

What to expect from the SCO summit in Qingdao

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By Ahmad Hashemi

The 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Qingdao, to be chaired by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is an important event for Eurasia. It will be the first meeting since India and Pakistan were admitted into the grouping last year, and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to attend. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani is taking part at a critical moment after the United States walked away from the Iran nuclear deal. And the summit will serve as an opportunity to further the Belt and Road Initiative, which is still at the crucial early stage of its implementation.



Photo taken on June 2, 2018 shows Wusi Square in Qingdao, east China's Shandong Province. The 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit is scheduled for June 9 to 10 in Qingdao. [Photo: Xinhua]

There has been speculation about the subjects that will be raised by the SCO member states at the summit, as they each have different priorities. But they do share some common objectives that will likely be topics for discussion.

Fighting the "Three Evils"

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was primarily established as a security arrangement to counter threats posed to Eurasian countries, the "Three Evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. As at previous summits, the SCO member states will likely discuss these threats as they remain a huge problem for China, Russia, India, and other central Asian countries alongside issues such as drug smuggling and cross-border organized crime.

From security to economic cooperation

As a security bloc led by Beijing and Moscow, the SCO started with a primary focus on security cooperation. But with China's rapid economic growth and India's accession to the bloc last year, the SCO nations now make up about half of the world's population and a quarter of the global economy, and so cooperation has been expanding in the economic arena.

China plays a substantial role in economic cooperation, trade, and investment among the SCO member states. Amid rising trade tension between China and the United States, the upcoming summit will also likely focus on regional economic cooperation. This regional cooperation is heavily influenced by the Belt and Road Initiative, which promises an economic boom and a geopolitical transformation to the region, especially now that India and China are managing their territorial disputes and Pakistan has a more prominent role in the initiative.

Diversification of international relations

The Eurasian world order - led mainly by China and Russia, and with the recent participation of India and Pakistan - is in line with a concept of multilateralism favored by nations who oppose the unilateralism of the United States in international affairs and global politics. These nations are not satisfied with the current balance of power, which favors Euro-American interests. The SCO nations have, on different occasions, shown their dissatisfaction with the status quo maintained by the North Atlantic powers. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized the role played by the SCO in supporting multilateralism in 2005 when he invited SCO member states to take part in the formation of a "fundamentally new model of geopolitical integration".

One of the ways that the diversity of the SCO is demonstrated is in the use of Chinese and Russian as the official languages, rather than English. And in another revisionist approach towards the Western dominated order, the SCO members have previously

underscored their own ability to safeguard the security of the region and repeatedly urged Western countries to leave Central Asia.

India and Pakistan are present for the first time

The SCO, as a Eurasian political, economic, and security organization, gained further significance and more potential for cooperation after India and Pakistan both joined last year. This summit will be the first meeting after the accession of India and Pakistan as full members of the organization on June 9, 2017. As the second most populous nation on earth, India's presence is crucial in furthering the SCO's influence. And as a country with territorial disputes with its neighbors, India has been one of the challengers of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, deepening economic cooperation and the benefits of regional trade have been great incentives for New Delhi to move past its differences with its neighbors. And as part of both the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Pakistan's attendance at the summit for the first time as a full member is an important event.

Iran is present for the first time after new U.S. sanctions

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's attendance will be one of the highlights of the Qingdao summit. Iran is only an observer to the SCO, but has long pushed for full membership. China has invited Iran to participate in the upcoming meeting in its capacity as an observer state. Iran is very keen to attend because the invitation to Hassan Rouhani comes at a crucial moment after the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, better known as the Iran nuclear deal. Iran has been reluctant to match the American move and pull out of the agreement. But the country needs Russia and China as well as European countries to help keep the deal alive and to get around the new American sanctions. Iran has high hopes, as it sees SCO member states, especially China, Russia, and India as major emerging powers and Tehran's close economic partners and political allies. Iran expects them to join the Islamic Republic in defying the unilateral withdrawal by the United States.

The Qingdao summit has the potential to become a new landmark in the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But it's important not to underestimate the serious challenges it must address. Uncompromising strategic and economic competition is going on in the Eurasia region that poses colossal challenges to the SCO constituents, including hostilities between India and Pakistan, great power rivalries between Russia and China, a suspicious United States, and a wary Japan, just to name a few.

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