

## India, the SCO and Potential Shift in the Asian Axis of Power

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Since the adoption of a new policy towards the United States, which led to the creation of a special New Delhi-Washington defense relationship, India has to address a crucial question: How to develop relations with countries that are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), at the helm of which stand China and Russia. Much will be affected by the policy choices India makes. At stake is not only the strategic balance in Asia over the next decade but the evolving multipolar structure of the international system.

For some observers, the SCO (whose founding members are China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) is little more than a discussion forum, an organizational shell devoid of concrete content, whose existence is based on the abstract and implausible geopolitical assumption that there is such a thing as a Eurasian geopolitical reality.

The fears of those who see it as a sort of counterpart to NATO appear unjustified, since the road leading to the creation of a true Eurasian military alliance is full of obstacles. Nevertheless, the SCO has the potential to become a strategic focal point in Asia, where players think more and more in terms of an emerging "new Cold War." The SCO's distinctive feature is that it is positioning itself to be a rival of U.S. power in the region and beyond. This does not necessarily mean that all countries belonging to the SCO are hostile to U.S. policy. Nevertheless, the SCO's existence is undoubtedly based on the belief that East and Central Asia do not need to be under an American umbrella to achieve stability and development. This is a rather strange belief, however, considering that all other formal and informal regional Asian associations accept the U.S. presence on their soil.

The fact that the June 2011 SCO summit in Astana (Kazakhstan) put the full membership of India (then and still to this day having observer status) on the agenda was therefore a significant gesture. Few can doubt that India and the U.S. seek very strongly to maintain harmonious relations in the short and medium term. But this intention alone does not diminish the major dilemma facing Indian politicians of every political orientation: How to align with American foreign policy positions, and gain maximum benefits from this (for example, cooperation in the nuclear field), without being partially subordinated to the U.S. on the international scene. A relationship of subordination, however limited, would collide with the role of a great power that India wants more and more to assume in the world. Playing the role of a great power is no longer just a political aspiration; it is perceived as an economic and financial necessity in New Delhi.

During her July 20, 2011 visit to Chennai (a symbolic city representing friendship between the two countries), U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told India that "it's time to lead." She explained that the Obama administration wishes to create a partnership "for the new century," one which would stabilize Asia and bridle the growing dominance of China. She also said that the U.S. is "committed to a strong, constructive relationship between India, the United States and China" (Reuters, July 20, 2011). But these calls and wishes, particularly significant because they were made while relations between the U.S. and Pakistan were, and still are, strained, have not yet proven enough to push India into making a definite choice of partner between the U.S. and the SCO.

India, which the U.S. sees as a trusted ally in South East Asia, must be fully aware that its special relationship with Washington serves the primary purpose of helping the Americans in Afghanistan, spreading Western values and principles in Asia (beginning with representative democracy) and defending U.S. strategic interests.

In other words, Washington's growing influence on New Delhi amounts to an American reinterpretation of India's "Look East Policy" launched in 1991. This slogan is now being supported by the Obama administration as a key component in the "New Cold War," which entails containing China and achieving stability in South and East Asia by increasing engagement with Japan and India, two pro-American countries, through military and economic cooperation.

However, the hard fact is that many in New Delhi have other ambitions for their country, as they believe that in a few decades India will take the first place in the world in terms of GDP growth and developmental level. Indian opinion makers are now competing with one another to make the best arguments for the need to substitute a regional power mentality among policymakers and politicians for a great power one. Since India – so the reasoning of Indian opinion makers and politicians goes – is about to become a global economic power, from an economic standpoint, it must also become a

global political power, on a par with China. It indeed makes sense that only by breaking the shell of its proverbial introversion will India be able to prompt the further economic growth necessary to achieve such a goal. But on this point the gap between the Indian and American positions is wide, and will prove difficult to bridge.

Diplomatic alignment between India and the U.S. cannot hide all the divergences existing between them. One of these is New Delhi's refusal – not yet fully digested in Washington – to boost its air offensive capabilities by purchasing the latest generation of American jet fighters. India, which covers 12% of its oil needs with imports from Iran, is also unwilling to follow the White House in its intransigent stance towards Iran's nuclear program, as it sees sanctions as a serious threat to the continuity of its energy supply. Such frictions can be overcome, however, there may be much more profound disagreements on the horizon, linked to the fact that China is India's main trading partner (and will become an even larger one in the future). Also, India, like China, sees a need for a major overhaul of the international security and economic system imposed by the West since World War II. Like the other members of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), they feel their voice is unheard in this system.

There are many reasons for New Delhi to doubt that an Indo-American rapprochement is the best choice for its foreign policy. India's request to join the SCO presumably is a reflection of such misgivings. For instance, geopolitical contiguity may push New Delhi and Beijing to deepen their strategic relations in order to secure their energy supplies. Regardless of what that may imply for neighboring countries' navigation rights, the two Asian giants share strategic interests in ensuring stability in the South China Sea, although New Delhi has paid little attention to Chinese claims of sovereignty over this disputed sea.

What actually matters most for New Delhi is the establishment of a stable relationship with Beijing, one which would provide for an adequate network of pipelines and achieve a level-playing field for both countries' economic and political penetration of the Middle East and Africa, perhaps as a joint effort to counter the oil producers' current power.

Moreover, there is a natural convergence between some of India's national interests and the priorities of the SCO. Since its inception eleven years ago, the SCO has focused on fighting three insidious "evil forces": terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. Such SCO priorities are extremely appealing to India, which is interested in coordinating its own efforts to fight terrorism (such as conducting military exercises) with reliable partners and exchanging information with its neighbors' interior ministries and intelligence agencies.

The proposed SCO Free Trade Area, which should be in place by 2020 and economically unite all members of the SCO, is also most attractive to New Delhi, perhaps even more than Washington's offer to admit India to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. However, the main obstacle India faces is finding ways to square the circle about Afghanistan, since it is in favor of creating permanent U.S. military bases in that country after 2014. The SCO adamantly opposes such plans. It is worth mentioning that Afghanistan applied for SCO observer status at the Astana summit.

India's accession to the SCO would certainly be construed by many as a setback for Washington. But such a conclusion is not so obvious. If well managed, a change towards a greater degree of multipolarity in Asia could actually benefit the U.S. in two fundamental ways. First, Washington could more easily penetrate Central Asia through India. Second, it could use its influence on India to prevent Iran, which has already applied for upgrading its observer status to full membership, from acceding to the SCO.

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