

India's role in SCO will depend on how its ties with China, Pakistan evolve

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's informal summitry seems to have earned a small prize by way of an announcement by Russian leader Vladimir Putin that his country, China and India would be designated "major players" within the eight-member Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). It remains unclear what benefit, other than symbolic, this designation brings to India. But there will be some heartburn in Pakistan that this label has not been affixed to it though it joined SCO along with India.

India may struggle to live up to this diplomatic promotion. There is little evidence among the many statements issued about SCO by New Delhi that India has any clearly defined set of goals regarding what it wanted to do inside SCO — other than to be a member. New Delhi has been happy to add its voice to SCO's long-standing counter-terrorism focus. It will also prove an able participant in the organisation's military exercises. Anti-terrorism resonates well with many of the members, almost all of whom have struggled with Islamicist militancy within their borders. It also puts the spotlight on Pakistan and its long-standing support for terrorist groups. But India will be circumspect in its contribution to SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure given the requirement that intelligence must be shared with all members, China and Pakistan included.

That India has such a thin agenda should not come as a surprise. Eurasia has been a backwater for Indian diplomatic and economic relations for decades. The primary reason is simply a matter of geography. India has no land boundary with any Central Asian country. All of its land connectivity to that region has to pass through Pakistani or Chinese held territory. This isolation is compounded by the fact the region is dominated by two large countries, China and Russia, leaving little space for a distant third power. India has tried to find some means around these constraints, most notably by trying to construct a North-South Connectivity Corridor from the Iranian coast up into Central Asia. While the parallel link-up to Afghanistan has begun functioning, the rest of the corridor remains theoretical. Making this part of a cooperative effort with other SCO members could be a possibility India could explore.

The SCO will remain a minor interest for the foreseeable future. How much India can accomplish will depend in part on how its relations with China and Pakistan evolve, whether it can get a functioning land bridge to Central Asia and which direction events in Afghanistan will develop. It is the environment India creates for itself in Eurasia that will determine whether it can be a major player.

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