



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
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SCO and India

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Why in News: The Council of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) will meet on 12th May in Goa

A Brief about SCO

The SCO is a multilateral grouping comprising eight member states of China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; four Observer States; and six "Dialogue Partners".

This year, of the four observers, Iran and Belarus are set to be admitted as full members. Afghanistan and Mongolia are the two other observers. The dialogue partners are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey.

THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION



India, which was admitted as a full member in 2017 along with Pakistan in the first-ever expansion of the group, holds the rotating presidency of the SCO this year, and in this capacity has hosted several ministerial-level SCO meetings, including a tourism ministers' meeting at Varanasi in March.

Central Asia, the heart of SCO

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Eurasia, which in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition includes 13 countries (Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan), is at the centre of this flux in the world order.

Excluding Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Turkmenistan, all others are either members, observers or dialogue partners of the SCO.

While the West views the SCO as a cosy club run by China and ally Russia, those familiar with the workings of the group describe the forum as a venue where the two dominant powers are in competition with each other for influence.

Four of the five Central Asian republics are members of SCO. Russia has viewed these resource-rich republics that were part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, as its strategic backyard. But it has not been able to stop a growing Chinese footprint over the region, which has been driven both by strategic economic and security reasons.

The competition has been all the more apparent as Beijing's outreach to the Central Asian 5, or C5, caught momentum with the Belt and Road Initiative, and accelerated over the last year during Russia's preoccupation with its war in Ukraine. Later this month, Beijing is preparing to host an in-person C Plus C5 summit, after last year's inaugural summit held virtually.

But Russia's continuing economic influence in the region is still strong, as are its political, cultural and people-to-people connections.

The power play in central Asia has its impact in the SCO. And this is where Russia needs India.

India and the SCO

Moscow sees India's presence in the SCO as a potential countervailing force to Chinese dominance of Central Asia.

It was Russia that began pushing for India's membership of the group, around the time that China's Xi Jinping launched his Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan. In 2015, India was admitted as an observer along with Iran and Pakistan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit the same year to all five central Asian republics in one trip gave India's interest in the region an authoritative imprimatur.

The region spoke to all the recurrent themes of Indian foreign policy over the last two decades – trade, connectivity, energy security and combating terrorism.

A membership of the SCO two years later gave India a higher profile in Central Asia to which it does not have overland access. In post-US Afghanistan, it has helped India stay involved in the regional discussion on Taliban rule, from which it is otherwise excluded.

Just last month, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which have formed a group called "Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan", met in the Uzbek city of Samarkand.

Challenges to SCO

Some experts have tended to view the Quad grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the United States as a counter to the influence that Russia and China seek to project through the SCO, and India's membership of both as an irreconcilable contradiction.

But if the Quad is India's diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific, the SCO represents its diplomacy in the Eurasian landmass. It can also be seen as an exercise of true multipolarity.

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If the SCO is a bipolar China-Russia platform, it offers several multipolarities within as other members leverage their strengths to get the best deal for themselves.

At last year's foreign ministers' meeting in Tashkent, India was the only country that did not sign a joint statement calling for the strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention.

The entry of Iran and Belarus can only increase the cross currents within.

Agenda of Foreign minister meet

The main work of the foreign ministers' meeting is to prepare for the upcoming meeting of the Heads of State Council, or the SCO summit, expected to be held in July.

The foreign ministers will put their heads together to prepare a draft declaration to be adopted at the summit, formalise the admission of Iran and Belarus to the SCO, and discuss other regional and international issues.

As a pointer, at the foreign ministers' meeting hosted in July 2022 by last year's chair Uzbekistan, the discussions centred on the Ukraine conflict, the resulting energy crisis and food shortages, Afghanistan, terrorism, trade and connectivity.

China and Russia dominate the SCO. Like last year, this year too, SCO meetings are being held under the shadow of Russia's war in Ukraine, and the resultant geopolitical changes in the world.

Conclusion

SCO veterans describe the forum as a "diplomatic battlefield". The challenge for India is to use both the SCO and the Quad to further its own interests instead of getting trapped in an either-or proposition.