

# Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

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## History

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is a Eurasian political, economic and military organisation which was founded in 2001 in Shanghai by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Except for Uzbekistan, the other countries had been members of the Shanghai Five, founded in 1996; after the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, the members renamed the organisation.

**Observers** – India, Afghanistan, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan.

**Dialogue partners** – Belarus, Turkey and Sri Lanka.

## Areas of cooperation

Security (terrorism, separatism, extremism), military activities (intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism, joint exercises), Economic cooperation (energy, trade, FTA by 2020) and cultural cooperation.

Some analysts have viewed the SCO as an anti-US and anti-NATO alliance. US was not comfortable with the organization in its initial years. However, this anti-US notion is fast changing. In 2011, US assistant Secretary of State stated that "In Central Asia the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation seeks to bolster security, economic and cultural cooperation between China, Russia and Central Asia. We see the potential for greater U.S.-China dialogue on areas of mutual interest such as counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism in support of the SCO's effort". As ISAF is withdrawing from Afghanistan, SCO is becoming ever more important for US. However, US has not shown any inclination in seeking any status in SCO.

## India and SCO

Initially India did not show any interest in SCO because of US reservations. SCO in initial phases was seen as devoid of concrete content later on, SCO's importance started increasing. For the first time, Indian PM attended the SCO summit in 2009 at Yekaterinburg, Russia. Importance of this platform has increased in context of exit of ISAF forces from Afghanistan.

India in 2005 acquired the observer status in the SCO. India is seeking full membership of SCO. Russia and Central Asian states have always been very supportive of India's entry into the SCO as a full member for a long time.

Members of SCO are apprehensive of expansion of the platform. If India and Pakistan are included, members contend that SCO will become platform for bilateral dispute between India and Pakistan.

## Why should India make efforts to become full member of SCO?

Given the increasing role and significance of the SCO in the Eurasian region and beyond, India is likely to benefit more in the long-term by joining the organisation rather than by staying out of it.

For long India has been seen as a "mute spectator" and "fence sitter" in terms of its foreign policy towards Western and Central Asia. As India seeks to expand its role in regional and global affairs, it cannot remain

insulated from the developments in its extended neighbourhood. Today, India's growing economy and its scientific and technological advancement are perceived as being beneficial for the region.

1. Full membership of the SCO will provide India greater visibility in the affairs of the Eurasian region which is strategically important for India. It will provide India with an additional channel to improve its relation with Eurasian republics.
2. It will enable India, as an integral part of the Eurasian security grouping, to neutralise centrifugal forces arising from religious extremism and terrorism in the region.
3. In addition, it will help India in managing much more effectively the negative impact of a Talibanised Afghanistan, especially in the post-2014 scenario or rather in checking the Talibanisation of Afghanistan.
4. It will provide India with a forum where it can constructively engage both China and Pakistan and also other regional players in a regional context and project India's security interests in the turbulent regional swathe— including West Asia.
5. Cooperation in three critical areas— energy, building trade and transportation links, and dealing with traditional and non-traditional security threats— can be facilitated through the SCO mechanism.
6. The main focus of SCO is to combat three evils in the region terrorism, separatism and extremism. Regional Anti Terrorist Structure (RATS) a permanent acting agency of SCO coordinates the agencies of SCO members on dealing with these three evils. India is quite appreciative of the greater cooperation within RATS as an important regional answer to this challenge.
7. India is looking for energy cooperation in the region and the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran) project can give India a strategic link in its extended neighbourhood and South Asia. Also, India is increasingly looking to Central Asia for its energy security needs. The energy rich Central Asian countries will help India reduce its dependence on Iran for its energy needs.

On the other hand, India will have to face the challenge of playing second fiddle to China and Russia, which have been the leaders since the SCO's inception. Moreover, given China's domination of the SCO, India's ability to assert itself will be minimal. India will also have to contend with China's use of the SCO for enhancing its own role not only in the Eurasian region but also in Southern Asia. In return for granting India full membership in the SCO, China may seek full membership in SAARC. What are the implications of China's entry into SAARC? Moreover, India will have to deal with the China-Pakistan nexus in the SCO, especially given the complementarities in Chinese and Pakistani interests in the Central Asian Republics.