



## **India's Membership of SCO: Present Scenario**

*Dr Angira Sen Sarma\**

India's willingness to upgrade its membership as a full member in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) again found resonance at the 11th Heads of Government Meeting of the SCO held on 5 December 2012 at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. It was noted that India is "ready to play a larger, wider and more active role in the SCO as a full member".

India joined the SCO as an observer in 2005. However, it is only recently that New Delhi has expressed interest in joining the group as a full member. India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy' unveiled in June 2012 indicates India's interest to proactively engage with its 'extended neighbourhood'. SCO is one potent forum for India to deepen ties with the region and enhance its visibility in the region.

Eleven years since it came to existence, SCO has gradually evolved as a significant regional body. The group started as Shanghai 5 in 1996 and was renamed as SCO in 2001 after Uzbekistan joined the group. Initially, the group dealt with security issues only; today, however, economic issues are an important part of SCO's agenda.

The SCO consists of six members: Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; the five observer countries are India, Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia and Afghanistan; the dialogue partners are Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey. In the past few years, there have been

discussions about SCO's expansion; however, till now, the Organisation has not come out with any specific timeline for induction of new members. It is important to mention that SCO can include new members only after there is consensus on the procedural aspects of expansion among the members. In 2006, SCO declared a moratorium on new members. As long as the moratorium is in place, inclusion of new members would be delayed. As and when SCO decides to have new members, India would be a strong candidate.

India stands to benefit by becoming a member of the SCO in a number of ways. Till date, India is not a member of any regional groups in the Central Asian region. Membership to SCO would give India for the first time a common platform to discuss issues of similar concerns with the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) and with some of the important neighbours of the region like Russia and China.

An issue of utmost worry to the members of SCO as well as to India is the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. India, through the SCO forum could engage with the member countries to jointly work for stability in Afghanistan. India's perception about SCO's role in Afghanistan is well laid out in the statement made at the 5 December SCO meeting at Bishkek; SCO "provides a promising alternative regional platform to discuss and reflect upon the changing security situation in Afghanistan".

It is important to note here that SCO has so far not been playing a proactive role in the ever unfolding Afghan crisis. Barring a few initiatives like setting up the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005, organising an international conference on Afghanistan in 2009, and consistently emphasising the dangers Afghanistan poses to the region at the various SCO summits, no substantial steps have been taken by the group to deal with the crisis. Given the geographical location of the Organisation, there are enormous expectations from SCO for sharing greater responsibility to stabilise Afghanistan, especially in the post 2014 period. If SCO has to establish itself as an effective regional body, it cannot afford to sit on the sidelines with regard to the Afghan evolving situation.

India and the SCO members are concerned about the extremist forces receiving support from Afghanistan and the nexus between terrorist groups and drug trafficking, which pose security threats to India as well as to the SCO member countries. Membership to SCO would give India access to information about terrorist outfits collected by the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of the SCO, based at Tashkent.

There are economic benefits too; the setting up of the 'energy club' announced by the SCO in 2007, can potentially open avenues for India to access the region's rich hydrocarbon reserves. There is also a view that SCO in future could facilitate India's connectivity with the region through China or Pakistan (after Pakistan enters as a member).

Membership in SCO also has its share of complications for India, of which it has to take note of. India's position within the Organisation vis-a-vis the two strong members i.e. Russia and China needs to be handled cautiously to avoid friction. The power dynamics in the region are visible in the SCO, and both China and Russia are playing a determining role in the inclusion of new members. Russia has welcomed India's membership, while China has supported Pakistan's candidature and opposed India. If included as member, India will have to deal with China-Pakistan 'nexus'. Another worrying issue is China asking for membership in SAARC on reciprocity to include India in the SCO.

Despite challenges, membership holds significance for India. India has taken a judicious step by showing its interest in upgrading the membership. India, at the moment, has to watch carefully how the CARs see India's membership in the organisation. The CARs have so far, welcomed India's membership in the SCO. Russia and China will be the dominant player in the Organisation. Nevertheless, the SCO as a regional group cannot ignore the aspirations and needs of the CARs. India has to be careful not to fail the expectations of the Central Asian countries with whom India has shared a friendly relationship for long. As India takes greater interest in multilateral mechanisms to engage with the region, it will also have to revitalise its bilateral ties with these countries, which eventually would help India in the SCO too.

*\*Dr. Angira Sen Sarma, Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*