

SCO SUMMIT 2023 AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION: POSSIBILITIES FOR EURASIAN INTEGRATION AND TOUGH CHOICES AHEAD

By
Ume Farwa
 Research Associate
 India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by
Malik Qasim Mustafa

July 27, 2023

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



On 4th July 2023, the 23rd Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Heads of State took place virtually.¹ The Summit, which is the top hierarchical body in the Eurasian organization, assumed significance for various reasons.

The Summit was attended by all of its full members.² Besides the Observers and Dialogue Partners of SCO, representatives from international organizations also participated. Turkmenistan – a Central Asian country with a neutral foreign policy – was also invited to attend.³

Many important developments took place at the Summit:

- A joint communique, “New Delhi Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organization” was signed and adopted;⁴
- Two other joint statements adopted on countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism; and “cooperation in the field of digital transformation;”

¹ “SCO Summit 2023: India to Host Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Shehbaz Sharif, in Virtual Meeting Today; Details Inside”, *Outlook India*, July 4, 2023, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/sco-summit-2023-india-to-host-xi-jinping-vladimir-putin-shehbaz-sharif-in-virtual-meeting-today-news-300139>

² Ibid.

³ “PM Modi Chairs SCO Summit 2023: Here’s What All Happened in the Meet”, *Business Standard*, July 4, 2023, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/pm-modi-chairs-sco-summit-2023-here-s-what-all-happened-in-the-meet-123070400623_1.html

⁴ “New Delhi Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, July 4, 2023, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36751/New+Delhi+Declaration+of+the+Council+of+Heads+of+State+of+Shanghai+Cooperation+Organization>

- Iran was formally admitted as full member state;
- Belarus signed the Memorandum of Obligations and, now after Iran, it is next to acquire full membership in 2024.⁵

The New Delhi “Joint Declaration”, prepared by India and signed by all the member states, acquired significance for many reasons. Just like the groundbreaking Tashkent Declaration, as signed and adopted at the last SCO Summit, it asserted the need for the SCO family to acknowledge the ongoing yet undeniably prevalent processes of ‘multi-polarity’.⁶ Given the unprecedented challenges that regional and international relations are confronted with, as of now, the final document highlighted the pressing need for the SCO members to build a ‘new type of international order.’⁷

This very acknowledgment, under the flag of SCO, not only charts new possibilities but also highlights tough choices that lie ahead for SCO, especially for its South Asian member – India since it is simultaneously part of several diverse regional and international alignments. Therefore, it seems promising as to how New Delhi is going to join hands with the other SCO members – particularly China and Pakistan – to enhance the regional connectivity processes, at the heart of Eurasia. At the same time, while being equivocal on the subject of accelerating the pace of regional connectivity on paper, New Delhi did not lend support to Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship project, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Except for India, all other members of SCO supported these initiatives in the Document.

In his speech as well, the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi, made allusions to the need for building alternate regional connectivity projects instead of directly giving support to BRI. This, in many ways, not only reflects the prospects but also the challenges that the Eurasian Organization, as a whole, faces as well as its members in their individual capacity.

These challenges and prospects lie wrapped in the very decision of arranging the Summit virtually instead of hosting it physically. The Indian mainstream media outlets also reported how an “urgent letter” was sent by New Delhi’s SCO National Coordinator, Ms. Yonja Patel, addressing all the member states as well as the Secretary-General, Mr. Zhang Ming, simply stating, “The Indian side hereby conveys that the SCO summit on 4 July will be held in virtual format.”⁸ *Times of India* claimed

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Suhasini Haidar, “Government Drops Plans to Host Summit in Delhi, Will Now be in Virtual Format”, *The Hindu*, May 30, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-host-sco-summit-virtually/article66913235.ece>

the possible reason for the cancellation of the SCO Summit, in person, as New Delhi's strife with Beijing and Pakistan.⁹

Despite ambitiously following its "Neighborhood First Policy,"¹⁰ New Delhi was unable to mute the differences with both its strategic neighbors, Islamabad and Beijing, in the Summit.

In his speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated "India's allegations of cross-border terrorism albeit without naming Pakistan and urged all the SCO members to condemn cross-border terrorism suggesting that not doing so was tantamount to double standard", in a veiled reference to China.¹¹

These differences were visible in other meetings of the Organization as well including the SCO Defence Ministers Meeting. In a sideline meeting with his Chinese counterpart, the Indian Defense Minister, Rajnath Singh, stated that restoring peace along their disputed border is the "key to developing their bilateral ties,"¹² whereas the Chinese Defense Minister, Li Shangfu, reiterated that the overall situation at the border area is "largely stable."¹³ These two views indicate how contrasting and opposing Indian and Chinese positions and perspectives are with regard to Sino-Indian disputed area in Ladakh, Tibet.

India's difference of opinion with other SCO members, particularly on the issue of its multi-alignments with other countries, particularly the U.S., is seen as a clash of interests among the members. In the same meeting, the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, vehemently criticized all the military and political alliances, by the U.S. and its allies, such as QUAD and AUKUS.¹⁴ He dubbed these processes as a premeditated plan of the U.S. and its allies to enlarge the ambit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and curtail the otherwise inevitable coming of the multipolar world.¹⁵ Herein lies the rub, not only for New Delhi but for SCO also, how it evolves and adjusts itself to successfully operate as a multilateral Eurasian organization while being fully

⁹ Sachin Parashar, "Amid Strife in Ties with Pakistan and China, India to Host SCO Summit Virtually on 4 July", *The Times of India*, *The Times of India*, May 30, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/amid-strife-in-ties-with-pakistan-and-china-india-to-host-sco-summit-virtually-on-july-4/articleshow/100630144.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁰ Pradipta Roy, "Decoding India's 'Neighborhood First' Policy", *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 76(4), 2015, pp: 1024-1029. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26575650>

¹¹ "India, Pakistan Spar at SCO Video Summit", *Dawn*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1763072>

¹² Anjana Pasricha, "India Says Normal China Ties Depend on Resolving Border Dispute", *Voice of America*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-says-normal-china-ties-depend-on-resolving-border-dispute/7070114.html#:~:text=Indian%20Defence%20Minister%20Rajnath%20Singh,Delhi%2C%20April%2027%2C%202023.>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rajat Pandit, "QUAD, AUCKUS Attempts to Contain China: Russia", *The Times of India*, April 19, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/quad-aucus-attempts-to-contain-china-russia/articleshow/99856653.cms>

¹⁵ Ibid.

cognizant of the need to develop a ‘new’, ‘fair’, ‘just’ and, ‘democratic’ world order for the rising powers.

Elaborating upon India’s strategic engagement within SCO, the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) – the state-owned thinktank – enlisted the objectives of Indian engagement in its special edition on “Renewing the Shanghai Spirit: India’s Presidency of Shanghai Cooperation”. It mentioned the need for India, “to revise the SCO charter, align it with the ASEAN, disrupt Pak-China axis, curtail China’s connectivity projects under BRI, and compel Pakistan to give full transit rights to Afghanistan as India’s sole purpose of engagement at SCO.”¹⁶

In short, the outcomes of the SCO Summit indicate the possibility of continued engagement among regional countries, despite their long-standing differences and disputes. In the case of Pakistan and India, this may be somewhat encouraging as they seemingly have exhausted the possibilities of interaction at the South Asian Regional Cooperation Organization (SAARC) for the time being; while bilateral dialogue also remains stalled. From this perspective, the SCO, as a Eurasian multilateral forum, still promises a pathway for some constructive interaction between these two South Asian states, if the conditions are conducive.

However, at the same time, the Summit echoed with dissonance among the member states as well on a range of subjects: India emphasized building International North-South Corridor (INSTC) terminating in Iran’s Chahbhar Port, in the Gulf; China pressed the need to work together for building a community of shared interests, emphasizing its newly introduced Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI); Pakistan stressed the need to join hands in accelerating the pace of regional connectivity, especially China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as a “vehicle of peace and prosperity in the region”, while urging all member states to fully condemn terrorism in all its forms.¹⁷ Russia, as evident in the aftermath of Ukraine conflict, seemed more concerned with projecting its gains and accruing economic benefits while being hard-pressed by U.S. sanctions.

In the long run, the SCO has still a long way to go to chart a roadmap that can result in regional integration processes and modalities. As of now, it both reflects hope and despair as it continues to expand and evolves to assimilate new member countries in its fold and adjust to an unfolding phase of multi-polarity in the international arena.

¹⁶ “Renewing the Shanghai Spirit: India’s Presidency of Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, *Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)*, September 17, 2022, pp. 5-15.
<https://www.icwa.in/pdfs/ICWASCOGuestColumn.pdf>

¹⁷ “At SCO Virtual Summit, PM Says Terrorism Should be Condemned in Unambiguous Terms”, *Dawn*, July 4, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1762935>