

SCO SUMMIT 2022 FROM PAKISTAN'S PERSPECTIVE

By
Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan
Research Associate
Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI

Edited by
Dr Neelum Nigar

September 27, 2022

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



This year's annual meeting of the Council of Heads of State (CHS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), that took place on September 15-16, 2022 in the Uzbek city of Samarkand¹ was the first in-person meeting in two years since the onset of restrictions imposed in wake of COVID-19 pandemic.

The meeting was attended by the Heads of State of all SCO permanent members, including some from the organisation's observer and dialogue partner states as well, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus and Türkiye.

A significant detail about this 22nd regional summit of the SCO is that it took place in the backdrop of highly fluid and volatile international environment which is marked by: armed conflict; economic and strategic crisis; and major power competition manifesting itself in different parts of the world, particularly in Europe, Africa, Middle East and Indo-Pacific.

Although the agenda of the SCO Summit was mainly to discuss major regional security challenges and issues like trade, investment and energy supplies, however, majority of the conversations during the Summit's proceedings were primarily dominated by the contemporary political and strategic issues being faced by SCO members.

¹ "Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Samarkand, 15-16 September 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, published on September 17, 2022. <https://mofa.gov.pk/meeting-of-the-council-of-heads-of-state-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization-samarkand-15-16-september-2022/>

The same was evident during the speeches of various leaders at the CHS meeting and the accompanying optics of the bilateral meetings that the leaders held on the sidelines of the Summit.

Almost all leaders reiterated the continued support for efforts to counter challenges like terrorism and extremism, separatism, drug trafficking, trans-border organised crime and illegal armed groups in the region. There was also mention of creating frameworks and roadmaps to ensure food and energy security along with adopting connectivity plans that will lead to the extension of regional transit rights within SCO member states.

Leaders of the SCO co-founders even delved into highlighting the challenges that have emerged in the global arena such as the changing political and economic paradigms, prevailing uncertainty in international affairs owing to policies like sanctions and protectionism and the emergence of Cold War mentality (bloc politics and zero-sum game).²

India for one highlighted the persisting global economic woes resulting from the COVID 19 pandemic, the Ukraine War (disruption of global supply-chains) and even boasted about its economic growth (with good reason) along with stressing the need for cooperation on traditional medicine.³

Despite all the significant topics being discussed and issues highlighted during the Summit, along with important developments like: acceptance of Iran's bid to become a full member of the SCO; India becoming the SCO Chair for 2023; and granting of dialogue partner status to Egypt, Qatar & Saudi Arabia, the speech of Pakistan's Prime Minister stood apart from the rest of the leaders' remarks.

Amid all the noise concerning geopolitics, strategy and economics, PM Shehbaz Sharif's speech touched upon the profound perils to humanity (in tandem with the global issues mentioned earlier).

PM Shehbaz Sharif began his speech with making an unfeigned plea for the people of Afghanistan who were experiencing a humanitarian crisis which was exacerbated by the paucity of funds, which necessitated the unfreezing of the country's foreign assets.

² Huaxia, "Full text of Xi's speech at SCO Samarkand summit", Xinhua News, published on September 16, 2022.

<https://english.news.cn/20220916/9a25ddd0a86848a09ef0b2a4e499a52d/c.html>

³ Sujit KumarNath, "PM Modi's remarks at SCO Summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan", Narendra Modi, published on September 20, 2022.

<https://www.narendramodi.in/prime-minister-narendra-modi-s-remarks-at-sco-summit-in-samarkand-uzbekistan-564434>

The Pakistani PM made a compelling point that helping Afghan authorities build a sustainable economy will also enable them to address the issues of political inclusivity, respect for human rights and ensure education for all. Matters which have been points of contestation between the current Afghan authorities and the international community.

He emphasized on a collective effort by all SCO members to support all good initiatives in Afghanistan which will have profound positive impact on peace & security of Pakistan by extension, especially with regards to terrorism.

The most striking points raised by PM Shehbaz Sharif during his remarks were the ones that addressed the impacts of climate change. A challenge that was missing from the remarks of almost all leaders that preceded his speech. It was natural for him to highlight this topic since he was coming from a country that is experiencing one of the worst natural calamities in its history.

He rightly raised the point of climate injustice, of which Pakistan was a primary victim. Despite having one of the lowest carbon (CO₂) emissions/ footprint in the world, Pakistan was still suffering from its effects. The timing of raising this issue was of essence, since four members of the SCO are part of the top 15 countries that are presently the largest CO₂ emitters. (see figures 1 & 2 below)

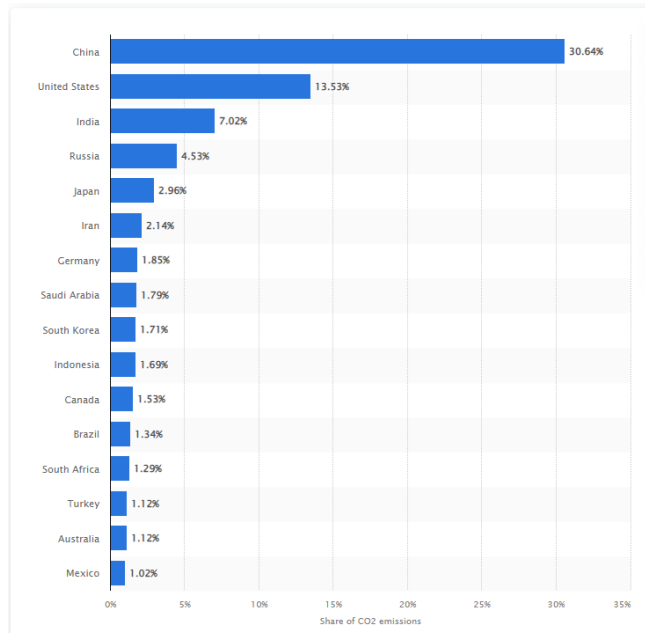


Figure 1.4

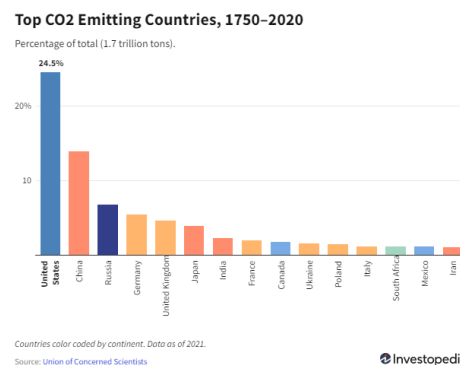


Figure 2.5

4 "Distribution of fossil fuel CO₂ emissions worldwide in 2020, by select country", Statista, released in 2021. <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/092915/5-countries-produce-most-carbon-dioxide-co2.asp>

It was important to inform them that their practices are leading to devastating consequences for other countries (e.g. Pakistan) and steps need to be taken in order to address the issues on priority basis so that any other country does not have to face the devastation that Pakistan is currently experiencing.

It was highly forthcoming of PM Shehbaz Sharif to highlight non-traditional security threats amid all the debate profoundly dominated by traditional security issues. The world leaders' over fixation with strategic and political issues has taken the focus away from significant issues such as climate change which has manifested itself as one of the most daunting threats to human civilization.

While the other SCO leaders discussed issues related to resolving issues in local currencies, global security & economy initiatives and removal of policies like protectionism and sanctions, the Pakistani PM timely raised the issues of Afghanistan, terrorism, climate change, and climate injustice as these were the priority issues that his country was facing and required urgent attention.

Pakistan is the 3rd largest country (by population - 6.83% of the total 3.23 billion) of the SCO. Impacts of climate change in the form of floods and unprecedented rainfall have directly affected 15% of Pakistan's total population, with a third of the country under water.⁶

Despite Pakistan's obligation to bring such issues to the fore at this SCO Summit, it is pertinent for all the SCO members as a collective to respond to the issue, especially China and India (as they have largest populations in SCO 42.4% each and highest carbon footprint), before any other country in the region falls victim to the impacts of climate change.

Issues raised by Pakistan during the SCO Summit 2022 are the ones that impact every country in the region and therefore it is the collective responsibility of all to come up with a well coordinated and united response to these challenges and SCO can prove to be a vital platform to this end.

⁵ Andriy Blokhin, "The 5 Countries That Produce the Most Carbon Dioxide (CO2)", Investopedia, updated on July 02, 2022.
<https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/092915/5-countries-produce-most-carbon-dioxide-co2.asp>

⁶ "Devastating floods in Pakistan", UNICEF, published on September 20, 2022.
<https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/devastating-floods-pakistan-2022>