

A COUNTER-COALITION OF EURASIAN POWERS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: SCO and India

As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi negotiated a five-point agreement which they hoped will lead to a disengagement process between Indian and Chinese troops ranged against each other at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), it wasn't just the host, Russia, that played a part behind the scenes. In fact, the occasion for their presence in Moscow, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), had as much of a role to play.

The SCO was founded in June 2001, built on the 'Shanghai Five' grouping of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyz Republic) and Tajikistan, which had come together in the post-Soviet era in 1996, in order to work on regional security, reduction of border troops, and terrorism. A particular goal all these years has been "conflict resolution", given its early successes between China and Russia, and then within the Central Asian Republics. The 1996 meeting of the Shanghai Five, for example, resulted in an 'Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field Along the Border Areas' between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which led to an agreement on the mutual reduction of military forces on their common borders in 1997. Subsequently, it helped push the Central Asian countries to resolve some of their boundary disputes as well.

In 2001, the Shanghai Five inducted Uzbekistan into the group and named it the SCO, outlining its principles in a charter that promoted what was called the "Shanghai spirit" of cooperation.

According to its rules, the organisation has two permanent bodies — the SCO Secretariat based in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent. The SCO Secretary-General and the Director of the Executive Committee of the SCO RATS are appointed by the Council of Heads of State for a term of three years. However, the venue of the SCO council meetings moves between the eight members (including India and Pakistan). The SCO also has four observer states — Afghanistan, Iran, Belarus and Mongolia — which may be inducted at a later date.

Main goals

The SCO describes its main goals, part of its Charter that was adopted in St. Petersburg in 2002, as: "strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, economy, research and technology and culture, as well as in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order."

No doubt, the SCO was eyed with some misgivings by the U.S. and Europe as a result of this, not the least by its desire to build a "new international political and economic order", and it was even dubbed the "Anti-NATO" for proposing military cooperation. In 2005, the Astana declaration called for SCO countries to work on a "joint SCO response to situations that threaten peace, security and stability in the region", indicating the group's strategic ambitions

Western and NATO concerns were heightened a decade later, when they placed heavy sanctions against Russia for its actions in Crimea, but China came to its aid, signing a 30-year, \$400 billion gas pipeline framework agreement. Since then, helped by the personal bond

between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the SCO has become a platform for Eurasian cooperation in a region rich with energy resources. China's Belt and Road Initiative, which Russia is not a part of but supports, and is joined by all members of the SCO (with the exception of India), has also become a part of the SCO declarations.

Contradictions

India and Pakistan joined the SCO as observers in 2005, and were admitted as full members in 2015. Joining the SCO has been seen as one of the Modi government's more significant yet puzzling foreign policy choices, as it came at a time that New Delhi was looking more keenly at the West, and in particular at the maritime 'Quadrilateral' with the U.S., Japan and Australia. India has explained its membership in both ostensibly clashing groups as a part of its principles of "strategic autonomy and multi-alignment".

Other contradictions have also been noted. Since 2014, India and Pakistan have cut all ties, talks and trade with each other, and India has refused to attend the SAARC summit due to tensions with Pakistan, but both their leaderships have consistently attended all meetings of the SCO's three councils: the Heads of State, Heads of Government, Council of Foreign Ministers, as well as other meetings.

Despite the fact that India accuses Pakistan of perpetrating cross-border terrorism at every other multilateral forum, at the SCO, Indian and Pakistani armed forces even take part in military and anti-terrorism exercises together, as part of the SCO-Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. In addition, the two countries are part of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, to discuss the course of Afghanistan's future, an issue New Delhi and Islamabad are bitterly divided over.

Bilateral meetings

Through the years, SCO hosts have encouraged members to use the platform to discuss differences on the sidelines. In 2009, India and Pakistan held the first talks after the Mumbai attacks on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Astana, where then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and former Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari met, and in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met then Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif at the SCO summit in Ufa, for a meeting that even resulted in a joint statement. There have been no bilateral meetings between Indian and Pakistani leaders on the sidelines of the SCO since then, and both sides have pointedly ignored the other in recent years, although the SCO secretary general has often expressed the hope they will resolve their issues through dialogue, including last year after the Pulwama attack.

Thus, it should not have come as a surprise that the SCO host, Russia, encouraged and facilitated meetings between the Defence Ministers of India and China (September 4) and Foreign Ministers of India and China (September 10) to discuss the stand-off at the LAC that has seen violent clashes, killings of soldiers and gun fire exchanges for the first time in 45 years.

"The SCO Charter doesn't allow any bilateral dispute to be taken up, but it provides a comfortable platform for building mutual trust, expanding cooperation, finding common ground and eventually, creating conditions for dialogue between countries," said Russian Deputy Ambassador to India Roman Babushkin in a press conference this week.

It remains to be seen whether the Moscow meeting between the Indian and Chinese Foreign Minister results in a real breakthrough on the ground at the Line of Actual control, where armies remain entrenched, and the PLA has mobilised both troops and heavy equipment. If it does, that would be a feather in the cap for the SCO, and if fails to do so, the SCO will no doubt continue to provide other venues for its disputing members to meet, as it seeks to build a continental

coalition that, its founders hope, may one day be as strong as some of the other coalitions that exist to its west and south.

In focus

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