

## New Asian constellation

Earlier this month, the picturesque city of Qingdao became the perfect venue for a summit of eight Eurasian nations. India and Pakistan were the talk of the town as they were making their maiden appearance as full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The SCO was formed in 2001, with the intent of calming the Eurasian borders strained by the Sino-Soviet rivalry of the Cold War. But the organisation has since mutated from its core security orientation, seeking greater regional prosperity for the collective. Culture has become an important element of the SCO, attuned to the group's search for an inclusive Eurasian identity.

China and Russia have been the pillars of the SCO, encompassing a Central Asian core. India's heavyweight entry in Qingdao meant that Chinese President Xi Jinping, his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi became instant stars of an aspirational event. The two-day summit, which began on June 9, echoed an important subtext. The eight heads were meeting at a time when the leaders of the G-7 were engaged in bitter Twitter feuds across the Atlantic. Keen to contrast the rise of Eurasia as the vehicle of a post-U.S. order, participating nations — China and Russia, especially — were intent on showcasing the “eastern” values of mutual respect and plurality. Mr. Xi went out of his way to quote Confucius as the template of the “Shanghai spirit”, while Mr. Modi evoked Buddha and Rumi as precursors of an inclusive SCO ideology.

There were plenty of takeaways from the summit, but for India, Mr. Modi's meeting with Mr. Xi on the sidelines of the event was important. It reinforced the promise of the Wuhan informal summit in late April, where the two leaders met to bury the ghost of the Doklam military stand-off and flag a fresh start to a relationship that has a mixed legacy.

The SCO summit also gave India fresh leads to engage with Central Asia. Landlocked Uzbekistan will now funnel goods through the Iranian port of Chabahar — a joint undertaking of Iran, India and Afghanistan. But perhaps more significantly, India is re-exploring a transit corridor to Central Asia through Pakistan under the SCO's multilateral connectivity initiative. If the Pakistan-Central Asia two-way route works, it can soften the ground for improved ties between New Delhi and Islamabad, as a subset of the rise of Eurasia. During the summit, China and Russia repeatedly highlighted that the SCO was a platform for narrowing India-Pakistan differences.

India would do well to seize the opportunity to develop a sustainable working relationship with Pakistan that benefits both, notwithstanding South Block's ingrained distrust of the Generals in Rawalpindi.

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