

REGIONAL PRIORITIES: ON THE SCO SUMMIT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: SCO and India

Three years after joining the [eight-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organisation \(SCO\)](#), India hosted the [SCO heads of governments \(HoG\) meeting](#) for the first time on Monday. The focus of the 66-point joint communiqué at the end of the virtual conference was in developing a “Plan of Priority Practical Measures for 2021-2022 to overcome the socio-economic, financial and food consequences of COVID-19 in the region”. Members committed to strengthening multilateralism and the UN charter while welcoming the fact that the grouping is now being seen as an “influential and responsible participant in the modern system of international relations”. The meeting also showed up persisting differences. Although the HoG Council consists of the Prime Ministers of all SCO countries, neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan attended the meet, ostensibly due to a protocol mismatch between the position of PMs in parliamentary democracies versus those in the former Soviet bloc and China. Mr. Modi was represented by Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu, who made strong observations on cross-border terrorism; he called it the SCO region’s “biggest challenge”, in comments aimed at Pakistan. Pakistan’s representative too spoke of the need to combat what she called “state terrorism” in disputed areas, in a reference to Jammu and Kashmir. The SCO is a rare forum where India-Pakistan troops take part in joint exercises under the Regional Anti-Terror Structure, although it would seem the two countries have come no closer on the issue. Neither statement on terrorism was reflected in the final joint statement, which focused on trade and economic issues. India also marked its differences with China over the BRI by not joining other SCO members in a paragraph endorsing the BRI. Mr. Naidu made a pitch for “transparent and trustworthy” trade practices, seen as a sidebar aimed at China.

Regardless of the differences, the Modi government has consistently maintained the importance of the SCO grouping, referred to as the “Asian NATO” although it does not mandate security alliances. The SCO is one of the few regional structures India is a part of now, given a decline in its engagement with SAARC, BBIN [and the RCEP](#). The SCO provides India a convenient channel for its outreach — trade and strategic ties — to Central Asian countries. It has afforded a platform, when needed, for bilateral discussions with the two countries India has the most tense ties with: China and Pakistan. While the government has eschewed meetings with Pakistan for the last five years, it has used the SCO for talks with China, [including this year amidst the LAC stand-off](#), when Rajnath Singh and S. Jaishankar met their counterparts on the sidelines of SCO meets. Above all, the SCO has been seen as a grouping worth pursuing as it retains India’s geopolitical balance, a useful counterpoint to New Delhi’s otherwise much more robust relations with the western world, and hosting the SCO meeting was one more step towards developing that engagement.

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