

## THE SCO AND INDIA'S PRESIDENCY

By Ambassador Anil Trigunayat

India took over the Presidency of the over two decades old Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in September and that of the G20 in December 2022 for a year at a time when the global tensions due to the Eurasian War and devastating impact of the Covid pandemic were defining the not so flattering contours of the global transitional order or disorder depending from which pivot one looks at it. It was expected to be a very difficult period since super power competition is really on its peak and global goods, commons and welfare have been given a short shrift. India, with an avowed principled policy of strategic autonomy, dialogue, diplomacy and peace emerged not only as a Voice of the Global South but also a voice of sanity in international discourse. Hence when at the Samarkand Summit of SCO, PM Narendra Modi told the Russian President Putin that the 'Era of War is over' it resonated well with all sides. India waded through all the challenges including 'abnormal' relations with China due to 'Galwan' and 'Tawang' border incidents and successfully completed her Presidency of the SCO and is on the way to do the same for the G20 Summit in September. It has been exceptional under most difficult circumstances and sharply dividing fault lines among major powers.

Although the 23<sup>rd</sup> Summit chaired by India was held virtually in July, it was preceded by large number of meetings of various verticals including that of Foreign Ministers at Goa at which the Pakistani Foreign Minister once again abused the Indian hospitality. Earlier Defence Ministers and scores of other verticals provided relevant feedback for the 'New Delhi Declaration' while strengthening the intra-regional cooperation and security and counter terrorism objectives. Fighting Terrorism has been one of the key reasons for the SCO's existence and continued relevance. While the collaboration under the aegis of RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure) continues the double standards and hypocrisy in dealing with it by some member states like China backed Pakistan has undermined its credibility and sincerity of purpose. PM Modi in his opening remarks reiterated that "Terrorism has become a major threat to regional and global peace. Dealing with this challenge requires decisive action. Regardless of its form or manifestation, we must unite in our fight against terrorism. Some countries use cross-border terrorism as an instrument of their policies, provide shelter to terrorists. SCO should not hesitate to criticize such nations." But will the others be on board remains to be seen!.

During India's Presidency SECURE SCO became the major theme which implied "Security, Economic development, Connectivity, Unity, Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and Environmental protection." And that is what India stood for. Likewise, India also established five new pillars of cooperation which included Startups and Innovation; Traditional Medicine; Youth Empowerment: Digital Inclusion, and; Shared Buddhist Heritage. To achieve these objectives new working groups on Startups and Innovation as well as Traditional medicine were established. Areas for the fourteen Ministerial meetings were expanded to include Cooperation on emerging fuels in the energy sector; Collaboration on decarbonization in the transportation sector and digital transformation; Cooperation in the field of digital public infrastructure. Therefore, at the Summit two other focussed Joint Statements on countering radicalization and digital transformation were adopted in keeping with stated objectives of the SCO. The fact that India was able to secure consensus on several important areas including the new ones is a testament to its diplomatic heft, leadership and sincerity of purpose.

The SCO has gingerly continued to expand but in recent times has acquired a much greater salience and interest as the global geo politics polarises. Started in 1996 as Shanghai Five with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan and the SCO in 2001 included Uzbekistan. Next expansion took 16 years to include India and Pakistan as full members in 2017. The SCO's foundational architecture lies in the fact that SCO member states are bound together by the basic Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation signed in Bishkek in 2007. Under India's Presidency Iran has been admitted as a full member and Belarus will become the next in 2024. However, attraction of SCO continues which is clearly evident from its association compass. It has 14 dialogue partners and three observers. They are hoping to become full members speaks of its heft perhaps as an alternate pole in the emerging multipolar order but perceived more as an anti-Western security alternative given the current strategic adversity between China and Russia on the one hand and US and the West on the other. Moreover, rich Eurasian landmass is already becoming a zone of competition and influence especially in Central Asia among various actors from China to Russia to USA and Turkey which might not be palatable in the medium term.

The SCO represents 40% of the global demographic dividend, 60% of Eurasian landmass and nearly 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the global economy with three major global actors and stake holders with India, China and Russia in the lead. No wonder during its Presidency, India embarked on the need to harness the youth dividend and talent through the Young Scientists

Conclave, Young Authors Conclave, Young Resident Scholar Programme, Startup Forum, and Youth Council. Another important initiative was to promote tourism through designating an iconic city under each Presidency. For its part India chose the timeless ancient city of Varanasi as the first tourism and cultural capital for the SCO.

India on the other hand is keenly working with SCO member states especially Central Asian countries through its benign connectivity and developmental initiatives under the aegis of 'Connect Central Asia' policy and could even act as a bridge between SCO and the West should the strategic tempering follows. Speaking about the importance of connectivity PM Modi underscored that strong and better connectivity not only enhances mutual trade but also fosters mutual trust. However, in these efforts, it is essential to uphold the basic principles of the SCO charter, particularly respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Member States. "Following Iran's membership in the SCO, we can work towards maximizing the utilization of the Chabahar Port. The International North-South Transport Corridor can serve as a secure and efficient route for landlocked countries in Central Asia to access the Indian Ocean. We should strive to realize its full potential."

SCO also is not devoid of its own divergent intra-regional differences and contestations which have run counter to the overall integration process. China through its BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) and CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) has continued to violate the principle of territorial integrity and hence India could not subscribe to the Chinese proposal of SCO Economic and Development Strategy 2030. It is not as innocent as it looks. Likewise India-China border dispute, Pakistan's continuing resort to terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy and Russia- China competition for strategic influence as well as the dispute between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan do not augur well for the SCO. Eurasian region itself is under flux let alone the big power rivalries hence it is imperative that China and Pakistan adhere to the fundamental principles enshrined in the very charter of the SCO and give up the zero-sum matrix as far as India is concerned lest the fault lines become even deeper. No wonder while advocating key reforms to the SCO, PM Modi genuinely asked "Is SCO evolving into an organization that is fully prepared for the future?"

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