the void

Though the SCO had established a Contact Group on Afghanistan, its impact on Afghan developments leading to the Taliban takeover in Kabul in August 2021 was marginal. The SCO would therefore need to chalk out a role for itself under the new circumstances, especially given the increased threat posed to the security of Central Asia.

We have an interest in setting up rules and norms in the SCO on connectivity issues along lines agreed between India and the EU. This may seem an uphill task but necessary in the long term.

by expanding its economic footprint not just bilaterally but also through the SCO through such mechanisms as the proposed SCO Development Bank and the SCO Development Fund. This challenge requires careful handling – closing the SCO gates completely may disappoint the Central Asian States and allow China to seek bilateral channels of influence without the moderating influence of the SCO multilateral mechanisms. With its back to the wall, due to the massive western sanctions, Russia may also want to use the SCO to set some rules of the road to moderate the expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia.

Though the SCO had established a Contact Group on Afghanistan, its impact on Afghan developments leading to the Taliban takeover in Kabul in August 2021 was marginal. The SCO would therefore need to chalk out a role for itself under the new circumstances, especially given the increased threat posed to the security of Central Asia. The SCO RATS Centre provides a useful platform to establish cooperative contacts with Central Asian states on security issues of particular concern – counter terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, illicit arms transfers through training and capacity building.

2 India-EU Connectivity Partnership 8 may 2021

Due vigilance is also necessary with regard to Pak role in the SCO (which prohibits raising of bilateral issues) or Pak-China nexus in pushing their BRI or CPEC agenda which impinges over sovereignty issues of India in Kashmir. At the same time, we have an interest in setting up rules and norms in the SCO on connectivity issues along lines agreed between India and the EU.² This may seem an uphill task but necessary in the long term. The prospect of Iran joining the SCO would add a new dimension to the attractiveness of the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) not just for India but for Central Asian states as well. Continental connectivity in the SCO has to go hand in hand with the security of maritime connectivity that is a priority in the Quad. SCO should endorse norms on connectivity that would compel Pakistan to allow India full transit rights to Afghanistan.

As compared to its first fifteen years of its existence, which focused mainly on political and security issues, SCO has acquired a broad economic and developmental agenda in what can be termed as its second phase in the last seven years. India has played a significant role in expanding the SCO agenda into areas that are more people-focussed. The global economic downturn and the Covid

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The SCO is a grouping of high significance for India's geopolitical interests and deserves correspondingly high attention on part of India. Turning our back on SCO would inevitably lead to the field being left open to China. Russia, which drove Indian membership and the Central Asian states want India to play a more active role.

Pandemic have added a further sense of urgency to the economic agenda. The SCO has developed significant Action Plans – for the Implementation of the SCO Development Strategy up to 2025 and for the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the UN; there is also an initiative for an Economic Development Strategy for the SCO region until 2030. There are other proposals with considerable potential – an SCO Economic Forum, Programme for the Development of Interregional Cooperation as well proposals for the creation of a SCO Development Bank and an SCO Development Fund. Specific areas of cooperation include joint infrastructure development, industrial cooperation, data bank of investment projects, customs cooperation, digitization and ITC, pools of technology parks, Start Ups and Innovation, poverty reduction, regional transport and connectivity projects, energy cooperation, food security, agricultural technology, healthcare, epidemics cooperation, traditional medicine and telemedicine, environmental protection, culture, tourism, public diplomacy, sports, education, vocational training, women and youth affairs.

While the efforts of the SCO to broaden its agenda is a welcome development, there are significant limitations in their implementation. China has tended to use the SCO to push its national agenda in the SCO region on issues such as the BRI, Global Development and Security Initiatives often with little prior consultations with other SCO member states. While Russia does not always support China in this regard, it is often compelled to support China in exchange for support on political or security issues such as Bio-Security and Outer Space, which have a strong anti-US angle. Lack of inadequate consultations and cross-linkages often create a situation where proposals of considerable potential for even creating value for member states get uneven support due to lack of trust and understanding. SCO should be used as a platform for dialogue on global issues but not for norm creation on global issues which should be prerogative of the respective international bodies which have the mandate for such matters.

The second major factor is lack of adequate capacity and resources, especially among the Central Asian states to take forward agreed areas of cooperation. Apart from the SCO Secretariat and the RATS Centre,

The SCO already has a framework of principles and norms to regulate inter-state behaviour which are essential for stability and predictability on the Eurasian continent. It is true that member states of SCO can do more to respect its principles and thus strengthen the group.

SCO meetings provide an opportunity for India to press other SCO members to bring their actions in conformity with the principles and norms of the SCO, especially what is called the 'Shanghai Spirit'.

SCO has not yet developed any major institutions which can boost its agenda of economic cooperation. Since SCO member states also participate in other regional organizations – India, Russia and China in BRICS and G20, some Central Asian states in CIS, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), CICA etc, their capacity or willingness to concentrate on SCO matters is correspondingly impacted. The objective

of Greater Eurasian Partnership is a very laudable one - especially if it is able to connect SCO with the EAEU, ASEAN and when conditions permit even with the EU, thus creating a Pan-Eurasian cooperative platform.

The SCO can be used by India to strike a balance between its core interests on the continental and maritime dimensions.

However, this objective is hampered due to divergent priorities of SCO member states - while China has a more aggressive agenda, the Central Asian States and Russia are often divided as to using the SCO agenda for optimizing their interests.

Despite its apparent limitations, the SCO is a grouping of high significance for India's geopolitical interests and deserves correspondingly high attention on part of India. Turning our back on SCO would inevitably lead to the field being left open to China. Russia, which drove Indian membership and the Central Asian states want India to play a more active role. That it includes all the main players on the core Eurasian continent and is attracting

interest from other relevant countries is a sign of SCO's continuing relevance.

The SCO already has a framework of principles and norms to regulate inter-state behaviour which are essential for stability and predictability on the Eurasian continent. It is true that member states of SCO can do more to respect its principles and thus strengthen the group. This is in contrast to the maritime domain where norms are less well developed or codified and even less respected. While India may not have been a member when the founding documents of the SCO were drafted, India committed to their adherence at the time of joining as a full member. SCO meetings provide an opportunity for India to press other SCO members to bring their actions in conformity with the principles and norms of the SCO, especially what is called the 'Shanghai Spirit'.

India has participated regularly at various SCO Summits and high-level meetings at HoS and HoG level, as well as those of SCO Foreign Ministers, NSAs, Defence Ministers, Trade, Health, Science and Technology, Central Banks, Culture and other Ministries and Departments. After an initial lag, India's participation at working level meetings has picked up considerably despite the difficulties of inter-ministerial coordination and consultations. In this regard the Ministry of External Affairs has taken steps to support our SCO activities- including creating a separate SCO Division under a senior Joint Secretary

The 2023 Summit preparations would provide an opportunity to showcase the 'New India' in terms of advances in recent years in the fields of Start Ups, Innovative technologies, digital finance, pharma and technologies relevant for climate change and environmental protection.

who has done well also as India's National Coordinator. India has a separate SCO mission accredited to the SCO Secretariat in Beijing and has posted two officers each to the Secretariat and the RATS Secretariat in Tashkent. Russian and Chinese being the only two official languages of the SCO also place an additional challenge on SCO related activities.

India's chairmanship of the SCO in 2023 offers a unique opportunity to steer the group in new directions and add momentum to its activities that would benefit its members, in particular the states of the Central Asian region. While the SCO has value of its own as a cooperative platform on the Eurasian Continent, the forthcoming Summit is an opportunity to mainstream our continental policy in the context of the SCO agenda. It may also be useful to synchronize our SCO activities with mirror activities that we pursue in the BRICS, RIC, our engagement with EAEU and the G20 so that all these platforms, while having their individual mandates reinforce our priorities in a coordinated manner.

India's priorities in the forthcoming summit may include both political and security dimensions as well as economic, trade and cultural dimensions, as both these dimensions are inter-related at a fundamental level. The SCO can be used by India to strike a balance between its core interests on the continental and maritime dimensions. With respect to Chinese assertive postures, the SCO has its

utility to moderate inter-state behaviour, in particular with respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. This will involve consulting with other member states on proposals that will achieve this purpose. Both Russia and the Central Asian states would welcome such efforts by India. India may pursue its priorities with respect to counter-terrorism and defence exercises-intended to create a comfort level especially for the Central Asian states.

The economic and trade agenda of the SCO would need to take into account the severe disruptions in globalization following the Covid Pandemic and the weaponization of interdependence following the imposition of sanctions on Russia in the context of its conflict with Ukraine. It is important to find ways and means of cushioning the impact of these developments on the fragile economies of the Central Asian States and to preclude the possibility of China seeking unilateral advantage of the current crisis to make inroads in terms of market share, exploitative investments or expansion of its digital infrastructure footprint. The possibilities of greater use of national currencies and innovative mechanisms of facilitating trade and banking arrangements should be explored in a proactive manner. The full operationalization of the INSTC would add to SCO connectivity as compared to alternative BRI linkages being pushed by China. A rethink on our part may be necessary to push the SCO in directions that

would suit our interests. Neglect of these dimensions of SCO activities will create future risks of our marginalization on the Eurasian Continent.

The 2023 Summit preparations would provide an opportunity to showcase the 'New India' in terms of advances in recent years in the fields of Start Ups, Innovative technologies, digital finance, pharma and technologies relevant for climate change and environmental protection. Initiatives on Start Ups, Young scientist conclaves, traditional medicine and young academic conferences can be endorsed at the Summit level. Highlighting cultural and civilizational ties, including the Buddhist connection, tourism and educational links can add to the vital people to people cooperation in the SCO. In contrast to western concepts, promotion at the international level through SCO platforms of traditional medicine and traditional sports can give a new profile for the group.

It is also important to establish at least one SCO centre with respect to one core

cooperative activity in India as other SCO member states have already done. At the academic and think tank level, it is important to strengthen interest in and expertise about SCO matters which will be essential for think-tank interactions with other SCO members. A beginning has been made with establishing of a SCO Study Centre in ICWA. Developing expertise on Eurasian issues will be necessary for long term sustainability of our policy objectives.

The future of SCO is largely dependent on how far India is willing to work to engage on its core activities that would reinforce our relations with Russia and the Central Asian states and to keep a watch on China to prevent it from appropriating the SCO in the image of its own interests as opposed to common interests of the whole membership. This will be a test of our diplomacy but India has shown time and again that it is capable of coming out with flying colours. The 2023 SCO Summit under PM Modi's chairmanship will once again prove this point.

Indian Engagement with Shanghai Cooperation Organization

ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

K. Warikoo

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as a prominent regional organization bringing together Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, besides Afghanistan, Iran, Mongolia and Belarus as Observers and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia as Dialogue Partners. SCO is the largest regional organisation in terms of its geographical coverage and population. SCO provides a non-western perspective reflecting broad convergence of views of its members. The looming threats from radicalisation, terrorism and separatism pose serious challenges to the sovereignty

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and territorial integrity of the SCO member countries. The rise of the ISIS and its sustained efforts to strike roots in the region compounds these security challenges.

All through its summit meetings, the SCO has been stressing the need to fight the threats of religious extremism, separatism and terrorism. SCO is seen as an important organisation to promote and consolidate

the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Central Asian Republics and also to insulate these countries from any extra-regional interference and pressure. SCO member countries are faced with the security challenges of cross-border terrorism, religious extremism, separatism, arms and drugs smuggling which can be dealt with in the Shanghai Spirit of good-neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation.

Indian assumption of the SCO Presidency in September 2022 offers opportunities for enhanced cooperation between India, Russia, China and other SCO member countries and to take concrete steps to promote mutual cultural understanding, to combat religious extremism and terrorism, to deal with the Afghanistan situation and to develop regional economic cooperation. This will not only lead to the efficacy of this regional organisation but also lend strength to the multipolar global order. When India

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It is this consciousness of historical and cultural association dating back to antiquity and permeating the psyche of the people of this region, which provides a firm basis for constructive cooperation in diverse sectors of socio-economic development.

hosted the virtual meeting of 19th SCO Heads of Government on 30 November 2020, it expressed its keen desire to forge strong socio-economic relations among the member countries of SCO besides augmenting its role in countering terrorism and maintaining regional stability. With a view to harness the economic potential of SCO countries, India organised the first meeting of recently established SCO Consortium of Economic Analysis Centres in August 2020. There is enough scope for increased regional cooperation in trade, transport, energy, finance, education, agriculture, information technology, healthcare and traditional medicine, pharmaceuticals, industry and services sectors. Keeping in view the western sanctions on Russia and Iran, like-minded SCO countries can also look for alternative arrangements for payments etc.

■ Promoting Cultural Understanding

India views Central Asia as its extended neighbourhood and an area of vital importance. There is convergence of views and interests between the Central Asian Republics and India, on fundamental issues such as; (a) need to maintain social harmony and equilibrium by promoting

inter-ethnic harmony and peaceful co-existence; (b) commitment to secularism and democracy and opposition to religious fundamentalism; (c) recognition of threat to regional security and stability from trans-border terrorism, arms and drug trafficking, religious extremism and ethnic-religious secessionism; and (d) commitment to the principles of territorial integrity of nation states and inviolability of state borders. This mutual political understanding needs to be reinforced through synergy of thought and action between various government agencies, universities and institutions in the region so that the historical and cultural linkages between India and Central Asia are strengthened and developed into a fund of goodwill, love and harmony at the grassroots level.

The movement of trade, ideas and reciprocal cultural influences have left deep imprint on the social life and cultural traditions of this region. Popular usage of Indian spices, tea, medicinal herbs etc. and quest for Indian films and songs in Central Asia, Afghanistan and in the SCO member countries even today reflects the age-old Indian connection. A common cultural pattern embracing various forms of expression like astronomy, philosophy,

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The process of academic and cultural exchanges between Indian and Central Asian/Eurasian centres of learning, universities, institutes etc. needs to be streamlined and institutionalized, so that Indian specialists on Central Asia/Eurasia are able to collaborate with their counterparts in their areas of study/specialization.

language, literature, folklore, architecture, arts and crafts, calligraphy, textiles and food habits developed in the process of socio-economic interaction between India and its extended neighbourhood. It is this consciousness of historical and cultural association dating back to antiquity and permeating the psyche of the people of this region, which provides a firm basis for constructive cooperation in diverse sectors of socio-economic development. Traditional Nowruz is celebrated with fervour in major parts of Asia – Iran, Northern Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Central Asian Republics and parts of India. It reminds the peoples of this vast region of their shared history and heritage. This tradition of celebrating such common festivals can be popularised through the SCO framework as well.

Similarly, India and China are two ancient civilisations, proud of their own history, culture and traditions. Whereas the Silk Route facilitated the overland movement of men, ideas and goods across the Himalayas, the sea route was also used for trade and travel purposes. Buddhist missionaries from India established Buddhism in China, which became a storehouse of Buddhist scriptures. To the Chinese, India was the land of wisdom. If Huien Tsiang and Fa Hien travelled across the lofty Pamirs and the Karakoram mountains to India, Kumarajiva and Boddhidharma went from India to China. This historico-cultural

interface promoted the transmission of Indian thought and culture as also the Indian experiences in astronomy, medicine, yoga etc. Given the richness of the Sino-Indian contacts through history, it becomes all the more necessary for the two countries to cooperate in economic, cultural and political domains, shedding old suspicions and inhibitions. The SCO Digital Exhibition of the Shared Buddhist Heritage held at Indian National Museum, New Delhi (29 November 2020-28 February 2021) did help in highlighting the shared values and links between the peoples of the region.

The process of academic and cultural exchanges between Indian and Central Asian/Eurasian centres of learning, universities, institutes etc. needs to be streamlined and institutionalized, so that Indian specialists on Central Asia/Eurasia are able to collaborate with their counterparts in their areas of study/specialization. This can be made possible through liberal support to various study centres/think tanks on Central Asia/Eurasia. Another vital area of cultural cooperation is joint production of films, television serials, publication of books, exchange of print and visual materials and regular exchange of artistes. India has already translated 10 Indian literary classics in regional languages into SCO languages of Russian and

India has already translated 10 Indian literary classics in regional languages into SCO languages of Russian and Chinese, which were formally presented to the SCO Secretary General on 29 June 2021.

It is high time that all antiquities, frescoes, manuscripts, inscriptions, artefacts etc. which are lying scattered in various parts of Afghanistan, Central Asia and Xinjiang either at the sites or in local museums are documented.

Chinese, which were formally presented to the SCO Secretary General on 29 June 2021.

One would stress the need to safeguard the treasure of tangible heritage which is the bedrock of deep and historic civilisational ties between India and the region, so that the new and younger generations assimilate this rich historical legacy in their memory. The task of identification, location, documentation and dissemination of such a rich historico-cultural legacy, assumes priority. UNESCO, which has played a significant role in the restoration and management of various heritage sites in Central Asia, besides its famed Silk Roads Project, and the concerned institutes of archaeology and history in Central Asia, China and India, can jointly undertake this task. Concrete steps towards the actual documentation of the antiquities and archaeological sites fit in well within the policy of independent Central Asian Republics to rediscover the past and consolidating national identity on the basis of indigenous ethno-cultural heritage.

It is high time that all antiquities, frescoes, manuscripts, inscriptions, artefacts etc. which are lying scattered in various parts of Afghanistan, Central Asia and Xinjiang either at the sites or in local museums are documented. IGPCA and Indian specialists/archaeologists need to work urgently in

close collaboration with their Central Asian and Chinese counterparts, to undertake the hitherto neglected task of identification, location, documentation and dissemination of such a rich and common historico-cultural legacy. Similarly, there is need for preparing a cumulative catalogue of the artefacts, MSS etc. which were excavated by the western archaeologists such as Aurel Stein, Albert Grundwel, Albert Von le Coq, Paul Pelliot, Sven Hedin, L. Warner, Count Otani and also by the Soviet archaeologists in various parts of Central Asia, which are presently scattered in different museums throughout the world. Steps also need to be taken to identify and preserve the literary, historical and artistic works. Old classics in Chinese, Kharosthi, Turkic, Persian, Uyghur, Mongolian, etc. that have been found in various parts of Central Asia, can be microfilmed and published possibly with English translations. India and SCO can develop a comprehensive and concrete programme of identification, documentation, video filming and preservation of these antiquities, which can otherwise be lost into oblivion.

Urgent steps are, therefore, needed to protect, conserve, restore and develop the ancient sites in the region into important centres of cultural tourism. India and SCO can take the initiative by

A specialised SCO cultural centre involving experts, archaeologists and historians from the region can undertake the task of excavating, conserving and restoring such ancient sites presently lying in ruins, so that this rich testimony of historical and cultural interface does not get destroyed through vagaries of nature, time and neglect.

The phenomenon of terrorism has acquired multiple and dangerous dimensions, particularly the increased role of religious terrorist groups, proliferation of small arms, narco-terrorism, money laundering and proxy war by a state using mercenaries and terrorists against the other state.

setting up an appropriate institutional mechanism involving specialised agencies like archaeological institutes, national museums and cultural historians of the SCO member countries. A specialised SCO cultural centre involving experts, archaeologists and historians from the region can undertake the task of excavating, conserving and restoring such ancient sites presently lying in ruins, so that this rich testimony of historical and cultural interface does not get destroyed through vagaries of nature, time and neglect. These sites can be developed into important cultural and tourism spots which in turn will promote tourism and traffic.

■ Dealing with Terrorism

The scourge of terrorism which has manifested in destruction of human rights; ethnic-religious cleansing of minorities; hostage taking; target killings; mines and bomb blasts; subverting the legitimate civil and political authority in the states; undermining the democratic and pluralistic socio-political order; has been universally recognised as the main challenge threatening domestic and international peace and security. The UN General Assembly and other UN bodies have time and again reiterated the unequivocal condemnation of all

acts, methods and practices of terrorism, regardless of their motivation, in all their forms and manifestations, wherever and by whomever committed, as acts aimed at the destruction of human rights, fundamental freedoms and democracy, threatening the territorial integrity and security of states, destabilising legitimately constituted governments, undermining pluralistic society and the rule of law having adverse consequences for the economic and social development of the State.

Despite repeated condemnations and appeals by the international community for an end to acts of terrorism perpetrated by terrorist groups, their atrocities have assumed even more violent and barbaric manifestations of *fidayeen* (suicide) and car bomb attacks, kidnappings, hijacking, beheading of innocent victims, including women and children. The phenomenon of terrorism has acquired multiple and dangerous dimensions, particularly the increased role of religious terrorist groups, proliferation of small arms, narco-

The emergence of lethal combination of transnational terrorism, religious extremism, drugs and arms smuggling has been posing a serious threat to human rights of civilians and international peace and security. It is high time that this menace is confronted and combated firmly.

Terrorism has both internal as well as external explosive dimensions. In its external dimension, international terrorism has the potential of impinging upon friendly relations among states and evoking even strong responses from the states affected by it. In its internal dimension, terrorism creates chaos and instability, which undermines human rights and fundamental freedoms.

It becomes necessary to launch effective and well coordinated campaign against the perpetrators of terrorism, through international cooperation between states, regional and international organizations and UN bodies.

terrorism, money laundering and proxy war by a state using mercenaries and terrorists against the other state. Taking due cognizance of the grave threat posed by terrorism to democracy, civil society and the rule of law, the UN Security Council adopted a Resolution 1269 on 19 October 1999, calling upon “all States to take appropriate steps to (i) prevent and suppress terrorist acts, protect their nationals and other persons against terrorist attacks and bring to justice the perpetrators of such acts; (ii) prevent

All through its summit meetings, the SCO has been stressing the need to fight the threats of religious extremism, separatism and terrorism.

and suppress in their territories through all lawful means preparation and financing of any acts of terrorism, and (iii) deny those who plan, finance or commit terrorist acts, safe havens by ensuring

their apprehension and prosecution or extradition.” In 1994, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution reiterating its commitment to counter terrorism, including through the principle of extraditing or prosecuting perpetrators of terrorist acts. This was followed up by the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism. In November 1996, India circulated a ‘first draft’ of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT)¹, which is still locked in a logjam due to difference of opinions on the definition of terrorism.

The emergence of lethal combination of transnational terrorism, religious extremism, drugs and arms smuggling has been posing a serious threat to human rights of civilians and international peace and security. It is high time that this menace is confronted and combated firmly. The semantic muddle over the definition and interpretation of terrorism, as it relates to the terrorist campaigns launched in the name of holy war against ethnic-religious minorities, is being misused as a cover-up by some states in their support of trans-border terrorism and in pursuit of their foreign policy strategy against other states. With the result, the impasse over the definition of terrorism continues. It, therefore, becomes imperative to remove forthwith any such existing loopholes which impede the process of firm and deterrent action against terrorism and its perpetrators, without any exception being made for political or other considerations.

Terrorism has both internal as well as external explosive dimensions. In its external dimension, international terrorism has the potential of impinging upon friendly relations among states and evoking even strong responses from the states affected by it. In its internal dimension, terrorism creates chaos and instability, which undermines human rights and fundamental freedoms. Since the issue of terrorism has assumed centre stage in the discourse on international cooperation to combat terrorism, three approaches are proposed to arrive at a consensus on the

¹ Asoke Mukerji, “Leveraging the UN for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism”. In Modi 2.0: A Resolve to Secure India. Edited by Ranjit Pachnanda and others. New Delhi, Pentagon, 2021. p 87.

part of states. The first approach should be laying down a legal framework and creating mechanisms within the states to deal with the terrorists for their activities within state(s). Secondly, there should be inter-state cooperation in dealing with global terrorism. In this context, a mechanism needs to be evolved through which states can cooperate with other state(s) by way of sharing information, identifying the culprits along with their networks and support systems within their territory. The third approach is to identify and censure states, which are sponsoring and sustaining terrorism in order to achieve their strategic objectives.

It becomes necessary to launch effective and well coordinated campaign against the perpetrators of terrorism, through international cooperation between states, regional and international organizations and UN bodies. The looming threats from radicalisation, terrorism and separatism pose serious challenges to the sovereignty and territorial integrity across the world. All through its summit meetings, the SCO has been stressing the need to fight the threats of religious extremism, separatism and terrorism. In its initial year of establishment, the SCO members met in Shanghai in June 2001 and signed *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism* on 15 June 2001. This was followed up by the conclusion of the *Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure*, in 2002. RATS was established as a centre to collect, collate and exchange information about terrorist movements, draft counter-terrorism policies and laws and also to interact with the concerned institutions of the member states dealing with extremism, terrorism and separatism. RATS mechanism needs to be fully utilised

to combat these three evils. The SCO special conference on Afghanistan held in Moscow in March 2009 called for the “adoption of a comprehensive convention on international terrorism as well as the elaboration of regional counter-terrorism legal instruments.”²

Chinese President Xi Jinping in his address at the 18th SCO Summit held in June 2018 in Qingdao city of China stressed the “need to actively implement the 2019-2021 program of cooperation for combating ‘three evil forces of terrorism, separatism, and extremism;’ continue to conduct the ‘Peace Mission’ and other joint counter-terrorism exercises”. At the 18th SCO summit which concluded on 10 June 2018, the member states of China, Russia, India, Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, adopted a joint declaration strongly condemning all forms of terrorism and called for the creation of a unified global counter-terrorism front with the central coordinating role of the United Nations on the basis of international law, without politicization or double standards. The member states also sought a consensus on adopting the UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, which has been pending due to the double standards adopted by some countries. The SCO member countries were united in their resolve to combat the spread and propagation of terrorist ideology through the internet, including publicly justifying terrorism. The SCO Member states recognized the special role of the SCO regional counter-terrorist agencies in jointly combating the “three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism and extremism, and safeguarding regional security.

² See <http://www.sectSCO.org/EN123/show.asp?id=100>

In order to achieve definite results in the battle against terrorism and in keeping with the spirit of the UN Security Council Resolutions, India can take the lead by evolving a SCO consensus document/draft Convention against international terrorism for adoption by the United Nations, on the basis of the following basic principles:

- All measures to combat terrorism need to be taken in a manner so that human rights and fundamental freedoms are not violated.
- Trans-border and international terrorism be dealt with effectively, through strong international cooperation between states, international and regional organisations and the UN bodies, so as to ensure the arrest, extradition and prosecution of terrorists.
- The UN bodies and states should come out openly against acts of terror in all their forms and manifestations, without getting influenced by their own political priorities and compulsions. There should be no room for any ambiguity or misinterpretation of the definition of a terrorist.
- The international community and UN should impose sanctions against the identified terrorist organizations, its members and more importantly the states which are sponsoring and harbouring such terrorists. All types of international assistance to such states be made dependent upon their actions towards dismantling and destroying the terrorist networks, their bases and infrastructure. This becomes necessary for deterring such states from supporting terrorists. Ensuring accountability and compliance is an essential element of global strategy against terrorism.
- All the assets including bank accounts, moveable and immovable properties belonging to terrorist organizations, their members, sponsors/donors and sympathizers be seized and deposited in an international fund, as was suggested by the UN Security Council Resolution 1566 of 8 October 2004. The victims of terrorists and their families be provided relief and rehabilitation out of thus created fund, besides the concerned government measures.
- Necessary steps be taken to apprehend and destroy the terrorist groups, their bases and infrastructure and even follow hot pursuit when the terrorists are operating from their bases in other countries.
- Principle of non-use of the territory of one state for terrorist activity against the other be applied strictly.
- Legislative and criminal proceedings related to different types of terrorist crimes be set in motion to ensure expeditious trial, prosecution and deterrent punishment of terrorists.
- The society at local, regional, national and international levels needs to galvanise its social support and

The traditional and moderate Islamic beliefs and practices with strong indigenous and Sufi content in South and Central Asia are diametrically opposed to the radical Wahhabi ideologies and practices which are intolerant of other cultures and groups.

The silent majority of traditional, moderate and liberal Muslims in South and Central Asia, who practice Islam in accordance with the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, need to shun their silence and assert and organise themselves against the extremists.

create a social milieu in which such terrorist activities are not tolerated.

- Media should strike a balance in their coverage of terrorist activities in order to contain rather than facilitate the spread of terrorist activities and the related ideologies.
- The terrorists and their sponsoring/harboursing states need to be denied access to nuclear materials and advanced technology, so that any possibility of the terrorists using weapons of mass destruction, and inflicting catastrophes, is averted. This implies securing and eliminating nuclear materials and related technology in states known to be harbouring/sponsoring terrorists.

■ Combating Religious Extremism

The traditional and moderate Islamic beliefs and practices with strong indigenous and Sufi content in South and Central Asia are diametrically opposed to the radical Wahhabi ideologies and practices which are intolerant of other cultures and groups. The jihadis do not agree with the modern concept of democracy and secularism. To a jihadi, Islam transcends geographical boundaries, ethnicities, creed, race and all other distinctions. The focus of religious radicals has been Islamisation of the state rather than reform of the individuals. In theory, jihad in Islam was meant to create an egalitarian social order where the poor and the deprived would be treated fairly and dignity. But jihad has been turned into

Qital (violence) by the extremist terrorist groups like *Jaish-e-Mohammad*, *Lashkar-e-Tayyeba*, *Hizbul Mujahideen*, *Jamaat-ut-Dawa* (JuD), *Harkat-ul-Jihad-ul-Islami* (HuJI), *Harkat-ul-Mujahideen* (HuM) etc., which have been in the forefront of violence and terrorism in the region.

The extremists lay stress on the enforcement of their injunctions at gun-point, censoring the veneration of *ziarats* (shrines) and sufis, closure of places of entertainment, exclusion of music and fine arts, strict observance of *hadith* or tradition, indoctrination of Muslim minds at all levels, making religion and politics essentially complementary to each other and negating the achievements of democracy, secularism and modernization. Alcoholism, dance, music, courts, judiciary, earning of bank interest and various things associated with a secular, democratic and liberal order, are publicly decried and declared un-Islamic. Ironically, the radical extremists find it easy to operate in a free society by invoking their democratic right to preach and practice hatred. It is the ideological training, upbringing and brainwashing in the fanatical *madrassas* which moulds and shapes young receptive minds. To quote a prominent Pakistani scholar Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, “the education imparted to Pakistani children is flawed and encourages extremism, intolerance and ignorance”.

Terrorism when blended with the fire and zeal of *jihad* becomes a deadly mix posing a major challenge to peace and security in South and Central Asia. The emergence of

radical and violent religious movements poses serious challenge to secular and democratic polity, pluralistic social order, inter-religious harmony, security and territorial integrity of states in the region. It is high time that the academics, media, civic society, states and international community distinguish between the traditional Islam and the one propounded by the jihadis and their mentors. The silent majority of traditional, moderate and liberal Muslims in South and Central Asia, who practice Islam in accordance with the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination, need to shun their silence and assert and organise themselves against the extremists. On their part, the governments and secular societies need to help in preserving, restoring and emphasising the indigenous, traditional and diverse Islamic practices and institutions, besides encouraging interfaith harmony and dialogue.

One would recall the constitution of UNESCO which states that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. So the battle for peace is to be fought on the ideological plane. Most of the *madrassas* are engaged in inculcating in the young students’ minds extremist, exclusivist, totalitarian and supremacist version of Islam, by misinterpreting the Quranic verses and *Hadith* traditions, talking about *jihad*, *qital*, *khilafat*, *hakimiat-e-Ilah* (God’s rule over the earth) and *ghalba-e-Islam* (supremacy of Islamic faith). Modern, liberal, secular and scientific outlook needs to be imparted to the young generation through the medium of revised

and restructured curricula, textbooks in schools and colleges, thereby replacing the existing ones which are replete with hate and gun culture. It is gratifying to note the statement on 22 February 2015 of Sheikh Ahmed al Tayeb, the Head of Jamia-al-Azhar, Sunni Islam’s most prestigious seat of learning, in which he called for reforms in the Islamic education to contain the spread of religious extremism in the Muslim world. He denounced terrorism as a product of extremist ideology linked to “bad interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith”. In the year 2014, 120 Muslim scholars wrote to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the IS leader saying that he had misconstrued Islam by ignoring the context of the Quran, classical teaching and the current era. The *madrassas* need to be regulated, restructured and brought within the purview of new liberal educational structures. Once intolerance, hatred and discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, religion, national, ethnic or social origin is eliminated, peace will follow.

Advocacy and incitement to hatred should be prohibited and made a criminal offence. To eradicate growing extremism and radicalization which lead to hate crimes and violence, the states and civil society needs to launch social harmony and integration programmes, through media, education, interaction with grassroots communities and young people. Interfaith and intercultural dialogues with the participation of religious groups and communities can help in reducing the menace of intolerance, extremism, and also violence. Internet and social media which

International seminars, workshops, festivals, publications of literature etc. to promote dialogue among civilizations need to be regularly organised to bring about better inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding.

The SCO organised a special conference on Afghanistan in March 2009 in Moscow. Besides the SCO member states and observers, the participants included the UN Secretary General, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs and representatives from the EU, NATO, OSCE, CSTO, OIC etc. Such a high level of international participation in effect validated the SCO's role in Afghanistan.

present an effective forum for exchange of information expression, dialogue, education, knowledge sharing between communities and among networks, can be harnessed positively to achieve the desired goals. SCO can initiate steps in this regard by launching a concerted and coordinated drive to provide scientific and modern education to the youth and children, particularly in countries where religious extremist and terrorist groups are busy recruiting their cadres with extremist ideologies and distorted world view. International seminars, workshops, festivals, publications of literature etc. to promote dialogue among civilizations need to be regularly organised to bring about better inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding.

■ Afghanistan Imbroglia and SCO

When in 1990s Al Qaeda, the trans-regional terrorist network headed by Osama Bin Laden, turned Afghanistan as the base for international terrorism, it became a major threat to the neighbourhood security, particularly to the newly independent Central Asian countries. In the aftermath of 9/11, when international war against terror was launched in Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provided air bases to the ISAF forces at Karshi Khanabad, Manas and Dushanbe respectively.

Kazakhstan gave overflying rights, repair and refuelling facilities. Besides, the Central Asian Republics became involved in the humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. Soon after the Interim Administration headed by Hamid Karzai was set up in Afghanistan, SCO in its June 2002 meeting held at St. Petersburg formally welcomed “the creation of a new, stable Afghanistan, free of terror, war, drugs and poverty”, and expressed readiness to “facilitate the process of forming broadly representative government in the interest of the entire Afghan people”.³ The next SCO summit of 2003 held in Moscow was concerned about the threat of drug trafficking from Afghanistan. The member states agreed that “an international strategy for comprehensive neutralization of the Afghan drugs threat be drawn under the UN aegis”.⁴ Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai attended the Tashkent summit of SCO held in Tashkent in 2004. At this summit, the member states issued a declaration on 17 June 2004 recognizing the central coordinating role of the UN in the implementation of international programs in Afghanistan. They stressed the need to coordinate efforts in the fight against terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking with a view to achieve security, peace and order, and create the necessary conditions for peaceful reconstruction in Afghanistan. At the Astana summit held in 2005, the SCO members reaffirmed their commitment to

³ See <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/2002>

⁴ See <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/2003>

fight against drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan.

Recognizing the near- and long-term importance of stability in Afghanistan to the SCO region, the organization created a SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group (SACG) by adopting a protocol in its meeting at Astana in 2005. Formal cooperation between Afghanistan and the SCO began in 2005 with the establishment of SACG aimed at fighting terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. In its Bishkek declaration of 16 August 2007, issued after the SCO summit, the member states expressed “concern over the drug threat emanating from Afghanistan and its negative impact on the Central Asian region”. They called for “conscious strengthening of ‘anti-drug security belt’ around Afghanistan”. Afghanistan was discussed once again at the Dushanbe summit of SCO in August 2008. The then President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai also attended this summit. The member states took note of the “developments in Afghanistan, increasing volumes of drug trafficking, transnational organised crime, which necessitated the creation of joint mechanisms of assessment, prevention and response to such challenges and threats”. In their declaration issued on 27 August 2008, the Heads of SCO member states called upon the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operating in Afghanistan on the mandate of the UN Security Council to pay greater attention to the task of combating the production and trafficking of the Afghan narcotics in coordination with the government of Afghanistan.

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observers, the participants included the UN Secretary General, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs and representatives from the EU, NATO, OSCE, CSTO, OIC etc. Such a high level of international participation in effect validated the SCO’s role in Afghanistan. Recognising the challenges in Afghanistan and the region, the conference underscored the importance of sustained international efforts to achieve a stable, peaceful, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan. It emphasised the need for sustained international support to strengthen Afghan security institutions to effectively combat the scourge of terrorism and production and trafficking of drugs.⁵ Another joint statement issued by the SCO member states and Afghanistan during this conference, called for “further improvement of the SCO drug control cooperation mechanism as well as the elaboration of plans of practical cooperation between anti-drug agencies of the SCO Member States and other countries in the region”.

At its Yekaterinburg summit held on 15-16 June 2009, the SCO member states reiterated their “grave concern over the complicated situation in Afghanistan related to illicit drug trafficking, terrorism and transnational organised crime”. The next SCO summit held in Tashkent on 10-11 June 2010 also took note of the continuing deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational organized crimes originating from that country, which posed serious threats to the region. The SCO member states reaffirmed their support for the UN’s leading role in coordinating international efforts in mediating the situation in Afghanistan. Maintaining that military means alone cannot resolve the

5 See <http://www.sectSCO.org/EN123/show.asp?id=98>

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issue of Afghanistan, the SCO member states supported “pushing forward the negotiation process in which the United Nations plays a leading role and the Afghan people participate. “The SCO emphasized that “the time-honoured history, national origin and traditional religious values of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan should be fully respected.” At the SCO summit at Astana held on 10-11 June 2011, besides the five heads of SCO member states, delegations from the Observer countries of India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia also participated. The President of Afghanistan also attended as a guest. In its declaration issued after the conclusion of the summit, the SCO “supported the development of Afghanistan as an independent, neutral, peaceful and prosperous country”.

At the Beijing summit of SCO held on 6-7 January 2012, Afghanistan which is a neighbour to most of the SCO states, was admitted as an Observer of the SCO. The common view of members of the SCO regarding Afghanistan has been that there cannot be a military solution to the Afghan problem and that the SCO states must help Afghanistan develop economically, politically and with the participation of Afghan people. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was revived when it met

at the level of deputy foreign ministers in Moscow on 11 October 2017. The delegates stressed the importance of supporting the Afghanistan government and peoples’ efforts to settle the conflict through political consultations and dialogue. The members exchanged views on the security challenges and threats in the region and assistance to rebuild Afghanistan as a peaceful, stable and prosperous state. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group held another meeting on 28 May 2018, at the level of deputy foreign ministers of the SCO member states and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, in Beijing. To quote Rashid Alimov, the Secretary General of the SCO, “the meeting saw an in-depth exchange of views on the situation in Afghanistan, assistance to efforts undertaken by the government and people of Afghanistan to restore the peace process, and measures for further SCO-Afghanistan cooperation.” “The leaders of the SCO member states were unanimous in their firm commitment to Afghanistan’s sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity, as well as their invariable support for the Afghan Government and people as they strive to restore their country and strengthen democratic institutions.” “It felt that a comprehensive approach to security, economy, state governance

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and development problems with the coordinating role of the United Nations in guaranteeing peace and stability in Afghanistan can bring the long awaited result.”

As Ambassador Vitaliy Vorobiev of Russian Federation stated⁶ : “One should not forget that the SCO was created as a response to immediate threats of terrorism and drug trafficking from the Afghanistan conflict in the late 1990s. The SCO idea was born from a collective demand for a regional coalition to combat them”. Similar views were expressed by Muratbek Imanaliev, former Secretary General of the SCO during an interview in 2010 in Bishkek⁷: “Afghanistan is the main reason of the cooperation of the member states of the SCO and the problem for all the countries, the only subject of common interest”. According to the Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev,⁸ “first of all, Afghanistan remains the main base of terrorists, including those related to terrorist and extremist organizations whose goal is to destabilize the situation in Central Asia, topple the existing political regimes and create the Muslim Caliphate within its borders. Second, Afghanistan remains the main base for production of raw opium and also the main supplier of heroin and other drugs to global markets via Central Asian states. After the withdrawing of coalition forces, the radicals began to feel confident in a number of provinces in Afghanistan, and in the north of Afghanistan established a bridgehead from which extremists

penetrate into the neighbouring countries of Central Asia. The drug trafficking threat has increased”.

An Afghan diplomat and an academic, M. Ashraf Haidari put it succinctly⁹: “Over the past 17 years, we have learned from international security cooperation in Afghanistan that without sincere, results-driven regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism with no distinction it would be hard to secure the peace in Afghanistan. Indeed, a collective failure to defeat terrorism and to win the peace on Afghanistan would entail adverse spill over effects, which could easily transcend borders, destabilising the region and the world at large. But this shouldn’t be allowed to happen”.

Even though war against terror in Afghanistan was launched over twenty years ago, the situation in Afghanistan remains unstable due to increasing insecurity and deteriorating social and economic conditions. Another aspect of the situation is that as per the UNODC’s *Afghanistan Opium Survey of 2018*, the total opium poppy cultivation area in Afghanistan witnessed 17 per cent increase at 263,000 hectares, over the level of 2014 representing an increase of 39,000 hectares. Most of the poppy cultivation took place in the southern region (69%) followed by the Western region (12%), Eastern region (8%) and northern region (7%). The SCO member states approved on 10 June 2018 Anti-Drug Strategy in the years 2018-23

6 See Vitaliy Vorobiev, The SCO as a Rising Master of the Heartland. <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-SCO-as-a-Rising-Master-of-the-Heartland-15503>

7 Cited by Jildiz Nicharapova, (Bishkek), The Afghan Crisis and Shanghai Cooperation Organization Policies of Stabilisation.

8 See the speech of the Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, during the tenth meeting of Secretaries of Security of the SCO countries, Moscow April 2015.

9 See M. Ashraf Haidari, How China and India can help secure peace in Afghanistan. Raisina Debates, ORF 18 August 2018.

outlining measures to counter the drug threat emanating from Afghanistan. The current Taliban regime in Afghanistan has announced curbs on poppy cultivation. The impact of these curbs however remains to be seen.

So ensuring sustainable security and peace in Afghanistan is a great challenge facing the international community. International community needs to shed its ambivalence and evolve a concerted strategy to curb terrorism and extremism in and around Afghanistan by stopping their sources of funds, arms, logistics and training and ideological motivation. Indian policy has been to help in rebuilding the physical infrastructure in Afghanistan, training and scholarships for human resource and skill development. India sponsors over 1,000 Afghan students annually for their education/training in Indian institutions. India provided few hundred vehicles, some aeroplanes and helicopters, built the new parliament complex, Salma Dam which has a capacity of 42 MW of power besides irrigating 75,000 hectares of farmland, Delaram-Zaranj road, transmission line from Termez to Kabul and over 200 public and private schools. Hundreds of small and medium development projects were also started. India is the biggest regional donor and fifth largest donor globally having provided assistance of over 3 billion US dollars since 2001.

Following the Taleban takeover, the future of Afghanistan and its people hinges upon the emergence of a balanced, inclusive and stable government representing diverse ethnic, regional and minority interests. India is supportive of providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. India airlifted the first tranche of medical supplies to Kabul on 11 December 2021, in view of the challenging humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. India has also committed to supply 50,000 metric tons of wheat to Afghanistan through the land route via Pakistan, which has allowed Afghan trucks to ferry the consignment from Wagah-Atari border. Till mid-December 2021, India had evacuated 669 people, comprising 448 Indians and 206 Afghans including members of the Afghan Hindu and Sikh minority communities, from Afghanistan. As many as 565 people including 438 Indians were evacuated from Afghanistan in August 2021.

The SCO member countries including Iran remain concerned over the cross-border movement of extremists, armed militants, refugees, drugs, arms and organised crime from Afghanistan into their countries. Several countries including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan which have physical borders with Afghanistan, are worried about the spill over of the conflict, terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan to their own territories. Since, many countries are part

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of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it provides a good and viable forum for these countries to express their concerns on Afghanistan and work out a common strategy to deal with the challenge. Amid the volatile situation in Afghanistan, SCO Foreign Ministers' Contact Group on Afghanistan met in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe in mid-July 2021. Here Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar called for cessation of violence and terrorist attacks, settlement of the conflict through political dialogue, and steps to ensure that neighbouring countries are not threatened by terrorism, separatism and extremism.¹⁰ SCO and RATS have a distinctive role to play by working out definite agreements/arrangements between the member states including Afghanistan to (i) negotiate bilateral extradition agreements, (ii) take regular stock of the radical extremists and terrorists operating in the region, and exchange such information (iii) identify the sources of terror-financing and take necessary steps to block these channels, (iv) to engage and seek cooperation of the Islamic clergy/Ulema for rejecting the hate ideology of the terrorists and extremists in the name of *jihad*.

Promoting Regional Connectivity, Transit and Trade

The SCO and its member states remain concerned with the situation in Afghanistan and are keen to alleviate its economic

problems. The reconstruction of collapsed social and economic infrastructure and development of Afghanistan as the transit hub of regional trade and traffic, will help in putting the social and economic situation in Afghanistan back on tracks, though the process is cumbersome and long drawn. Whereas the geo-strategic significance of Central Asia and big power interests in the region make it an area of great importance, there is need to engage in genuine partnership in the region in a spirit of non-hegemonic intentions. There is need to shift from the geopolitical game to a paradigm of geo-cultural and geo-economic cooperation. An intensified cooperation and regional connectivity between Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia and neighbouring countries of Iran, Russia and China will bring in much increased trade and economic cooperation besides bringing peace, tranquillity and stability in the region. Apart from dialogues, knowledge sharing mechanism and bilateral transport linkages, comprehensive framework is required to facilitate energy transit and trade by providing a level playing field to all countries concerned.

Afghanistan becomes important as it provides a land bridge between Central Asia in the north and South Asia in the south. India is a member of the Agreement of the establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor between Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Ashgabat

¹⁰ Rezaul H. Laskar, India suggests 3-point Afghanistan road map at SCO Group meeting. Hindustan Times 15 July 2021.

India offers a huge traditional market for Afghan fresh and dry fruits and carpets, which remains untapped to the detriment of the Afghan economy, as the Afghan trucks have to return empty from Wagah due to bar on them for carrying back Indian goods.

Inclusion of India in the Afghanistan-Pakistan transit trade agreement and its extension to CARs would not only lead to high level of regional cooperation and development in South Asia, but also bring prosperity and peace to the entire region.

Agreement)¹¹ to facilitate transportation of goods between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. While Pakistan and Kazakhstan had already joined Ashgabat Agreement, India's accession to the Agreement came into force on 3 February 2018. It would diversify India's connectivity with Central Asia and complement Indian presence in Chabahar port, INSTC as well as future arrangements/agreements with Eurasian Economic Union.

The SCO has evolved as an effective regional institutional mechanism of multilateral cooperation between Central Asian Republics, Russia and China. With both India and Pakistan being its members, there is scope for enhanced cooperation among the member states. Pakistan has been consistent in its policy of blocking the overland Central Asia-Afghanistan-Pakistan corridor to India for import of energy resources and export of Indian goods. However, recently, Pakistan has allowed India transit access to send its humanitarian assistance in the form of wheat to Afghanistan. The Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Transit Agreement, which was finalized on 19 July 2010 in the presence of US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, while allowing Afghan trucks to carry goods to the Wagah border for onward dispatch to India, does not allow these trucks to

carry back Indian goods to Afghanistan. The Agreement provides Pakistan with access to Iran via Islam Qila and Zaranj border, to Uzbekistan via Hairatan, to Tajikistan via Ali Khanum and Sher Khan Bandar crossings, to Turkmenistan via Aqina and Torghundi border crossings and to China via Sost/Tashkurghan border.¹² Afghanistan has been provided access to the three ports of Pakistan: Port Qasim, Gwadar and Karachi ports.¹³ Pakistani imports and exports are allowed to enter Afghanistan via border crossings at Torkham, Ghulam Khan and Chaman. Afghanistan's former President Ashraf Ghani during his maiden state visit to India in April 2015 urged Pakistan to allow Afghan trucks to cross over to Indian checkpoint at Attari, less than a kilometre away from Wagah.¹⁴ Ghani asked Pakistan to "accept the 'national treatment' clause agreed to in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) signed in 2011, which gives both countries equal access up to its national boundaries".¹⁵ He went on to say that "if we are not given equal transit access, then we will not provide equal transit access to Central Asia."¹⁶ Pakistani exports to Central Asian Republics (CARs) account for approximately 0.054% of its total exports, while imports by Pakistan from CARs account for about

11 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, India admitted to Ashgabat Agreement as Delhi pushes Eurasian connectivity agenda. Economic Times 1 February 2018.

12 USAID Pakistan, Analysis of Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), May 2014. p 3.

13 Ibid

14 Suhasini Haidar, "Pak must open Wagah for trade: Ghani". The Hindu 30 April 2015.

15 Ibid

16 Ibid

0.05% of its total imports.¹⁷ This reflects a huge gap between the actual trade and its potential, which can be realised only after extending the scope of APTTA to India and the CARs. Needless to mention, India offers a huge traditional market for Afghan fresh and dry fruits and carpets, which remains untapped to the detriment of the Afghan economy, as the Afghan trucks have to return empty from Wagah due to bar on them for carrying back Indian goods. Despite these obstacles, India remains the second largest destination for Afghan exports. Though India has allowed duty-free market access to Afghanistan,¹⁸ it has been denied transit access through Pakistan to Afghanistan and onwards to Central Asia. Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics are keen to export their abundant supply of fresh and dried fruits to the huge Indian market, which is possible only if these are brought overland through Afghanistan-Pakistan-Wagah route to India, in return for Indian goods. Recently, an Indian private

trader exported 140 tonnes of goods mostly sugar, from India to Uzbekistan by road via Pakistan and Afghanistan¹⁹. The route involved sea and land freight transport with the cargo coming from India to the Karachi port in Pakistan. Then it was trucked across Pakistan and into Afghanistan via Torkham border, then to Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and on to Termez in Uzbekistan. Earlier in July 2021, Pakistan and Uzbekistan had signed a transit trade agreement, under which Uzbek trucks are allowed to carry goods via Afghanistan directly to Pakistani seaports at Karachi, Gwadar and Bin Qasim and vice versa. It bodes well for the formalization of the multilateral India-Pakistan-Afghanistan-CARs transit and trade agreement. Inclusion of India in the Afghanistan-Pakistan transit trade agreement and its extension to CARs would not only lead to high level of regional cooperation and development in South Asia, but also bring prosperity and peace to the entire region.

17 USAID Pakistan, op cit. p 2.

18 See The Hindu, 4 June 2011.

19 Economic Times 2 April 2022.

India, Central Asia, and SCO

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

S. K. Pandey

1991 was a momentous year in many ways. The Soviet disintegration and the end of the Cold War heralded a new phase in world politics. The US emerged as the only superpower and Russia entered a decade of chaotic transition and decline. It was also the year India embarked upon economic reforms (popularly known as LPG - liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) that catapulted it on the world stage as an economic and political player.¹ But more spectacular was China's rise after the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989. Deng Xiaoping's semi-market reforms propelled China's economic success. The Chinese Communist Party consolidated its power by offering a deal to the Chinese people - greater material prosperity in return for accepting one-party rule.²

Another significant development was the emergence of Central Asia, with five independent countries, as a geopolitical region in the global arena. The defining feature of Central Asia is its landlocked

location, which makes it incumbent on the countries of the region to be dependent on their neighbours to reach the outside world, for trade and other purposes. Central Asia has been at the crossroads of many ancient/ medieval civilisations – Chinese, Persian, Turkic, Russian, and Indian and has imbibed elements from each. It has also been a meeting ground and zone of contestation of many Empires/ principalities. In the nineteenth century it became the arena of intense jostling between the Tsarist Russian and the British Indian Empires. The Great Game, as the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia is better known, was a compelling story of adventure and intrigue. The old Great Game ended when Britain and Russia signed a pact in 1907.³

■ The Regional Setting

The Soviet disintegration in 1991 led to the emergence of not just five independent republics in Central Asia but a new phase of

1 T N Ninan, "30 years after 1991: What we achieved as an economy, and what was possible". https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/30-years-after-1991-what-we-achieved-as-an-economy-and-what-was-possible-121061801121_1.html

2 Jonathan Fenby "How Events in China in the 1990s shaped the World we Live in Now", The Guardian, 23 April 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/23/how-events-in-china-in-the-1990s-shaped-the-world-we-live-in-now>

3 Peter Hopkirk The Great Game: The Struggle for an Empire in Central Asia Kodansha International 1992

As a fast-growing economy, China's interest lay in its quest for raw materials, markets, and influence, and the desire to prevent the domination of adversarial powers (e.g. US) over the region and/or ideologies/movements (e.g. religious extremists) which may threaten its restive Uyghur Xinjiang region. Russia's ambition is to maintain its influence in what it sees as its near abroad and an area of special interest and to stabilise the region to ensure peace on its southern borders.

The Shanghai Five, has been a success as it not only helped to resolve the 7000 km border but also created goodwill and trust among the member countries, highlighted the threat posed by religious extremism and fundamentalism, and created a multilateral mechanism through which member countries could discuss their common concerns and coordinate their activities.

geopolitical contestation, often described as New Great Game⁴. The region's location bordering great powers - Russia and China (one former and the other emerging superpower) – and the Af-Pak region - which became increasingly destabilised with the emergence of Taliban in 1996; and significant hydrocarbon and mineral resources in the region, made it important in geopolitical and geo-economic terms. The 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror in Afghanistan brought the US to the region, leading to competition among the three. As a fast-growing economy China's interest lay in its quest for raw materials, markets, and influence, and the desire to prevent the domination of adversarial powers (e.g. US) over the region and/or ideologies/movements (e.g. religious extremists) which may threaten its restive Uyghur Xinjiang region. Russia's ambition is to maintain its influence in what it sees as its near abroad and an area of special interest and to stabilise the region to ensure peace on its southern borders. Regional powers such as India, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran have their own objectives and strategies. What adds an entirely new dimension is the fact that the five Central Asian States

are not passive spectators at the mercy of these powers but active participants, arguably the biggest beneficiaries, playing their balancing acts and deft manoeuvres to maximise their interest. Thus, it is a complex interplay of different players with (sometimes) conflicting interests, nuanced strategies, and an uncertain outcome.

Shanghai Five and SCO

The contested Sino-Soviet border was a constant source of tension between the two Communist neighbours - Soviet Union and Peoples Republic of China. After the Soviet disintegration China and the post-Soviet Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan decided to create a mechanism to resolve the border issue. On 26 April 1996, the Heads of State of the five countries met in Shanghai to discuss security and confidence-building measures along their shared borders and to resolve border disputes. This led to the creation of a new multilateral club named Shanghai Five, the predecessor of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁵ The Shanghai Five, has been a success as it not only helped to resolve the 7000 km border but also created goodwill and trust among the member countries, highlighted the threat posed by

4 Lutz Kleveman, The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia http://www.qurtuba.edu.pk/thedialogue/The%20Dialogue/12_3/Dialogue_July_September2017_229-246.pdf

Jean-Pierre Lehmann, "Central Asia: the Great Game in the new global disorder of the 21st century". <https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/articles/central-asia-the-great-game-in-the-new-global-disorder-of-the-21st-century/>

5 According to Encyclopaedia Britannica an [international governmental organization](#) (IGOs) is established by intergovernmental agreement among member states. IGOs need to have at least three members but can be large global bodies, e.g. the [United Nations](#) (with 185 members). They can be limited to one region (e.g., the [Organization of American States](#)) or can have members from all regions (e.g., the [International Monetary Fund](#)). They can be single-purpose (e.g., the [World Intellectual Property Organization](#)), or have multiple objectives (e.g., the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#)). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/international-organization>

It is generally believed that SCO's primary concern has been to ensure the security of the member states against the three evils of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. However, security can be comprehensive to include organised crime, drug trafficking, and even cyber and information warfare .

religious extremism and fundamentalism, and created a multilateral mechanism through which member countries could discuss their common concerns and coordinate their activities. The relative success of Shanghai Five can be attributed to a realisation among the member states about “shared interests, shared norms of international conduct and a pragmatic and gradualist approach.”⁶ This regional multilateral mechanism for cooperation laid the ground for the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

2001 was a landmark year that changed the course of global politics. The 9/11 attacks and the US War on Terror brought an increased focus on the threat posed by religious extremism and international terrorism. The US withdrawal from the ABM treaty signified US unilateralism and Russia's discomfiture. China's joining of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) marked another milestone in the country's economic rise, while the successful holding of the APEC Summit in Shanghai showed Beijing's diplomatic skills. For India, the year started with the devastating Gujarat earthquake and ended with the Parliament attack. It was also the year when the Shanghai Five was transformed into SCO, with a commitment to fight the three evils of extremism, terrorism, and secessionism.

While the defeat of the Taliban, removed one source of extremism and terrorism, the renewed US – Pak ties created a challenge for India. The democratic regime in Kabul created an opportunity for New Delhi to connect with Afghanistan and Central Asia. It was also the time when India was trying to overcome the connectivity deficit by launching, together with Russia and Iran, the North-South Corridor.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was created on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai (China) by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan (which had not been part of the Shanghai Five mechanism). It is a permanent intergovernmental international⁷ organisation. The SCO Charter was signed during the SCO Heads of State meeting in June 2002 at St. Petersburg, and entered into force on 19 September 2003. This statutory document lays down goals and principles, along with the structure and major activities of SCO. The organisation aims at: “strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, research, technology and culture, as well as in education, energy, transport,

6 Qingguo Jia “The Success of the Shanghai Five: Interests, Norms and Pragmatism” <http://www.comw.org/cmp/fulltext/0110jia.htm>

7 According to Encyclopaedia Britannica an [international governmental organization](#) (IGOs) is established by intergovernmental agreement among member states. IGOs need to have at least three members but can be large global bodies, e.g. the [United Nations](#) (with 185 members). They can be limited to one region (e.g., the [Organization of American States](#)) or can have members from all regions (e.g., the [International Monetary Fund](#)). They can be single-purpose (e.g., the [World Intellectual Property Organization](#)), or have multiple objectives (e.g., the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#)). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/international-organization>

tourism, environmental protection, and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order”⁸.

It is generally believed that SCO’s primary concern has been to ensure the security of the member states against the three evils of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. However, security can be comprehensive to include organised crime, drug trafficking, and even cyber and information warfare⁹. The SCO has wide-ranging cooperation with the United Nations. It became an observer at the UN General Assembly in 2005.¹⁰ The UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) appointed a Liaison Officer to the SCO in Beijing in 2017. Since its inception, China and Russia are two pillars of the SCO and have largely decided its agenda and functioning.

Russia - China in SCO: Cooperation and Competition

The 1990s witnessed the formation of the WTO and the subsequent flurry of regional economic integration initiatives, and free trade regime agreements. China

has been, arguably, one of the greatest beneficiaries of the WTO, and today it is an active participant and supporter of such initiatives. It considers Free Trade Agreements (FTA) another way to open up to global trade, which will be beneficial for the Chinese economy. SCO is one such platform that Beijing wants to utilise to export its industrial products, labour and capital to the neighbouring countries by creating FTA and SCO Development Bank. However, due to concern among many members states about their domestic markets being overwhelmed by imported Chinese goods, such proposals have not taken off.¹¹

Russia, which considers Central Asia as an area of special interest (near abroad) is apprehensive of increasing Chinese presence in Central Asia and domination of the SCO, especially in the economic domain. In view of its own weakness vis-à-vis China, Moscow has opposed Chinese proposals to create SCO Free Economic Zone, an SCO Development Bank and SCO Development Fund, and any initiative that would undermine Russian sponsored Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia has supported the inclusion of new members (e.g. India) to dilute SCO’s Central Asia focus¹².

- 8 Md Nazmul Islam, “BRICS, MIKTA, SCO and IBSA: Emerging Global Organizations and Groups-A Paradigm Shift for New World Order”, Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, January 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338659670_BRICS_MIKTA_SCO_and_IBSA_EMERGING_GLOBAL_ORGANIZATIONS_AND_GROUPS_-_A_Paradigm_Shift_for_New_World_Order
- 9 UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs <https://dppa.un.org/en/shanghai-cooperation-organization>
- 10 The SCO Secretariat signed a Joint Declaration on Cooperation with the UN and also established partnerships with the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). It also cooperates 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 Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), and UNRCCA (United Nations Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia) cooperate with SCO on matters such as counterterrorism and prevention of violent extremism.
- 11 THE SCO FREE TRADE AREA PROJECT: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS Eurasian Research Institute, Weekly Bulletin, 28.02.2017 – 06.03.2017, No 105. <https://eurasian-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Weekly-e-bulletin-28-02-2017-06-03-2017-No-105.pdf>
- 12 Fozil Mashrab, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization enters period of stagnation”. The Times of Central Asia, 03 October 2020 (originally published by The Jamestown Foundation’s Eurasia Daily Monitor) <https://www.timesca.com/index.php/news/26-opinion-head/22987-shanghai-cooperation-organization-enters-period-of-stagnation>

As a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the supply routes between China and the EU are under cloud. Hence, China is working on alternatives via Central Asia, with Russia as co-partner in this strategy. This despite what is sometimes referred to as “Russia’s and China’s quiet contest in Central Asia.”

SCO is not the only format through which China is trying to achieve its objectives in Central Asia. It has created other platforms to engage the States of the region, where players such as Russia are not there. China plus Central Asia (C+C5) or Central Asia-China (5+1) format is fast emerging. The first meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the six countries was held on July 16, 2020. China emphasised cooperation to fight the pandemic and put back the economies of the region. This meeting signifies a change in China’s mainly economic engagement with the Central Asian States to political relations. The Central Asia-China meetings will buttress China’s presence and influence in the region.¹³ On 25 January 2022, China’s President Xi Jinping held a virtual Summit meeting of the ‘China Plus Central Asia’ with the Presidents of the five Central Asian States, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between them. The two sides intend to increase *China-Central Asia Trade to US\$70 billion by 2030*¹⁴.

It is pertinent to keep in mind that the C+C5 is cooperating with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in matters of security and trade. The third C+C5 Foreign

Ministers’ Meeting was held in Nursultan, Kazakhstan in June 2022, where ten issues of cooperation were agreed upon. As a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the supply routes between China and the EU are under cloud. Hence, China is working on alternatives via Central Asia, with Russia as co-partner in this strategy¹⁵. This despite what is sometimes referred to as “Russia’s and China’s quiet contest in Central Asia.”¹⁶

SCO Expansion

The moratorium on new membership was lifted at the Tashkent Summit of SCO in 2010, paving the way for the expansion of the grouping. The decision to actually enlarge the organization was taken by the SCO in 2014 at Dushanbe. At Ufa in 2015 with Russia in the chair, the SCO decided to admit India and Pakistan. The Ufa summit was significant for many reasons, apart from the fact that it was held along with BRICS summit. The preceding two years had witnessed important developments. In 2013 China unveiled its ambitious OBOR infrastructure project to revive the old Silk route and reconnect with Europe through a series of multimodal transport initiatives crisscrossing Asia. In 2014,

13 Umida Hashimova, China Launches 5+1 Format Meetings With Central Asia, *The Diplomat*, July 20, 2020 at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/china-launches-51-format-meetings-with-central-asia/>

14 Chris Devonshire-Ellis, ‘China Plus Central Asia’ Meeting Draws Eurasian Security And Trade Closer Together, *Silk Road Briefing*, Jan 26, 2022 <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/01/26/china-plus-central-asia-meeting-draws-eurasian-security-and-trade-closer-together/>

15 Chris Devonshire-Ellis “China Lays Out Ten Cooperation points with Central Asian Nations”, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/06/12/china-lays-out-ten-cooperation-points-with-central-asian-nations/>

16 “Russia’s and China’s quiet contest in Central Asia” <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/russias-and-chinas-quiet-contest-in-central-asia-politics,2525,report.html>

After the Tashkent Summit of 2010, there was a lively debate in India about the merits and demerits of SCO membership. The foremost advantage of full membership, it was argued, would be “greater visibility in the affairs of the Eurasian region”. Moreover, India would get a platform to constructively engage China and Pakistan. It was also felt that SCO membership would be beneficial for India’s energy security, connectivity, and counter-terrorism cooperation.

Russia took military action to annex/re-integrate Crimea and faced Western sanctions, which brought it closer to China. The twin Summits were Putin’s way of telling the US-West that Russia was not isolated and had friends and allies willing to do business with Moscow.¹⁷ The Russian President asserted that the BRICS and SCO Summits were steps in developing multi-dimensional cooperation among member states. The Summit adopted the SCO’s Development Strategy until 2025 and the SCO Ufa Declaration and decided to enlarge the organization and grant membership to India and Pakistan.¹⁸

India’s Objectives in SCO

India became an Observer in the grouping in 2005 at the Astana summit. After the Tashkent Summit of 2010, there was a lively debate in India about the merits and demerits of SCO membership. The foremost advantage of full membership, it was argued, would be “greater visibility in the affairs of the Eurasian region”. Moreover, India would get a platform to constructively engage China and Pakistan. It was also felt

that SCO membership would be beneficial for India’s energy security, connectivity, and counter-terrorism cooperation.

However, there was apprehension that in a group dominated by China and Russia, India will not get its due (play ‘second fiddle’). The China-Pakistan collusion, especially in Central Asia, was also a real possibility. Hence India was advised to “proceed cautiously on the issue seeking full membership”.¹⁹

There are many reasons for India to take interest in the grouping which was to play a role in peace and stability in the region. Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia maintains that apart from “history, geopolitics, cultural, civilisational and economic imperatives”, India has three unambiguous objectives in joining SCO “deepen ties with Russia; monitor and counter the influence of China and Pakistan; and expand cooperation with CARs”.²⁰ He further believes that lack of land connectivity with Central Asia has been big obstacle for India, especially in view of Chinese Belt and Road project and a “thick cheque book”. He advocates novel and creative initiatives to overcome this

17 It is reminiscent of the 2009 twin summits of BRIC and SCO in Yekaterinburg, in the wake of the Russia – Georgia war.

18 BRICS and SCO summits filled with important decisions – Putin TASS, 10 JUL 2015, 19:41 <https://tass.com/russia/807771>

19 Meena Singh Roy, “Dynamics of Expanding the SCO” https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/DynamicsofExpandingtheSCO_msroy_040411

20 Central Asia is important for India for multiple reasons: historical-cultural ties, significant soft power in the region, present-day geopolitics, connectivity, and energy security. For more details see “India and the Importance of Central Asia” in P. L. Dash ed. *India and Central Asia: Two Decades of Transition*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press): 01 – 11.

In his speech at the 2016 SCO Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi talked about various ways in which India hoped to benefit from SCO membership. He emphasised “Within SCO, India will be a productive partner in building strong trade, transport, energy, digital and people to people links.”

challenge and increase India’s presence in the region’s markets.²¹

At the 2016 SCO Summit at Tashkent the process of India’s accession to the SCO started with signing of the Memorandum of Obligation. In its media briefing, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, described India’s approach to SCO as “fairly flexible multilateralism” where the country is ready to “engage in multiple processes”. For India, SCO would be another platform to engage with countries in the extended neighbourhood in trade, transport, culture and terrorism, connectivity etc. The SCO has huge potential for India’s energy security and SCO energy club holds promise in this respect. “We really see this as a net gain, as a supplement to what we have already. So I think from that perspective we see this as a group which has value and we see value in India being within that.”²² In his speech at the 2016 SCO Summit Prime Minister Narendra Modi talked about various ways in which India hoped to benefit from SCO membership. He emphasised “Within SCO, India will be a productive partner in building strong trade, transport, energy, digital and people to people links.” He mentioned India’s

decision to join the International North-South Transport Corridor, the Chabahar agreement, and Ashgabat Agreement as proof of its “desire and intent.” He maintained that “connectivity among the countries of the region is crucial to our economic prosperity.” He talked about “seamless flow of goods, services, capital and people” and the need to “nurture strong rail, road and air links with the rest of the world.” India also expects that its membership would help in tackling “threats of radical ideologies, of hate, violence and terror.”²³

India formally joined SCO in 2017 at the Astana Summit. In his speech, Indian Prime Minister emphasised “Energy, education, agriculture, security, minerals, capacity building, development partnership, trade and investment” together with fight against terrorism, peace and stability, environmental change and “Future Energy” as areas of potential cooperation between India and SCO.²⁴

Energy Security: Energy security should ideally be SCO’s top agenda as some of

Energy security should ideally be SCO’s top agenda as some of the world’s largest energy producers and consumers are part of this regional grouping.

21 Rajiv Bhatia, “How India can benefit from SCO”, Hindustan Times, 25 November 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/how-india-can-benefit-from-sco/story-lvHNVzB99Asw6EPcgfE6NK.html>

22 Transcript of Media Briefing by Secretary (West) on PM’s forthcoming visit to Tashkent for SCO Summit, June 22, 2016, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/26952/Transcript_of_Media_Briefing_by_Secretary_West_on_PM_s_forthcoming_visit_to_Tashkent_for_SCO_Summit_June_22_2016

23 Speech by Prime Minister at SCO Summit, June 24, 2016, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26948/Speech_by_Prime_Minister_at_SCO_Summit_June_24_2016

24 English rendition of Prepared text of Press Statement by Prime Minister at SCO Summit in Astana, June 09, 2017, Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28518/English_rendition_of_Prepared_text_of_Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_at_SCO_Summit_in_Astana_June_09_2017

the world's largest energy producers and consumers are part of this regional grouping. According to one estimate the territory of the SCO member states holds about 25% of global oil reserves, over 50% of gas reserves, 35% of coal and about half of the world's known uranium reserves.²⁵ When it comes to energy consumption China is the top of the pack while India is ranked third (with the US in between).²⁶

Russia, one of the largest energy suppliers in the world, is the main initiator of SCO Energy Club, which aims to create secure supply lines for the smooth export of fossil fuels. The memorandum to set up the SCO energy club was signed in Moscow by Russia, Afghanistan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia, India, Tajikistan, Turkey and Sri Lanka. It intends to bring together high-level state officials, business people, and scientists from the member countries to deliberate on energy-related issues. It would also provide a platform for energy producers, consumers, and transit countries to discuss problems and issues of common concern. Individual members will get a forum to raise specific concerns and bilateral problems.²⁷

The SCO Energy Club had its first meeting in 2017 under the presidency of Turkey, an SCO Dialogue Partner. Non-member countries such as Mongolia, Belarus, Iran, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka, who attended

Terrorism, especially cross-border, and religious extremism have been key concerns for the SCO, also for India.

the meeting, are crucial intermediaries in the transport of energy to markets, such as China, Japan, Europe, Korea, and India.²⁸

According to one study, there is a shift in the global energy market – production centres are moving westwards while consumption is expanding in the east. The meeting ground is the region covered by SCO member states. There is another shift/ change from coal and oil to gas and renewables. Here too SCO Energy Club has a role. The study identifies three ways in which it can help: stabilise the global energy supply chain, negotiate stable energy prices, and encourage research to find cleaner and cheaper energy sources.²⁹ This suits India's energy security concerns.

The Gateway House has certain suggestions with regard to India's energy security. It maintains that India should try to negotiate a long-term agreement for low-cost gas supplies from the Sakhalin in Russian Far East, which will be cheaper than the gas from Yamal peninsula in Russia's Arctic region. This will be useful if New Delhi wants to increase the share of natural gas in its energy mix from 6 percent to 15 percent. It also advises India to seek SCO

25 SCO Energy Club: structure ready for international interaction, not Shanghai Six's elite club, 26. 03. 2015 <http://infoshos.ru/en/?idn=13913>

26 Energy Consumption by Country 2022 <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/energy-consumption-by-country>

27 "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Sets Up Energy Club" Energy Intelligence, Thu, Dec 5, 2013 <https://www.energyintel.com/0000017b-a7c7-de4c-a17b-e7c78ef70001>

28 Chaitanya Giri and Aashna Agarwal, "India & the influential SCO Energy Club" GATEWAY HOUSE, 2 APRIL 2019, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/india-sco-energy/>

29 Gong Zhe, Analysis: Bright chances for energy cooperation at SCO Summit" https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414d3245444d78457a6333566d54/share_p.html

Energy Club presidency to augment its investment in the energy sector within SCO jurisdiction.³⁰

Terrorism: Terrorism, especially cross-border, and religious extremism have been key concerns for the SCO, also for India. As an Observer, the Indian Foreign Minister regularly attended the SCO meetings and participated in the group's activities, e.g., the anti-Terrorism organ Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). India has made every effort to deepen security-related cooperation with the SCO and RATS, which specifically deals with issues relating to security and defence. It hosted a meeting of counter-terrorism experts of all member states of SCO in May 2022, which deliberated on boosting cooperation in combating various regional security challenges.³¹ The then SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov, in his 2020 lecture in New Delhi informed that, during the year 2018, the SCO Member States identified and suppressed 10 channels of financing of terrorism, and more than 10,000 suspected foreign terrorists were blocked from entering the SCO countries. The member states continued joint anti-terrorist exercises 'Peace Mission'.³²

Afghanistan: Since its inception, the situation in Afghanistan has been an important concern of the SCO. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was

established in 2005 but its activity was suspended in 2009. The US announcement of military drawdown from Afghanistan, catapulted SCO as a stabilising factor and was an important consideration behind India's decision to join the grouping. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group resumed functioning in 2017 and started having Ministerial-level meetings. After Moscow (October, 2017), Beijing (May 2018), and Bishkek (April 2020), its last meeting was held in Dushanbe on 14 July 2021. The participants voiced their concern at the chaotic situation in Afghanistan due to the US withdrawal and expressed support for the "political settlement process in Afghanistan, restoring Afghan peace, developing economy, combating terrorism, and establishing an inclusive political structure in Afghanistan".³³ Deeply concerned about the developments in Afghanistan, India organised a regional dialogue on Afghanistan in November 2021 that was attended by National Security Advisors of Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The participants pledged to work towards ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for global terrorism and called for the formation of an "open and truly inclusive"

Since its inception, the situation in Afghanistan has been an important concern of the SCO.

30 Chaitanya Giri and Aashna Agarwal, "India & the influential SCO Energy Club" GATEWAY HOUSE, 2 APRIL 2019, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/india-sco-energy/>

31 "India hosts SCO-RATS meet; focus on situation in Afghanistan", Economic Times, PTI, Last Updated: May 16, 2022, 12:37 PM IST, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-hosts-sco-rats-meet-focus-on-situation-in-afghanistan/articleshow/91591122.cms>

32 "Lecture on The Future Trajectory of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and India's Role" by Ambassador Vladimir Norov, Secretary General, SCO, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 13 January 2020. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=4610&lid=3483

33 Tajik capital hosts SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group meeting <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20210715/tajik-capital-hosts-sco-afghanistan-contact-group-meeting>

India will chair the SCO following the Samarkand Summit in September 2022 and will organize the next Summit under its Presidency in 2023. It will be an opportunity for India to give a new direction to the grouping. The challenge is to keep the focus on core concerns like terrorism, and the situation in Afghanistan, while bringing new ideas and concrete initiatives on connectivity, energy and trade.

government in Kabul with representation from all sections of Afghan society.³⁴

Assessment: Prospects and Challenges

SCO originated in 2001 from Shanghai Five, a regional grouping created in 1996 to resolve boundary disputes between China, and former Soviet Republics - Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. With the inclusion of Uzbekistan it became SCO. After its formation during the next four years SCO was preoccupied with adopting an agenda and building its basic institutions. Its main concern was tackling “terrorism, separatism and extremism” and fight against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking. During the next decade SCO agenda became multifaceted and comprehensive, including regional security (in view of the emerging situation in Afghanistan), and greater cooperation

in economic, financial, transport and connectivity, and energy fields.

Mongolia became an SCO Observer in 2004, while India, Pakistan, and Iran joined SCO as Observer states in 2005. In 2017 India and Pakistan were admitted as full members. Currently there are four Observer States interested in acceding to full membership (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia) and six “Dialogue Partners” (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey). In 2021, decision was taken to start the accession process of Iran as a full member, and Egypt, Qatar as well as Saudi Arabia became dialogue partners.³⁵ This itself proves the organisation’s relevance and attractiveness to new members.

The portrayal of the SCO as an anti-West/ NATO grouping is mainly due to inability to appreciate its real intent and objective. This could be because of

34 India hosts SCO-RATS meet; focus on the situation in Afghanistan Business Standard, Last Updated at May 17, 2022 01:45 IST https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-hosts-sco-rats-meet-focus-on-the-situation-in-afghanistan-122051600514_1.html

35 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation <https://dppa.un.org/en/shanghai-cooperation-organization>, Downloaded on 29 June 2022

India’s membership in the SCO has strengthened its position in the region. It has given New Delhi a perch to observe developments in the region, and a mechanism to participate in projects related to energy and connectivity. The Central Asian States support India’s participation in SCO as they share common concerns and interests. They feel comfortable with India playing a soft balancer. It also suits their multi-vector foreign policies. Partnership with Central Asian countries, bilaterally as well as in the SCO framework can go a long way for our energy security and connecting with Eurasia.

language barrier or general mistrust of Russia and China in the US/West. SCO is a non-Western platform to articulate alternative viewpoints and interests of the Eurasian countries. There are, of course, differences among the member countries on various issues, including terrorism, Afghanistan, the level and pace of economic cooperation etc. But they are trying to bridge these differences and find a common ground. India and the Central Asian countries are largely on the same page on most issues and are a stabilising factor in SCO. With their ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy Central Asian States seek constructive engagement with all countries, including Russia, China, and India.³⁶

When it comes to actual achievements and limitations, Stephen Blank cautions against too much optimism about SCO, particularly for India. He reminds us that Russia and China have not really worked in tandem on many issues. While Russia has not been supportive of Chinese efforts to convert SCO into a trade bloc, China on its part is less than enthusiastic about certain Russian proposals. He also maintains that India – Pakistan dispute “might be imported into SCO’s structure.” He doubts Pakistan’s willingness to cooperate with India on Afghanistan and against Islamic terrorism, as it is the source of the problems in Afghanistan and supports Islamic terrorism against India. Blank also points out that Russia continues to sell arms to Pakistan and at times refuses to condemn

it for supporting terrorist groups. He thus believes that the differences among major members might stymie SCO’s effectiveness “as a regional security provider” and “serve as a brake on the expansion of its capabilities.”³⁷ However, there are others who do not agree that Pakistan can derail the SCO. They echo cautious optimism and believe that “India and Pakistan both joining the SCO will strengthen the organization.” They maintain that Pakistan cannot raise bilateral issues as per SCO mandate and that “Increased security cooperation by different mechanisms of the SCO platform can help reduce the trust deficit among members.”³⁸

Highlighting the economic importance and potential of the organisation, SCO Secretary General has mentioned an abundance of natural resources, production capacities, technological competencies, investment and financial potential, and complementarity among the economies of member countries. He reminded that SCO member-states account for almost half of the world population and 20% of the global GDP worth over \$18 trillion (in terms of purchasing power parity, almost 30% of the global GDP).³⁹ However, despite repeated pronouncements at successive Summits about the need for cooperation in economy, finance, investment, transport, energy, and agriculture, the reality is that SCO members

SCO is a non-Western platform to articulate alternative viewpoints and interests of the Eurasian countries.

36 “SCO 2019 Summit: A View from India”, Dr. Sanjeev Kumar and Dr. Athar Zafar, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 11 July 2019. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=2804&lid=2162

37 Stephen Blank, “Was the SCO summit in Ufa a breakthrough?”, The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 19/08/2015 <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13261-was-the-sco-summit-in-ufa-a-breakthrough?.html>

38 “India, Pakistan Extend Reach of SCO to Half the World”, Eurasianet, Jun 8, 2017 <https://eurasianet.org/india-pakistan-extend-reach-of-sco-to-half-the-world>

39 Beijing hosts briefing with SCO Secretary-General, 2019 / 10 / 23 <http://eng.sectscsco.org/news/20191023/590687.html>

are yet to arrive at a consensus on these issues and adopt a plan of action. The SCO has the potential to become the “bedrock for stability” in Eurasia if the member countries navigate carefully. It can also be an “economic marvel” by implementing comprehensive economic cooperation.⁴⁰

With the prospect of Iran, and now Belarus, joining SCO, its anti-West inclination and rhetoric might become shrill.⁴¹ The forthcoming SCO Summit is on 15 – 16 September 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan will likely discuss the issue of their membership.

India as SCO Chair: The Way Forward

India will chair the SCO following the Samarkand Summit in September 2022 and will organize the next Summit under its Presidency in 2023. It will be an opportunity for India to give a new direction to the grouping. The challenge is to keep the focus on core concerns like terrorism, and the situation in Afghanistan, while bringing new ideas and concrete initiatives on connectivity, energy and trade. Shiv Khemka, Chairman National Chapter of SCO Business Council in India, advocated a five-pronged approach to

strengthen intra-SCO cooperation through the mechanism of the SCO Business Council. He has also proposed special encouragement of MSMEs and Start-Ups in cooperation with innovation clusters, technology parks and high-tech companies, knowledge-intensive solutions and digital technologies, development and financing of entrepreneurship in innovative areas.⁴²

India’s membership in the SCO has strengthened its position in the region. It has given New Delhi a perch to observe developments in the region, and a mechanism to participate in projects related to energy and connectivity. The Central Asian States support India’s participation in SCO as they share common concerns and interests. They feel comfortable with India playing a soft balancer. It also suits their multi-vector foreign policies.⁴³ Partnership with Central Asian countries, bilaterally as well as in the SCO framework can go a long way for our energy security and connecting with Eurasia. On terrorism and Afghanistan also India and the Central Asian States can come together under the SCO framework. India can play a concrete role in skill development, capacity building, and human resource development.

40 Abhishek G Bhaya, “Russia, India enhance China’s trade within SCO amid tariff war”, 15-Jun-2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-06-15/Russia-India-enhance-China-s-trade-within-SCO-amid-tariff-war-HxJMxlGSRy/index.html>

41 Ananth Krishnan, “With new members, SCO looks to counter West”, The Hindu, 15 July 2022 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/with-new-members-sco-looks-to-counter-west/article65644609.ece>

42 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, “Five-pronged approach suggested to boost intra SCO business links” Economic Times, October 29, 2020 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/five-pronged-approach-suggested-to-boost-intra-sco-business-links/articleshow/78927392.cms>

43 Nirmala Joshi, India’s Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, January 2019 – March 2019 <https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/indias-role-in-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/>



■ AMBASSADOR D. B. VENKATESH VARMA

Ambassador D. B. Venkatesh Varma was a Member of the Indian Foreign Service from 1988 to 2021. During his diplomatic career, he worked in the Ministry of External Affairs, in the Office of External Affairs Minister and in the Prime Minister's Office. He served as India's Ambassador to Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, to the Kingdom of Spain and to the Russian Federation, until October 2021. He has vast experience in India's Security and Defence policies, including its nuclear, missile, and space programmes. He also served as Joint Secretary in charge of Disarmament and International Security in the Ministry of External Affairs between 2010-2013.

He was the first Recipient of the S. K. Singh Award for Excellence in the Indian Foreign Service in 2011 for his contribution to the negotiations of the Civil Nuclear Initiative. He has an M.Phil. in International Relations (Disarmament Studies) from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. He has spoken at numerous international and Indian think-tanks.



■ PROFESSOR K. WARIKOO

Born in Srinagar (Kashmir) in 1951 and educated at S. P. College and Kashmir University, Professor Kulbushan Warikoo did his Ph D at Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Prof. Warikoo taught for over 30 years at JNU and founded its Central Asian Studies Programme, School of International Studies, JNU. He was Senior Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi for two years (April 2019-March 2021). Known for his distinguished service to Himalayan, Central Asian, Xinjiang, Eurasian and Silk Route Studies, Prof. Warikoo is the author/editor of 22 books. These include *Xinjiang: China's Northwest Frontier*; *Eurasia and India: Regional Perspectives*; *Himalayan Frontiers of India*; *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia*; (all published by Routledge Taylor & Francis, UK,USA), *The Other Kashmir: Society, Culture and Politics in the Karakoram Himalayas*; *Cultural Heritage of Jammu and Kashmir*; *Cultural Heritage of Kashmiri Pandits*; *Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities*; *Bamiyan: Challenge to World Heritage*; *Central Asia and Kashmir: A Study in the context of Anglo-Russian Rivalry and Central Asia: Emerging New Order*.

Prof. Warikoo has travelled extensively in Xinjiang; Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan; Khakassia, Altai, Buryatia and Tuva Republics of Russian Federation; Afghanistan and Mongolia. He is the Founder Editor of *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, a quarterly journal being published regularly and uninterruptedly since 1997, devoted to the study of various issues pertaining to the Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan region in South and Central Asia.

He has supervised 34 Ph. D and 52 M. Phil research scholars, thus inspiring, guiding and training the young generation in the field of Himalayan and Central Asian studies.



PROFESSOR SANJAY K. PANDEY

Dr. Sanjay Kumar Pandey is a Professor at the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi. He served as the Chairperson of the Centre, and the Director of the Russia and Central Asian Area Studies Programme.

He teaches courses on Politics and Society, as well as Foreign Policy of Russia and the Central Asian States. He was L. M. Singhvi Visiting Fellow at the Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge; Charles Wallace Trust Visiting Fellow, University of Cambridge; and Visiting Fellow at Cambridge Central Asia Forum, Cambridge. He was International Observer for the Parliamentary (Oliy Majlis) Election in Uzbekistan in December 2014 and for Presidential Election in Uzbekistan in December 2007, 2016 and 2021.

Some of his publications are:

- “Russia and Ukraine: United by History Divided by Geopolitics”, (co-authored), *Journal of Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 12, Issue 1 & 2, pp.19 – 28, January – December 2020 (published in 2022);
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- “What led to the Protests in Kazakhstan—and What They Mean for the Region” *The Week*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2022/01/14/what-led-to-the-protests-in-kazakhstan-and-what-they-mean-for-the-region.html>;
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The Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) was established in 1943 by a group of eminent intellectuals led by Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and Dr. H. N. Kunzru. Its principal objective was to create an Indian perspective on international relations and act as a repository of knowledge and thinking on foreign policy issues. The Council today conducts policy research through an in-house faculty as well as through external experts. It regularly organizes an array of intellectual activities including conferences, seminars, roundtable discussions, lectures and brings out a range of publications. It has a well stocked library, an active website, and publishes the journal 'India Quarterly'. ICWA has over 50 MoUs with international think tanks and research institutions to promote better understanding on international issues and develop areas of mutual cooperation. The Council also has partnerships with leading research institutions, think tanks and universities in India.



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