

# Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Analysing Opportunities and Challenges for India

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**Abstract---***For making collective efforts to maintain peace, security and stability in Central Asia, SCO was formed. It is a permanent intergovernmental organisation to address global challenges and highlighted the need to tackle terrorism, separatism and extremism. In 2017, by joining SCO, India paved the way for a potential platform to advance India's Connect Central Asia Policy. Moreover, the Central Asian states are also keen for India to play a bigger role in the region. But in order to succeed, India would have to improve its own standing in the region. However, this paper tries to analyse the evolution of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in general and also examines how India's strategic aims in Central Asia are reflected through its membership with SCO along with various opportunities and challenges faced by it in particular.*

**Key Words---** *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, China, India, Central Asia, Anti-terrorism, Geopolitical*

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## I. INTRODUCTION:

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a multilateral Eurasian association which was founded in Shanghai by the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the year 2001. However, this organisation has expanded its membership to eight countries when India and Pakistan joined as full members on 9 June 2017 at a summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. The population of SCO member countries cover around 40 percent of the global population.

The main purpose of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is to establish cooperation between member countries in security-related concerns, resolving border issues, military cooperation, countering terrorism, intelligence sharing, economic cooperation, cultural cooperation and also countering American influence in Central Asia. Thus, maintaining peace and stability for sustainable development in the region is always SCO's top priority. As a model of interstate interaction that can provide an organised stage for regional political, economic and security cooperation especially in central Asia. India has also been interested to maintain cooperation with central Asian countries due to its geostrategic location, rich in natural resources and help in connecting Asia with Europe. Thus, Central Asia is considered as part of India's extended strategic neighbourhood.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To analyse the evolution of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in general.
- To examine how India's strategic aims in Central Asia are reflected through its membership with SCO along with various opportunities and challenges faced by it in particular.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW:

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Several books have been written on SCO. Like, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation- Origins and Implications by Timothy Ciriag in 2003. In this book, the author has discussed details about development of SCO and its various functions and how its member countries work together to fulfilment of the purpose.

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Another is Shanghai Cooperation Organisation- a Networking Organisation for a Networking World by Shirik Akiner. This book deals with how the SCO is a prime example of the evolving networks which are shaping the new global order. Through the development of this organisation, China in particular is showing signs that it understands these dynamics. The strategic question addressed here is whether this rise to the challenges of the network world is currently in danger of leaving the west in its wake.

The Book Shanghai Cooperation- an Assessment by Nirmala Joshi, 2015 talks about how today the competition among countries has acquired new dimensions resulting in the Eurasian region, that includes the SCO space, emerging as one of the key pillars in the evolving Asian politics. A regional cooperative approach is essential to meet the challenges of security and stability in the region and to promote greater economic engagement with the outside powers.

#### **IV. METHODOLOGY:**

This paper is based on secondary sources of data. Historical, Analytical and Descriptive methods are followed to fulfil the objectives. Various books, journals, articles, newspaper are used as a source of data collection in this paper.

##### **Discussion:**

##### **Historical Development of Shanghai Cooperation Organization:**

The process of formation of SCO initiated in May 1989, when the last Soviet Union president Mikhail Gorbachev and Li Peng, the then premier of China agreed that issues between them should be peacefully resolved. Accordingly, it led to a negotiation between Beijing and former part of Soviet Union-Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in November 1992. However, in April, 1996, heads of five neighbouring countries – China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan signed “Agreement on deepening military trust in border regions” and “Agreement on reduction of military forces in border regions”. This resulted in the establishment of mechanism “Shanghai Five”. From 1998 to 2000 its summits were held in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and discussed problems of regional security, cooperation in fighting international terrorism and religious extremism as well as border problems. With the participation of the then president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, they signed Dushanbe Declaration in July 2000 and “Shanghai” Five elevated to “Shanghai Forum”. In June 2001, “Shanghai Forum” renamed as “Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Moreover, on July 7, 2002 the heads of the states adopted “The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and provides purposes, principles, structure and laying a legal foundation for its development. During this time, an agreement among SCO member states on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was took place to build a global system of combating terrorism and according in 2004.” During this time, the Shanghai Convention on Fight against Organisation Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism” was also signed. At the SCO summit in Tashkent on June 17, 2004, Mongolia became the first ‘Observer’ country to be admitted in SCO and India, Pakistan, Iran were granted for SCO ‘Observer’ status in 5-6 July, 2005 in Astana, Kazakhstan. From June 2011, there formally approved a memorandum that non-member countries can apply for membership of the SCO and India expressed its willingness to become a full-fledged member. It is because India wants a constant policy towards Central Asia to build long term partnership in bilaterally and multilaterally.

On July, 2015, in the conclusion of Russia's one year of presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin said that "First of all, for the first time in the 15 years of

the SCO, the decision was made to increase the number of members. We signed documents to begin the accession of India and Pakistan. Therefore, the SCO's capabilities to react to modern threats and challenges will grow. The organization's political and economic potential will significantly expand." Accordingly, in 2017 the SCO members expanded and by bringing together four nuclear powers -India, China, Russia, and Pakistan, it provide a global strategic stability.

However, the organisation is an evolutionary in nature. At the initial phase, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation mainly focused on fight against terrorism, separatism extremism and border problems but gradually expanded to cooperation on social, economic, political, cultural areas among member countries. Currently, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's permanent membership are comprises of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan. Mongolia, Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran are currently observer countries of the organisation. SCO also consists of six dialogue partner countries namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey.

### **India's "Connect Central Asia Policy"- Engagement with Extended Neighbours and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation:**

Central Asia that entered the world scenario only after disintegration of Soviet Union is strategically positioned as an access between Europe and Asia and thus provide an ample opportunity for trade, investment and growth. Moreover, the region is rich in natural gas and significant reserves of oil. Due to its geostrategic location, Central Asia gain global attention and after the post -cold war years, India's growing national strength in regard of economy and military encouraged India to develop engagement beyond South Asia. Both India and Central Asia share common perceptions about the need to have mutually benefitted strategic relations in the advent of globalisation.

Moreover, geo-economics has a direct link with geopolitics and therefore economic cooperation between India and the Central Asian regions play a vital role in developing strong defence ties, by strengthening strategic and security cooperation with mainly emphasis on military training. Thus, keeping it in mind, during the Astana Summit in 2011, India expressed its desire to play a larger role in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the then external affair minister stated in the summit, "India would be happy to play a larger and deeper role the SCO when the rules and criteria for full membership are clear. We value the role of the SCO in bringing security, stability and development of our region and stand ready in contribute more to the SCO for the common good of the people of our region."

In this way, central Asia occupies an important place in foreign policy priority issues. The high level visits from both sides- Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev's visit to Delhi and former President Pratibha Patil's visit to Tajikistan in 2009, former Prime Minister Mon Mohan Singh's visit to Kazakhstan in 2011 and Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov's visit to India in May 2011, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahman's visit to India in September 2012 and India 's Vice-President Hamid Ansari's visit to Tajikistan in April 2013 and to Uzbekistan in May 2013 followed by former External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid's visit to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in September 2013. On 13 July, 2015 Narendra Modi became the first Indian prime minister to have visited all five Central Asian countries- Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tazikistan in a single trip. Underlining the region's importance for India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "We see an important place for Central Asia in India's future. We can reinforce each other's economic progress." President of Kyrgyz Republic Almazbek Atambayev visit to India in December 2016 to foster bilateral ties. In 2017, in historic Astana summit India joined in SCO and paved the way for more cooperation in Central Asia .In 2018, Wuhan summit, revive the relationship between India and China and both countries are interested to keeping it stable and free from extremism as well as from conflict. In the 34<sup>th</sup> meeting of

Regional anti-Terrorist Structure (RATE) council held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan it was announced that SCO member countries will participate the first joint counter terrorism exercise named “Sary-Aarka-Aniterror 2019”. It was first stage of the joint border operation “Solidarity 2019-2021” that will help India along with the entire region to tackle the menace of terrorism. Moreover, the first meeting of “India- Central Asia” dialogue, 13 January, 2019 was a successful one and focused mainly on cultural, trade, people-to-people links and expressed mutually beneficial cooperation between them. In this regard, SCO can play a potential role to advance India’s Connect Central Asia Policy.

## **V. FINDINGS:**

### **Opportunities for India:**

Over the years, the SCO has acquired increasing significance as an important platform for cooperation on regional economic and security issues. India has been keen to engage with the Central Asian countries in a wide variety of issues such as counterterrorism, energy security economic integration with Central Asian countries and improving connectivity are some of the key objectives of India, while it can gain its interests under the purview of the SCO. At once, India is keen to deepen its security related cooperation in the region and is looking for collective efforts towards building an anti-terror mechanism among the SCO states in dealing with these threats.

India through various efforts, is trying to consolidate its geopolitical and geo-economic presence in the Central Asian region and becoming a part of SCO can provide many benefits in this region. The once India’s ambassador to Kazakhstan said, “There is a need for a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the silk route, not a anew great game and SCO is appropriate framework for this. India has made it clear that it would like to be member of the SCO and it could be possible only with the active and energetic support from Central Asian region”. On the other hand, economically, India will provide SCO member countries with the connectivity linkage with South Asia and Arabian Sea.

India is looking to access oil and gas from this region and part of various projects that will provide economic benefit to India. India’s pending energy projects like the TAPI ( Turkmenistam- Afghanistan-Pakistam-India) pipeline, IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) pipeline and CASA( Central Asia- South Asia)- 1000 electricity transmission projects may possible to get a much needed drive through SCO.

SCO will help India to boost her trade with China. As India is constantly facing border issues with China, joining SCO will help India to resolve the disputes. Moreover, India is a big importer of arms and majority of its come from Russia, thus joining SCO will advantage India to enhance bilateral trade with Russia for arms and building a strong self –defence.

Apart from this, three of the five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are SCO members and India have strategic partnership agreement with each of them. Moreover, India’s growing relationship with Afghanistan- a south Central Asian country that shares borders with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China that are important part of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Recognising the importance of SCO in settling the Afghan conflict Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Ufa Summit said, “A stable and peaceful Afghanistan will ensure peace and prosperity across the region”.

India recently joined Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Bishkek for the annual Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit from 13-14 June. The summit discussed on a wide-ranging multilateral agenda on illegal drug trafficking, cooperation in information technology and also seek to increase cooperation between SCO and other multilateral organisations.

As a member of SCO, it will help India to get benefit from International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Ashgabat Agreement, the Chabahar port and India-Myanmar-Thailand highway. In this way, SCO will help the country's aim to regional integration, promote connectivity and stability across borders and also strengthen India's position in Central Asia. Apart from this, India is one of the largest energy consuming countries in the world and the membership in the SCO is also increase India's better access to major gas and oil exploration projects in Central Asia. Apart from this, all central Asian regions provides support for India's permanent membership in extended United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and can thus enhance cooperation.

### **Challenges for India:**

Joining SCO the biggest challenges for India that as it is a China dominated group, can dominate India regarding the policies and agreements regarding the group. Another major shortcomings are- absence of political will and confidence: difference in economic status of member states; lack of resources for development, cultural differences and domestic challenges of Central Asian Regions. Apart from this, lack of clear direction for cooperative endeavours has prevented it from moving forward.

Critique said that China has always viewed the SCO as "its organization" and SCO is a forum in which it is a rule maker rather than a rule taker. Moreover, China is trying to push OBOR (Road and Belt Initiative) via SCO which provide a huge challenge for India as there might be some conflicts in SCO .There is also a possibility that China is trying to enter SAARC. Another problem is that the organisation has difficulty transforming words into deeds. The members individually and collectively, announces new goals and initiatives, but there is a little evidence that the goals are met or the initiatives ever implemented.

### **VI. CONCLUSION:**

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is seen as an eastern counterbalance to NATO. The cooperation and proper engagement among SCO members will help in bridging the gap between Southeast Asia and Central Asia. It led to the regional stability, prosperity and all-round development of the region. India is concerned to strengthen its security related cooperation in the region and is looking for collective efforts towards building an anti-terror mechanism among the SCO states in dealing with these threats. It is hope that this organisation will take more initiatives to combat terrorism in the entire region and will help India to further deepening its strategic activities. Membership of the SCO provides India tremendous strategic opportunity to its extended neighbour's i.e., central Asian countries. But deteriorated relations between India and Pakistan sometimes create tensions in proper realisation of this projects.

Whether the SCO grows into a successful regional forum depends on its ability to overcome bilateral differences between its members and their respective geopolitical intentions. Moreover, regional connectivity initiatives must be transparent and respect the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity that can enhance trade and play an important role in bringing development of the SCO member countries. As India supports a rule based order in Asia, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation can play an effective role in this regard. The future of SCO would depend firstly on how it addresses the conflicting interests of member states and other regional plays in the region.

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