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# **GEOPOLITICAL REALIGNMENT IN GREATER EURASIA**

**India's Strategic Imperatives and the Shanghai  
Cooperation Organisation**

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## About the Author

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On 27 Jan 2022, Prime Minister Modi emphasised on India’s vision for an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood on the occasion of the first India-Central Asia summit. He espoused the core of Greater Eurasian stability encapsulated in “SECURE”: Safeguarding citizens' Security, fostering inclusive Economic growth, regional Connectivity, fostering Unity, upholding Sovereignty, and promoting Environmental preservation—a comprehensive framework embodying multidimensional aspects crucial for the region's sustainable development. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), joined by India in 2017, has witnessed India’s renewed outreach to states in Central Asia, who themselves have attempted to diversify their relations beyond the Chinese and the Russians. India stands to harness broad support for its “SECURE” proposition, fostering robust coalitions within the SCO that align with its key priorities: combating terrorism and enhancing regional connectivity. Sustaining a comprehensive stance on counterterrorism remains imperative for India's enduring engagement and influence within the organisation.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation remains imperative for the regionalization process of the greater Eurasian macro region. According to *Aris* (2018), there exists fair amount of scepticism regarding the level of cooperation among SCO member states. The scepticism claims that the organisation is nothing but a type of club for its various heads of state or a conference hosting their annual meetings that does not pursue any specific objectives.

Some sceptics argue that the SCO's member nations are too disparate, citing variations in political structures, economies, belief systems, and cultural foundations as impediments to cohesive collaboration (*Imanaliev, 2017*). This article essentially aims to argue that *India stands poised to reap enduring advantages from sustained SCO engagement, notably in fortifying regional counterterrorism strategies and bolstering Central Asian connectivity. Nevertheless, the pervasive ascendancy of China within the SCO and Central Asia poses formidable barriers, constraining the consolidation of India's sway within the expansive Greater Eurasian framework.*

## The Politics of Indian ‘National Interest’

The significance of the SCO's role and its potential long-term advantages for India's participation align with a realist paradigm in foreign policy. Emphasising "national interest," India's involvement in the SCO and engagement with Central Asia reflect a classical realist or realpolitik approach, navigating membership within an organisation housing both China, as a rather dominant member as well as Pakistan.

## Catalyzing Regional Counter-Terrorism Efforts and Intelligence Collaboration

The SCO can be utilised to give birth to an effective regional anti-terrorist structure. India could leverage the wide acceptance of its “SECURE” proposal to build stronger coalitions with the SCO, as mentioned earlier. India’s emphasis on the adoption of a holistic counter terrorism approach is an important part of the country’s engagement with the SCO. The deployment of India's delegate at the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent not only facilitates intelligence sharing but also serves as a pivotal platform to monitor destabilising elements in Eurasia, whose repercussions could permeate into South Asia, engendering regional instability. Additionally, it furnishes India with an avenue to exert influence, urging the SCO towards a unified stance on counterterrorism. This strategic effort by India aims to raise awareness among SCO member states regarding its terrorism-related apprehensions, a shared concern among multiple stakeholders within the organisation. Such diplomatic mechanisms can be affirmed to be more effective than military intervention. *Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Tim Dunne (2016)* discuss the ‘Blowback’ effect of foreign policy. It argues that the attempts to eliminate threats through military means can potentially amplify greater societal insecurity in the said region and for the wider international order.

On October 13, 2023, the National Security Guard (NSG) of India orchestrated the SCO's Joint Anti-Terror Exercise (JATE). In a statement, the NSG articulated the exercise's primary aim: fostering the exchange of expertise, best practices, and the cultivation of synergy among SCO RATS Member Countries' Counter Terrorism Forces. The exercise's overarching goal is to

augment capabilities for collective anti-terror operations and the mitigation of diverse security threats. By providing a platform for participating member countries, this exercise seeks to elevate operational capacities and facilitate the exchange of experiences in addressing shared regional security challenges encompassing Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism.

## **India's Geo Economic Diplomacy: Advancing Connectivity in Central Asia Through SCO Engagement**

Central Asian Republics (CARs) remain efficient in the practice of major power balancing. They are quick to exploit the existing advantages by being the object of multiple powerful suitors. According to some experts, the convergence of efforts for building a new paradigm of economic cooperation in Eurasia could substantially facilitate the implementation of India's International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Hillman, 2017). According to the developers, the transnational corridor – to be built with international participation – will reduce the cost and time required to transport cargo between such cities as Mumbai, Bandar Abbas, Tehran, Baku, Aktau, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. This route is said to emerge as the engine of trade in a region that experiences development and people to people integration. Russian Deputy Industry and Trade Minister Choriyev Ergashevich has characterised the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as a ‘very important corridor for the development of freight traffic in the region.’ Additionally, he proposed that member countries explore collaborative efforts in the joint design and construction of container ships and railway lines, underscoring the corridor's potential for fostering collective initiatives in transportation infrastructure. Projects like Chabahar port and INSTC provide an option beyond China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Given the growth of India's economy and its IT sector, it holds the potential to be a contributing power in Central Asian development. SCO deliberations regarding Afghanistan remain integral to India if she wants to experience improved connectivity with CARs. Furthermore, Tourism stands as a pivotal economic factor for nations, and India possesses a significant opportunity to leverage its rich cultural and

historical heritage, particularly with strong Buddhist connections, to promote key cities and regions as prime tourist destinations among SCO countries. In short, SCO provides India with a convenient channel in the advancement of India's Connect Central Asia policy.

Currently, India relies on the sea route from Rotterdam to St. Petersburg, often through China and further inland, for transporting goods to Russia. The establishment of the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) would significantly diminish the expenses involved in transporting goods from India to Eurasia and neighbouring regions. Several studies suggest that INSTC implementation would notably decrease transit time and costs, fostering smoother and more efficient movement of goods from India to Russia and its adjacent nations. India's admission to the Ashgabat Agreement in 2011 underscores its vision when it comes to formulating long-term strategies to foster economic trade. These projects hint towards the fact that not only China, but India as well, is taking keen interest in infrastructure diplomacy with the developing world. India's recent efforts to emerge as the voice of the Global South was seen during her G20 Presidency. In November 2023, India organised the second edition of the Voice of Global South Summit. CARs form an integral composition of the Global South. India's Global South engagement also brings it closer to Central Asia. On the occasion of the second Voice of the Global South Summit, Nurtleu, Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs commended India on the successful completion of its G20 presidency. Emphasising the strategic alliance between Astana and New Delhi, he underscored the significance of collaboration between Kazakhstan and the Global South. He highlighted the imperative need to bolster transport connectivity and diversify routes for enhanced cooperation.

## **Confronting The China problem: Impediment to India's influence in Central Asia amidst Chinese hegemony and expansionism**

President Xi Jinping, in his address to the 23rd meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), articulated China's commitment to facilitating

knowledge and market access while sharing developmental experience. He emphasised the intent to empower young agricultural professionals by implementing capacity-building initiatives. China pledged to conduct specialised training in digital technologies through collaborative efforts with the China-SCO Big Data Cooperation Center and to convene an SCO national forum focused on fostering sustainable green development. The Chinese diplomatic plan of action clearly suggests the hegemon's interests in influencing Central Asian economies.

The competitive dynamics between India and China within the SCO framework could potentially hamper interactions, impeding the progression of initiatives and stalling negotiations on agreements. The stability and prosperity of Central Asian states persist as fragile entities, yet China's involvement has presented these nations with avenues for infrastructure development and previously inaccessible opportunities. This engagement has diversified the external major-power interests, enabled a balancing effect, and concurrently enhanced the diplomatic stature and negotiation capacity of these states. Recently, India refused to sign China's Economic Development Plan 2030 presented at SCO due to her apprehension towards the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and BRI.

## **China's Diplomatic and Economic Edge Over India**

The primary challenge arises from the competition between Russia and China in Central Asia, evident in their respective initiatives within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the BRI. These initiatives, geared toward bolstering Beijing and Moscow's regional influence, pose conflicting economic interests. Consequently, some argue that linking or coupling these projects is unfeasible, citing contradicting economic objectives between the two endeavours (Daily FT, 2017; Marantidou & Cossa, 2014). It can be affirmed that the Russian influence in Central Asia is rooted from its past whereas the Chinese Influence arises from a futuristic point of view. According to various studies, the on-ground Kazakh perception is that China is a competing hegemony that remains economically benevolent but at the same time, is politically uninvolved. China has built extensive road networks, connecting internal cities and international borders. Chinese engineers are perceived as competent, and many locals are content with the evolving transport linkages. China's economic presence does not only prevail in the trade sector. In addition to providing

consumer products to Central Asian markets, China has strategically positioned itself in the realm of infrastructure development.

Media coverage often tends to highlight issues of conflicts between China and Central Asian states, overshadowing instances where these states leverage their position effectively in negotiations. Notably, examples in hydrocarbon investments, trade infrastructure development, and instances of local resistance to specific security, diplomatic, and investment proposals reflect Central Asian acumen in managing engagements with China. A similar trend is observed in dealings between African nations and China. However, these instances showcasing successful negotiations and collaborations often receive less attention in western media narratives. The case of Turkmenistan serves as a prominent example highlighting the potential risk of over-dependence on China. Being both isolated and reliant on its resource abundance, Turkmenistan exhibited a substantial increase in exporting its considerable natural gas production to China, reaching 94% in 2017, a stark elevation from roughly 50% in 2012.

## **Pakistan's SCO Membership, Counter-Terrorism Flaws in the Regional Framework, and the Sino-Russian Nexus**

Both Pakistan and India joined the SCO in 2017. New Delhi's membership was supported by Moscow, while Pakistan's inclusion was strongly advocated by its enduring ally, China. SCO adopted a far tougher posture on threats faced by its founding members in Eurasia vis-à-vis the South Asian region. Prime Minister Modi had earlier iterated the urgency for SCO to have a unified terror list. SCO is unable to reach a consensus on Pakistan sponsored terrorism, mostly on account of China shielding its ally, which remains a major concern for India.

The situation in Ukraine also has several geopolitical implications in Central Asia and SCO. Russian Timur Umarov, a scholar associated with the Moscow Carnegie Center, contends that despite Russia's established presence in Central Asia, the repercussions stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine may potentially elevate Beijing's attractiveness as a regional partner.



This pertains to China's substantial investments amounting to billions of dollars and its economic dominance in the area.

To some extent, one can argue that Chinese ambitions in Central Asia are kept in check by Russian interests and paternalism. However, despite a fairly strong Indo-Russian dynamic, it would be rather unusual to see Moscow backing New Delhi at the expense of their diplomatic nexus with Beijing. Russia's seemingly entrenched reliance on China influences the belief among some circles and numerous foreign observers that India's foreign policy must strategically pivot away from Russia and align more toward the Western bloc. Putin's support towards the CPEC and BRI emerges as a major area of discomfort for India.

Thus, we can conclude that India is likely to benefit from sustained SCO engagement by strengthening regional counterterrorism efforts and connectivity in Central Asia. However, Chinese influence in the SCO and the Central Asian region presents significant challenges, limiting India's solidification of influence in the broader Greater Eurasian context.

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