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SIGNIFICANCE OF SCO FOR INDIA -PEACE MISSION EXERCISE - 2018

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A fast changing security paradigm is throwing up new challenges and concerns. These threats range from inter-state conflicts, terrorism to economic, demographic and social tensions, ethno-religious issues, mass-migration, financial turmoil, environmental degradation etc. All of these can be found in Asia, which is believed to be the playground of 21st century. Interestingly, the large continent is united on various fronts, such as inter-regional contiguity, cultural and civilizational commonalities, inter dependence for hydro-carbon resources, common environmental issues, increasing intra-regional trade and investment. But, the security concerns faced by the region are also many, for example, territorial disputes, terrorism and religious extremism, proliferation of small arms, drugs and human trafficking, mass migration and water management etc. Addressing this plethora requires multilateral initiatives especially those, at the regional level can play a significant role in this regard. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a platform which unites a

significant number of Asian countries and can thus play a significant role in aiding countries to address these threats. So far it has been a success story on some fronts; however, the larger goals are still not within the reach, specifically, the threats emanating from religious extremism/terrorism, small arms proliferation, drug and human proliferation etc.

While terrorism is a global phenomenon, SCO member states are particularly grappling with it not only in terms of suffering terrorist attacks but also becoming a rich breeding ground for such organisations. Further, technology is the most lethal weapon in the arsenal of extremist groups today. Its unprecedented reach, instant connectivity, anonymity, resourcefulness along with low cost of access make it most potent tool in extremist hands. Availability of drug finances abets illicit small arms and human trafficking-transnational crimes that affect us all.

Consequently, to deal with this menace, the member-states emphasised on the need to

enhance their efforts against terrorism and its ideology, the detection and elimination of factors and conditions that facilitate terrorism/extremism during the Qingdao SCO Summit-2018.¹ To achieve it, enhancing trust among themselves on military matters and working together to counter new challenges and threats is a significant step. Although to impart more substance to the SCO anti-terrorism cooperation, the member states have been engaged in military cooperation, exchange, training and joint operations since 2003.² Initially, these were termed as “anti-terror” exercises, but lately, military-to military activities involving large scale war games were termed as Peace Missions. The SCO Peace Mission exercise is conducted every two years for the SCO member states and it involves tactical level operations in an international counter insurgency or counter-terrorism environment under the SCO charter. The scope of the exercise includes professional interaction, mutual understanding of drills and procedures, establishment of joint command and control structures and elimination of terrorist threat in urban counter terrorist scenario.³ These exercises can be termed as one of the important defence cooperation initiatives amongst the SCO member-states.

Peace Mission and India

Peace Mission-2018 holds its importance for India as it participated in this drill for the first time after becoming a full member of the SCO in 2017 on the one hand and expansion of SCO's

counter-terrorism mission to South Asia on the other hand. The exercise was conducted in Chebarkul, Russia where over 3,000 troops from of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, China, India and Pakistan participated in this military drill while the representatives from Uzbekistan served as observers.⁴ Actually, India was a part of this decision taken early this year when an Indian military delegation led by Major General Ajay Seth participated for the first time in a meeting of the international military cooperation departments of the SCO.⁵ Further, India joined an anti-cyber-terrorism drill in Xiamen organised by the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in December 2017 which was designed to improve coordination in a scenario dealing with a terrorist group that had infiltrated into SCO countries. Besides, India has also participated in the Defence Ministerial meet and Foreign Ministerial meet of SCO in April this year to brain storm strategies and strengthen its stand against terrorism.

India's active participation in such endeavours highlights its resolve to counter terrorism in all its forms. Therefore, as an SCO member, these drills provide India with great opportunities to develop an expanded partnership with the broader Eurasian region and work for the shared objective of achieving peace and stability. Further, these exercises are conducted under the auspices of RATS, and the importance of RATS lies in the fact that it

possesses a terrorism database of approximately 2,500 suicide bombers and 69 organizations.⁶ For India, this database will help it map the threat. Moreover, having access to a database of trans-national terror groups will help India's own fight against them.⁷ Also, regular participation in the meetings of RATS and joint military drills could provide a new level of intelligence sharing and could also enhance counter-terrorism strategies to fight terrorism.

Furthermore, a key convergence of interest among all the SCO members is preventing Afghanistan from becoming the hub of religious extremism and terrorism and ensuring to make it a commercial bridge between South and Central Asia. Presently, we are witnessing a downturn in the security environment in Afghanistan. Therefore, it becomes essential for SCO countries to be able to provide a higher degree of clarity and coordination of policies on this important country which has implications for regional security. This in itself is a challenging task. But here lies the importance of SCO because the success of any security measures undertaken depends upon the strong political will of the member countries. Therefore, improved cooperation mechanism through security and defence engagement, intelligence sharing and interaction between law enforcement agencies can prove to be detrimental in consensus-building among the SCO countries.

Clearly, the SCO provides India an appropriate platform to strengthen its outreach to Eurasia. Existing defence cooperation at bilateral level with individual states will help in strengthening this engagement further. So far India's engagement in this platform has been very positive and within the Shanghai framework. Therefore, India's participation in all these manoeuvres should be seen from a broader and long-term perspective. There do exist many geo-strategic challenges that India will have to navigate, because SCO comprises of eight countries with different historical experiences, political environments and varying strategic interests. While, accepting the challenges and availing the opportunities, India's foreign policy dimension, in the words of former Foreign Secretary Dr.S.Jaishankar (Wire, 2015), should be to aspire to be a leading power, rather than just a balancing power. Therefore, engaging the world with greater confidence and assurance is the basic *Mantra*.

(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“Qingdao Declaration of the Council of Heads of States of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”, <http://eng.sectsc.org/load/443677/>, accessed on 27 August, 2018

² Jianwei Wang, “China and SCO-Towards a new type of Interstate Relations”, in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne, ed., *China turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security*, (London: Routledge, 2008), p.113.

³ “Opening Ceremony Exercise SCO Peace Mission 2018”, <http://pib.nic.in/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=183039>, accessed on 29 August, 2018

⁴ “First participants of Peace Mission 2018 international exercise arrive in Southern Ural”, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 14 August, 2018, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12191005@egNews, accessed on 29 August, 2018

⁵ “India attends its first SCO military cooperation meeting”, *The Times of India*, 16 January, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-attends-its-first-sco-military-cooperation-meeting/articleshow/62521727.cms>, accessed on 29 April, 2018

⁶ “Shanghai Pact Anti-Terror Database lists 2,500 Suicide Bombers, 69 Groups”, *Sputnik News*, 13 September, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201609131045248480-sco-rats-terrorism/>, accessed on 28 August, 2018

⁷ Smruti S Pattanaik, “Reshaping Asian Politics”, *Dhaka Tribune*, 13 June, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/2018/06/13/reshaping-asian-politics-2>, accessed on 15th July, 2018