



BRI Pulse

Samarkand SCO Summit – An Important Step Towards the 1997 Vision

The 22nd annual summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) will be held 15-16 September in Samarkand, located on the Silk Road and among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in Central Asia . The host country, Uzbekistan, joined the SCO predecessor Shanghai Five in 2001 triggering a higher level of cooperation among members and facilitating the 2002 launch of the SCO summit.

This year's annual summit is noteworthy for a number of reasons which we set out below:

First Xi-Putin meeting since February 2021; India in 2023

It will be the first in-person summit of the SCO since 2019. Attendees will include global leaders President Xi, President Putin and India's Prime Minister Modi; 15 leaders are expected to attend the summit including Pakistan Prime Minister Sharif and Iranian President Raisi. This summit will mark President Xi's first international travel since January 2020 and the first meeting between President's Xi and Putin since their February 2021, pre-Ukraine conflict meeting in China.

The summit is important for India as it will assume the rotational presidency of the SCO at the end of the Samarkand summit, until September 2023, so it will be the host country for the 2023 SCO Summit.

Expanding Membership – at an Increased Pace

SCO launched in 2002 with 6 founding countries: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan later joined in 2017. The SCO currently comprises 8 member states: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Leaders from these 8 member states comprise The Council of Heads of State (HSC), which is the top decision-making body in the SCO.

The results from the SCO Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs meeting in Taskent in July indicate that the SCO are planning to sign MoUs on Iran's pledges to become a member state (observer status since 2005) and on granting dialogue partner status to Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. They also plan to adopt decisions on commencing the procedure of admitting Belarus to the SCO and granting Bahrain (and the Maldives) dialogue partner status.

Iran, Belarus, and Mongolia will participate as observer members (as is Afghanistan), while Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey are dialogue partners.

The SCO now represents the world's largest regional organization, covering approximately 60% of the area of Eurasia, 40% of the world population and more than 30% of global GDP.

Expanding Remit

Even before the SCO was launched, the Shanghai Five signed the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions (1996) and Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions (1997). After 9/11, the SCO presented itself as protection against "terrorism, separatism and extremism".

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Over time the SCO has expanded from counter-terrorism to also include drug trafficking and military cooperation and explored economic collaboration, although modest from the outset.

Samarkand – Expanding Investment and Trade

The Taskent SCO Foreign Ministers indicated that the September summit will identify priorities and practical measures to step up SCO's activities from current levels. The heads of foreign ministries discussed key regional and global issues, and on Russia's initiative, adopted a Joint Statement on Strengthening the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention in the format of parties concerned.

For the past year, Uzbekistan has been chairing the SCO and this new era of global politics can be seen in the priorities that the Uzbek government has put forward – trade, industrial and technological cooperation, strengthening transport and economic interconnectedness, innovation, digital transformation and a green economy. As a result, at the summit, President Mirziyoyev is expected to present a number of breakthrough initiatives and proposals designed to serve as a significant revival of the SCO's agenda and comprehensive modernization.

The 2nd Economic Forum within the framework of the presidency of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the SCO was held in Tashkent in August, during which Uzbekistan proposed to develop:

- An action plan to promote mutual investment which will strengthen the coordination of the departments of the SCO countries responsible for the formation of investment policy
- An international conference on cooperation in the agro-industrial sector, which will allow its participants to develop a joint plan to expand cooperation in the agricultural sector, study new agricultural technologies and methods to increase yields and save water resources.

In keeping with the enhanced trading focus, in June 2022, Iranian Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Mehdi Safari proposed the bloc adopt a universal currency to ease its economic integration.

Conclusion

In its early years, with its security focus and priority on Central Asia, SCO was not followed closely by western based analysts. Since then, it has grown both in geographic reach and importance; it is home to Eurasian rail which recently completely completed its 27th consecutive month of 10,000 monthly Eurasian rail crossings with more digitisation to come.

Now, 20 years later, Uzbekistan once again is a catalyst for a higher level of cooperation among members. In May 1997, while still part of the Shanghai Five, Russian Yeltsin and China's Jiang Zemin signed a declaration on a "multipolar world". Twenty-five years later the Samarkand SCO Summit appears to represent an important next step towards in realising their 1997 Vision.

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