

A DIFFERENT TENT: ON SCO SUMMIT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: SCO and India

Terrorism, regional cooperation and the future of Afghanistan were major themes at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's Heads of State summit in Bishkek. The grouping, led by Russia and China, which includes Afghanistan and the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, inducted India and Pakistan in 2017, and has become an important forum for India's Eurasian neighbourhood. In a world riven by geopolitical contestations, SCO membership provides India a vital counter to some of the other groupings it is a part of, balancing out its stated policy of pursuing "multi-alignments". It is a platform also for alignments on issues such as energy security, connectivity and trade. With India indicating that it sees little use for SAARC, the SCO provides the only multilateral platform for it to deal in close proximity with Pakistan and Afghanistan. While the failure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan to hold substantive talks at the summit was marked, the occasion provided a setting for them to exchange what India called the "usual pleasantries" at the least. Beyond the summit, the two countries are committed to engaging at several other levels, including the [SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure](#). Pakistan leads the effort to coordinate between the SCO and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. In a paragraph on Afghanistan and the SCO-Afghanistan contact group, the Bishkek declaration stressed on an inclusive peace process led by "Afghans themselves". SCO countries committed to strengthening economic cooperation and supporting the World Trade Organisation structure, while building more people-to-people ties, tourism and cultural bonds within the grouping.

It is significant to see that where the group has failed to find consensus, such as on India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the declaration has mentioned only the other countries in a paragraph praising the project. On the sidelines, Mr. Modi held bilateral meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. This month, Mr. Modi will meet U.S. President Donald Trump on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka. While the current India-U.S. trade impasse and plans for Indo-Pacific military cooperation will take centre stage there, it is likely that the U.S.'s specific demands on curbing defence deals with Russia, including on the S-400 anti-missile system, and denying access to Chinese telecom major Huawei for India's 5G network bids will also come up. India's strategy of balancing and straddling the competing interests of these emerging blocs will be tested. But the SCO collective and the bilateral meetings in Bishkek are an important indicator early in the Modi government's second tenure of the foreign policy arc it is attempting.

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As Prime Minister Modi returns to power, he must swear by the Indian civilisational ethos

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