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INDIA'S PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN SCO: MOVING CLOSER TO ITS 'EXTENDED' NEIGHBOURHOOD

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Since its independence, India's foreign policy has evolved from 'non-alignment' to 'Soviet dependency' to 'India Matters' and now towards 'all-alignment'.¹ Hence, '*Sabke Saath Sabka Vikaas*'², which in other words means 'together with all, development with all', has emerged as the new developmental vision of India's contemporary foreign policy approach. One such effort in this direction is India's permanent membership alongside Pakistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). India is all set to assume its post as a permanent representative to the organisation this year after completing the requisite formalities. This development is being widely welcomed by both the political elites and the scholarly community as a) New Delhi will work towards development and progress together with Pakistan and China-neighbours which have often been a major security threat to the country, and b) India would gain more influence and access to Central Asia as

geographical distance will no longer be a constraint.

India's conduct as a permanent member in the organisation will be under critical observation as the success of promoting connectivity to Central Asia will be based on its influence, investment, engagement and objectives. At this crucial juncture, it is important to evaluate how India, China, and Pakistan, in particular will accommodate each other's interests in the geopolitics of the Eurasian space. Other key questions include:

- 1) Will the permanent membership and engagement in any way influence the behavioural pattern of all the three states at the bilateral level?
- 2) Will the existing impediments in the bilateral relations between India, Pakistan and China impact the progress of SCO?



The five Republics of Central Asia—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan since their independence have pursued an autonomous multi-vector foreign policy approach. In this process, the countries became members of various economic and military organisations including the SCO which has now emerged as the most successful organisation in the Eurasian region. The success has been accredited to the role and investment by China in the development of the Central Asian Republics (CARs).

India's relations with Central Asia in the past were more through the prism of Indo-Soviet ties. Until recently, the region continued to remain India's 'extended neighbourhood' more due to its geographical distance and policy initiatives which were at a minuscule level. Only few diplomatic engagements and prime ministerial visits have taken place between CARs and New Delhi. The region gained significance in 2012 when India initiated the 'Connect Central Asia' policy focusing in all spheres of political, security, economic and cultural connections.

The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June 2015 to all the CARs was based on the diplomatic initiative called 'Diplomacy for Development'. During his visit, an array of issues related to security, energy, trade and mutual cooperation were deliberated with the leaders of the Republics. With 'geo-economics' being the primary mantra promoted by Modi's

government, energy and trade were the key agenda of cooperation with CARs. 'Bilateral declarations and signing of mutual agreements by the leaders of all five republics and India has put Eurasia firmly in India's zone of interest'.³

With positive signaling from both India and the CARs, there is high expectation that the permanent membership in SCO may address many of India's inadequacies in order to sustain its economic growth and strategic influence in international affairs. One of the major hurdles identified is the growing demand for energy for industrial and infrastructural development. Regrettably, India is an energy deficit country. In order to fulfill its energy requirements, 'India's 'oil diplomacy' in search of new energy assets is fast becoming a 'crucial' component of its foreign policy'.⁴ Central Asia is thus seen as the key region for India to realise its material interests to achieve energy security.

Kazakhstan is one of the biggest producers of Uranium in the World, while Turkmenistan has the fifth largest natural gas reserves in the world. 'The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which will begin from the Dauletabad gas field and end in Fazilka on the Punjab border, is touted as the backbone of the emerging relationship. Construction of the pipeline has started in Turkmenistan on 13 December 2015. Uzbekistan has allowed Indian participation in the development of its Karakal gas reserves'.⁵ The 'Kazakh uranium mining

company KazAtomProm signed a contract with India's Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) on July 07, 2015 to supply 5000 tonnes of uranium over the next four years'.⁶ Nevertheless, the key question is will India play the role of China or is India ill prepared in tapping the enormous prospects of the region especially in terms of promoting energy diplomacy?

There is also the defence cooperation aspect between the CARs and India which has included a significant component of aid to the Republics' nascent militaries. India has provided training to Tajik forces to cope with its security threats. In collaboration with Tajikistan Air Force, India had its first and only military air base outside its territory in Ayni. While Tajikistan has some capability in producing solid-propellant rocket motors, Kyrgyzstan is reported to have facilities for producing torpedo components, small arms and armored vehicles'.⁷ It is worth mentioning here that, permanent membership in SCO will help mature defence relations between India and CARs; there will be further scope for bilateral dialogue to explore prospects for 'Make in India' project. This is likely to trigger commercial/military equipment acquisitions from India in the future.

Indian interests in parts of Central Asia are also driven by a desire to help diversify its economic relations. Trade and economic relations has been less than \$800 million in 2012-13. Though economic engagement has

been minimal, geographical location will no longer be a constraint in developing stronger economic relations as the operationalisation of the international North-South Transport Corridor is expected to overcome the impediment for weak economic relations. Furthermore, information technology, pharmaceutical and banking sector are some of the potential areas of cooperation.

With regards to the strategic relevance of Central Asia, the allied pull out from Afghanistan, the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Pakistan's support and aid to terror networks, and a possible re-emergence of Taliban in the region would make India's security more vulnerable to terrorists' activities. Like Russia, China and CARs, India also shares common interests and concerns in the stability and security of the Af-Pak region. New Delhi is keen on becoming part of some of the initiatives by the SCO such as the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) which focuses exclusively on combating terrorism and related illegal transnational activities, including money laundering. This has reinforced India's confidence in the forum which is not only taking shape as an economic forum but also aims to establish peace and stability in the region. Moreover, a stable non-Taliban government in Afghanistan is essential for strong cooperation with the SCO member states to combat terrorism, secure borders from non-conventional threats and also

to provide a secure pipeline route for the TAPI project.

Russia's consistent support to India's permanent membership into the forum and mutual trust has further strengthened the bilateral relations between the two countries. On one side, Moscow sees the successful role of China in CARs more as a 'caretaker', but on the other hand, China's growing influence and investment in the region's developmental projects has caused anxiety among the Russian political elites. The performance of Eurasian Economic Union and the SCO may have both the countries at daggers drawn over the future of their respective pet-projects including the presence of Islamabad which is the 'all weather strategic partner' of Beijing. At this critical juncture, the threat to Russian interests is not just from the West but also from the East. Therefore, India's inclusion in the SCO is being interpreted as Moscow preparing a geopolitical environment where its interests are not challenged but given unconditional and favourable support from its closest and trusted partner- India.

A serious apprehension is growing regarding the engagement between India and China in the forum as Beijing is undoubtedly the leader of SCO. Apart from the unresolved border dispute, widening economic growth performance and assertive offensive military posturing by China against India has been a major concern.

Despite resentment over China's treatment of the Uyghur conflict, Beijing has been successful in image building in Central Asia through huge financial assistance and developmental projects. India, on the other hand, is far behind in moulding strong bilateral and diplomatic relation with the Central Asian states to its benefit. There is no doubt that a constant comparison between India and China's role and influence in the region would ensue. Moreover, China will be on the defensive to protect its interests in the region if threatened by India's influence alongside Russia's support.

Some impending questions also arise regarding Pakistan's membership in the organisation. While China is pleased to have Islamabad on board, India is sceptical of Islamabad's role and intentions. The most worrisome aspect is the historical rivalry between India and Pakistan. Pakistan's past record of harbouring and financing terrorist organisations against India and its support to a Taliban led government in Afghanistan can be a major hurdle in New Delhi gaining confidence from Islamabad's commitment as a member of SCO to fight against terrorism which has often worked against Indian interests.

However, is it right to say that permanent membership in SCO, has provided an opportunity for India to move closer to Central Asian region and look beyond South Asian geopolitics? The answer is, 'NOT YET', because for the foreign

policy vision of 'progress with all' to become a reality and be more effective, India has to first insulate its worrisome bilateral relations with its immediate neighbours— China and Pakistan. Despite efforts to revive the bilateral engagements, unresolved border issues, suspicion, offensive-defensive military capabilities including possession of nuclear weapons has hampered the very progress of a stable partnership between these three countries. Geographical distance would no longer be a limitation only once Pakistan and China provide India a crucial economic opportunity through economic corridors such as CPEC, OBOR, New silk route, infrastructural projects, and energy pipeline routes. Thus, India, China and Pakistan should build confidence and explore opportunities that will enhance the commitment and principles of the organisation. The success of SCO depends on its farsightedness, equal participation, zero competition, accommodation of each other's interests and its resolve to establish stability and security in the region and beyond.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Dr. Manpreet Sethi during a fellow's seminar in Centre for Air Power Studies made reference to the India's foreign policy which has according to her evolved from 'non-alignment to all-alignment'.

² 'Sabke Saath Sabka Vikaas' was the poll slogan by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his election campaign,

⁴ "Narendra Modi's 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas' Is Great Vision: John Kerry", *The Economic Times*, July 29, 2014. http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-07-29/news/52186696_1_india-us-strategic-dialogue-state-john-kerry-new-indian-government accessed on March 12, 2016

³ P.L Dash, "When Central Asia Calls", *The Indian Express*, July 27, 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/when-central-asia-calls/> accessed on August 30, 2015.

⁴ Gulshan Sachdeva, "Geoeconomics and Energy for India" in David Scott, ed., *Handbook of India's International Relations*, (London, Routledge, 2011), p.48

⁵ Jyoti Prasad Das, India's 'Connect Central Asia' Policy, *Foreign Policy Journal*, October 29, 2012 <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/10/29/indias-connect-central-asia-policy/> accessed on November 30, 2015

⁶ "Kazakhstan Agrees to Supply Uranium to India", *World Nuclear News*, July 08, 2015. <http://www.world-nuclear-news.org/UF-Kazakhstan-agrees-to-supply-uranium-to-India-0807156.html> accessed on August 28, 2015

⁷ "India's Relations with Central Asian Republics: The Role of Defense Cooperation", *Aviotech Defense Advisory and Investments*, Thought Leadership Series, October 2011. http://www.aviotech.com/pdf/Aviotech_Thought_Leadership_Series_Central_Asia_October_2011.pdf accessed on August 30, 2015.