

SCO Summit 2020: RSTV – Big Picture

Anchor: Frank Rausan Pereira

Guests: Vishnu Prakash, Former Ambassador; Alok Bansal, Director, India Foundation; Rajendra Harshe, Foreign Affairs Expert.

What's in the News?

- Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan will be invited to attend the 19th Council of Heads of Government meeting of the **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** which will be hosted by India in 2020.
- Invitations will be sent to all the member countries of the SCO for the summit.
- There are various speculations regarding the presence of Prime Minister Khan during the meeting, given the relationship between the two countries.

Larger Background:

- In 2014, former Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif had visited India after an invite for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swearing-in was sent to all heads of [SAARC countries](#). Since then, no Pakistan prime minister has visited India.
- India and Pakistan have been having troubled relations for quite some time now. India had recently scrapped all bilateral meetings with Pakistan and has held the neighbouring country responsible for sponsoring terror attacks in Kashmir.

What is SCO?

- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the [SCO](#) is a Eurasian political, economic and security organization.
- It is the largest regional organization in the world in terms of geographical coverage and population, covering three-fifths of the Eurasian continent and nearly half of the human population.
- SCO grew out of the **Shanghai Five** founded in 1996 with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as its original members, and since then has expanded, bringing the total to eight countries as its members.
- India and Pakistan joined the SCO as full members in 2017 during a summit at Astana, Kazakhstan.
- The SCO is widely regarded as an "**alliance of the East**" due to its growing centrality in Asia-Pacific, and has been the primary security pillar of the region.
- The **Heads of the States Council** is the principal decision-making body. The committee adopts decisions and guidelines on significant matters of the organization and meets on an annual basis.
- The **Heads of Government Council** is the second-highest body. Meetings are also held at the levels of heads of parliament, ministers of foreign affairs, economy, transport, etc.
- **SCO Secretariat** in Beijing and **Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure**, Tashkent are the two permanent bodies of the SCO.
- The SCO's official languages are **Russian** and **Chinese**.
- Military exercises are conducted periodically among members to promote teamwork and coordination against terrorism and other external threats and to maintain regional peace and stability.
- The **Council of National Coordinators** of SCO Member States (**CNC**) acts as the SCO coordination mechanism.

Goals of SCO:

- **SCO's primary goals** are as follows:

- Strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states.
- Promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, research, technology, and culture as well as in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, and other areas.
- Making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security, and stability in the region and,
- Moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.

Significance of SCO to India:

- The SCO's significance for India lies in its economics and geopolitics with the Eurasian states.
- The SCO member states occupy the huge landmass adjacent to India's extended neighborhood where India has both economic and security imperatives.
- The SCO provides India with a potential platform to advance its **Connect Central Asia Policy**, which is vital to diversify the country's energy sources and expand its trade opportunities.
- This would also enable India to gain access to intelligence and information from SCO's counter-terrorism body - **the Tashkent-based Regional Anti Terror Structure (RATS)**.
- It is also the only multilateral forum that permits India to deal in close proximity with Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Finally, it is essential to note that the SCO provides an opportunity for the Indian leadership to connect with the leadership of the Central Asian countries.

Why was Pakistan invited?

- India would be hosting the SCO summit for the first time.
- The SCO protocol mandates that all heads of government be invited to the meeting for the meeting to take place.
- India, being the host, had to invite the Pakistan Prime Minister, to carry out a constructive role and expand engagements in a multilateral forum like the SCO. The action is, thus, a result of the nature of the organization.
- The speculations regarding Pakistan Prime Minister's presence are based on the ideology that Pakistan does not have many options left but to accept the invitation and that the country wants to work on its relations with India.
- This can also open up the possibility of a bilateral meeting with Pakistan.
- However, there are other pressing issues that should be considered for discussion on the multilateral forum, rather than placing a lot of focus and attention on the invitation extended to Pakistan.
- The global perspective of the organization and its multilateral nature should be maintained.

Could the relationship between India and Pakistan change?

- The joining of India and Pakistan to the organization has shifted its focus from being Central Asia centric to considering the issues and security of Southern Asia too.
- India-Pakistan relations have been turbulent for the most part, however, things took a turn for the worse when Pakistani backed militants launched a terrorist attack on the armed forces base at Uri, Jammu & Kashmir. Following this, India had repudiated its relations with Pakistan.
- However, the finalizing of the **Kartarpur corridor** has presented a narrow ray of hope for the initiation of talks between India and Pakistan.

Issues of concern for India:

- India's prime concerns are to address **terrorism** and connectivity. These issues also happen to be in line with SCO's core objectives which are to work against terrorism, separatism, and extremism.
- India should, therefore, try to highlight the issue of terrorism and put pressure on Pakistan to stop

supporting terrorist organizations.

- **Connectivity** stands as one of the most formidable hurdles before India. Most Central Asian countries would like to engage with India due to their apprehensions with Russia and China. The markets of Central Asia would open up tremendous trade opportunities for India, however, connectivity to these countries poses a problem.
- The existing tensions between Iran and the US might result in an **energy crisis** within India.

How should India's approach towards China be?

- Interactions between India and China began after India's independence (1947) and the Communist revolution in China (1949).
- The Chinese mistrust in India stemmed from Nehru's support for an independent Tibet and the relations worsened after the [Sino-Indian war, 1962](#).
- However, in recent times, India has attempted to engage and work on its relations with China.
- China is a rising **hegemonic power**, with the aim of creating a China-centric world economy.
- China has twin objectives:
 - It doesn't want India to rise to become a global competitor and is, therefore, trying to limit its development to southern Asia by using Pakistan.
 - Having Pakistan and China at the same high-table during the SCO meeting might prove to be a cause of worry for India.
 - It doesn't want India to be an ally of the US. Thus, it doesn't oppose India completely in all matters.
- Considering the prevailing border issues between India and China, the scope for an improvement in the relationship seems next to impossible; thus, India should focus on managing the relationship at present.
- India should also focus on softening its tensions with China and have a long-term approach while dealing with China.
- China is a major world power and one of India's largest trading partners. Thus, India should utilize its soft power and focus on expanding its trade with China.

What is the role played by Russia?

- India and Russia have a strategic partnership rooted in mutual trust.
- A watershed moment in relations between India and the Soviet Union was the signing of the **Treaty of Peace and Friendship** in August 1971.
- The Treaty was the manifestation of shared goals of the two nations as well as a blueprint for the strengthening of regional and global peace and security.
- However, India's relations with Russia had come under pressure because of American policies like CAATSA, etc. and although India has tended to go on with the U.S. sanctions on Iran, however, India has stood very firm on the **S-400 deal** with Russia.
 - The S-400 is one of Russia's most sophisticated pieces of military equipment, with advanced surveillance radar and a suite of missiles that can closely track and target aircraft from the ground.
 - India announced its intention to acquire Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile systems in 2015 and the delivery contract worth USD 5.43 billion was signed during the last visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to India.
- India has participated in all major economic forums in Russia including SPIEF, Eastern Economic Forum, Innoprom, Technoprom, IT Forum, Arctic Forum, among others.
- However, Russia has been growing closer to China, which might prove to be a cause of worry to India given the relations between India and China.

Challenges for India:

- While India has made its opposition to the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) clear, all other SCO members have embraced the Chinese project.
- The growing closeness of Russia and China might prove to be worrisome for India.
- India's bilateral trade with Central Asia and Russia is very low compared to China's trade with Russia and Central Asia.
- The lack of connectivity between regions rich in hydrocarbons and India has proved to be a hurdle in the development of energy ties between the Central Asian countries and India.

Way Forward:

- India has to utilize the opportunities that SCO provides for India to interact with the leadership of Central Asian countries.
- India should use this opportunity for promoting an informal dialogue process with the SCO member states.
- India should utilize this opportunity to expand its trade relations with other countries.
- It should also use the multilateral platform to put pressure on the issue of terrorism.
- India should maintain its relations with China by using its soft power while working on strengthening its relations with Russia.
- The forum also presents India with an excellent opportunity to showcase its potential and enhance its collaboration with other SCO countries.
- India should learn to manage the Rimland and the Heartland, which will enhance India's power in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific region.

Other noteworthy points:

- **Mackinder Heartland Theory:** The Heartland theory is a geopolitical concept that analyzes the political and economic success of the world's regions by geography.
 - The theory was hypothesized by 20th-century British geopolitical scholar **Halford Mackinder** in his 1904 paper called "**The Geographical Pivot of History**."
 - This theory regards political history as a continuous struggle between land and sea powers with the ultimate victory going to the continental power.
 - The theory proposed that whoever controls Eastern Europe controlled the Heartland.
 - It also supported the concept of world dominance.
- **Rimland Theory of Spykman:** Spykman proposed a theory that countered Mackinder's Heartland Theory. According to his rimland theory, the coastal areas or littorals of Eurasia are key to controlling the World Island, not the Heartland.
 - Spykman held that rimland was the key to world power since seapower and airpower through their domination of the littoral coast, would be able to contain and dominate heartland.
 - According to Spykman, geopolitics is essential for planning the security policy of a country in terms of its geographical factors.
 - With the defeat of Germany and the emergence of the USSR, Spykman's views were embraced during the formulation of the Cold War American policy.

