

IRAN, BELARUS TO BE NEWEST SCO MEMBERS

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the SCO Summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in this file photo.PTI-

Iran and Belarus are likely to be the two newest additions to the China and Russia-backed Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) grouping, officials said on Friday.

Expanding the group is among the issues that leaders of the grouping, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping are likely to discuss at the SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in September.

The current SCO Secretary, General Zhang Ming, a veteran Chinese diplomat, told reporters on Friday the grouping hopes for an in-person summit in Uzbekistan, which could see Mr. Modi meet with Mr. Xi for the first time since 2019.

“So far, all participating countries have confirmed the attendance of their leaders but the format of attendance is not finalised. All wish to switch to the traditional way of meeting which is more efficient,” said Mr. Zhang, who recently visited Samarkand and said the facilities for the summit would be constructed by the end of this month. “At the same time, the epidemic situation is changing and there are new variants emerging,” he said, adding a note of caution, with last year’s summit held virtually on account of COVID-19.

China, Russia and four Central Asian states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan — were the founding members of the SCO, while India and Pakistan joined the grouping in 2017 in its first round of expansion. Last year’s summit in Dushanbe agreed for Iran to join, while Belarus has also begun the membership process.

“In the Samarkand summit, we expect the leadership to adopt a document on the obligations Iran must fulfil to gain membership. The legal procedures of Belarus’s accession are also about to start. We need to build consensus on the acceptance of Belarus,” Mr. Zhang said. “The significance of this round of expansion is that it shows the SCO’s rising international influence and that the principles of the SCO charter are being widely accepted.”

Sharp contrast

China and Russia are looking to frame the grouping as a counter to the West — particularly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine — and Mr. Zhang sought to draw a sharp contrast between the SCO and NATO.

“There has been discussion in the international arena that the trend of non-alignment is back,” he said. “The expansion of NATO is totally different as the SCO is a cooperative organisation based on non-alignment and not targeting a third party. NATO is based on Cold War thinking. The logic of NATO is creating new enemies to sustain its own existence.”

He said the SCO “believes one should not build its safety at the expense of other countries”, a statement China has used previously to blame NATO for the Ukraine crisis. Mr. Zhang also hit out at “small circles” — a term China has used in the past to criticise the Quad — underlining India’s somewhat unique position in the SCO, whose two most important members, China and Russia, are increasingly positioning the grouping directly at odds with the West.

India will host the SCO summit next year, and Varanasi has been selected as the SCO region's first "Tourism and Cultural Capital", Mr. Zhang said, a title it will hold next year coinciding with India chairing the grouping.

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