

## SCO FIGHTS 'ANTI-WEST DICTATORS CLUB' TAG

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is not a military bloc nor is it aimed at any one country or group, said officials here, underlining that this week's SCO Summit will bring together 15 regional "strongmen", including Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to Samarkand on Thursday.

This will be the first such summit with Mr. Putin since the Russian invasion in Ukraine, which has sparked sanctions by the U.S. and the EU and their partners, and the first time that Mr. Xi is stepping out for a multilateral conference since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both Russia and China came in for severe criticism on different issues at the G-7 Summit in June, and the optics of the SCO this year will be that of a counter to the western coalition: as all countries particularly targeted by the West — Russia, Iran, China, Belarus and Turkey — find a common cause. In an opinion piece, the U.K.'s *Sunday Times* even dubbed the meet an "anti-West 'dictators' club".

Asked if India, as the next Chair of the SCO, which will host the summit in 2023, was worried by the label, India's Ambassador to Uzbekistan Manish Prabhat said the perception was unfounded. "India is very clear that the SCO is not an organisation which is against any other bloc of countries or any other country. The SCO is a venture for constructive cooperation and peace and stability in the world. There could be concerns of different countries on various kinds of issues, but the forum is there to talk about these issues," he told presspersons ahead of the summit.

Clearly aware of the optics, Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev wrote in an editorial article this week that the SCO's non-bloc status was important.

Referring to the summit declaration that is being worked on, he said the "Samarkand Spirit" would launch a "new format" in a world where the present international system has begun to "falter".

The stipulation of "non-interference" in internal affairs will, no doubt, strike a chord with the leaders of the SCO who are accused of human rights violations and domestic anti-democratic moves in the West.

In particular, both Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi are likely to use the presence of the record number of 15 leaders coming to the conference as evidence that they have not been "isolated" on the world stage, despite the West slamming their actions in Ukraine and the Taiwan Strait, respectively.

India will look closely at the Samarkand declaration for language on terrorism and the listing of terror groups such as the LeT and the JeM that target India, as well as the mention of connectivity initiatives involving the Chabahar port which Mr. Modi is expected to push during his address.

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