

India and China reset ties at SCO summit

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in the Chinese city of Qingdao to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit, but the visit appeared to be more about the continuing task of resetting India-China ties after the damage done by last year's military standoff at Doklam. The SCO is a grouping whose relevance is growing, primarily as a platform for combating terrorism and enhancing security cooperation focused on Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. This was the first summit since India and Pakistan were admitted as full members of the bloc. The Qingdao Declaration of the SCO spoke of a world in a period of major changes and adjustments, and the need for multi-polar and interdependent structures that can help nations surmount uncertainties created by increasing instability around the world. There were also references in the declaration to more protectionist and unilateralist challenges on the economic front and the need for strong multilateral cooperation to combat all forms of terrorism as well as financing and material support for the scourge.

Some have pointed to China's growing clout in organisations such as the SCO while juxtaposing the meeting in Qingdao with the acrimony witnessed at the G7 Summit in Canada. But such a comparison is superficial as the members of the SCO, barring India and China, do not wield the same influence on the global stage as the G7 states. For India, much of the attention was on Mr Modi's meeting with President Xi Jinping on the margins of the SCO Summit. Both sides agreed on key steps to take forward the momentum achieved during the informal summit between the two leaders at Wuhan in April. Besides Xi's acceptance of an invitation to participate in the next informal summit in India, the two sides will go ahead with a series of high-level meetings that appear to be aimed at keeping the disputed border peaceful while moving ahead with discussions that narrow the divergences. There was forward movement on the sharing of data on the Brahmaputra River and some minor steps to boost trade.

Mr Modi, however, did not dilute New Delhi's position on Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative as India is the only SCO member not to endorse the connectivity project in the Qingdao Declaration. Mr Modi, in fact, used his speech at the summit to drive home the message that India would back all such projects that are inclusive, transparent and respect the territorial sovereignty of nations. This reinforces the view that New Delhi is willing to work with Beijing for greater regional stability and development, but on its own terms as a key regional player.

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