

NAVIGATIONS IN BISHKEK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: SCO and India

At the 19th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, India will have to navigate between two contradictory imperatives. While on the one hand it must act as a willing partner of regional cooperation led by China and Russia, on the other it must avoid being seen as a part of the 'anti-American gang'. It could also be seen as a paradox that India wants to fight against terrorism through a body that includes states that pose the biggest threats to Indian security.

In Bishkek, Russia and Central Asian countries are likely to express "broad support" for China in its escalating tariff fight against the U.S. India is equally concerned about this trade war, but it is unclear whether it will join the others in slamming U.S. protectionism. New Delhi is seemingly confident of dealing with the U.S. without necessarily supporting China. For Chinese President Xi Jinping, whipping up anti-Americanism serves to stave off mounting opposition against his anti-corruption campaign and concentration of power. It is also notable that all SCO members barring India are enthusiastic supporters of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The summit is likely to have a muted agenda. SCO Secretary General Vladimir Norov has hinted at adopting documents to deepen multilateral cooperation and discussing non-conventional issues such as the fight against drug trafficking, cooperation in IT, environmental protection and healthcare. Terrorism is likely to be approached from the angle of improving the situation in Afghanistan and not necessarily of curbing the terrorist elements emanating from Pakistan. China is sure to offer its experiences of dealing with counterterrorism, and the deradicalisation measures it has taken in Xinjiang. China's achievement in expanding its high-speed rail network to restive Xinjiang comes with enormous economic and security implications for Eurasia. China has also enhanced its military projection capabilities to meet any potential crises beyond its western frontiers.

Kyrgyzstan is the latest to create an international near-border trade centre in Alai district bordering China. If the regional countries switch to adopting the Chinese railway track gauge of 1,435 mm, then China will be successful in uniting Eurasia to challenge a united Europe. As the situation unfolds, China and Russia are adopting a new era of global strategic partnership. Where India fits in is the question.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with President Xi on the sidelines of the summit will be critical, especially as Mr. Modi is now being guided by his new External Affairs Minister. This meeting also comes after China's decision to withdraw its technical hold on listing Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The key concern for the two leaders is the impact of the U.S.-China trade war, but judging from the trends, both sides seem to be gearing up for a big settlement of pending bilateral issues.

Mr. Modi's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin is important to save the S-400 contract deal against Washington's mounting threat to act under CAATSA. India and Russia have an ambitious economic agenda drawn up for 2019, and Mr. Putin might reiterate his invitation to Mr. Modi to be the chief guest at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September. It would be a good opportunity for India to explore Russia's Far East region not just for developing economic cooperation but also for exploring the prospects of transferring skilled labourers to offset Chinese demographic threats in the region. Russia is also keen that India joins the Arctic: Territory of Dialogue Forum.

India seems committed to work within the SCO to develop a 'cooperative and sustainable security' framework, to make the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure more effective, and participate in efforts to bring about stability in Afghanistan. Even though the regional aspirations of Central Asian countries contradict India's goals, these countries back India's proposal for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. Mr. Modi is certain to bring up India's resolve to fight terrorism by drawing the SCO's attention to the attacks in Pulwama and Sri Lanka. But China would not like India to use the SCO to name and shame Pakistan.

India may stick to its position on BRI, but accelerating progress on the International North-South Transport Corridor, the Chabahar Port, the Ashgabat Agreement and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway should be very much on the cards.

The India-Pakistan stalemate endures but the environment has changed a little since India's air strikes in Balakot. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan has been less belligerent, but whether the Pakistani military is taking tougher measures to curb anti-India terror groups is not known. Mr. Khan will have to demonstrate clearly if he wants Mr. Modi to give diplomacy a chance should they meet on the margins of the SCO meet. Mr. Modi might chart a new policy course in favour of normalising ties, especially since India has scored a point with Masood Azhar being designated as a global terrorist at the UNSC.

Pakistan places high hopes on the SCO to regulate key regional security issues (Afghanistan and Kashmir) even though the SCO discourages bilateral disputes to be raised. Its other agenda would be to sell the Gwadar Port as a potential passage to landlocked Central Asian states, besides promoting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor for regional economic integration and security cooperation.

To be sure, none of the institutional-level measures including the joint SCO military exercises have so far entailed any satisfactory results in jointly fighting against terrorism. Nevertheless, the SCO is relevant for India to garner support for reforms of the UNSC to make the latter more representative and effective. India has been lending support to the member countries' candidatures for non-permanent membership of the UNSC for a long time.

Phunchok Stobdan served as India's Ambassador to the Republic of Kyrgyzstan

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