

## Virtual summit, virtual silence

**A**t a media briefing on July 4, India's Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra vehemently asserted that the fact that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit was held virtually "in no way signifies, hints, insinuates the dilution in the objectives that we are trying to seek of the SCO Summit". He did not disclose, however, any reason for not holding the summit physically or in hybrid mode. To emphasise India's commitment to the SCO, Mr. Kwatra dwelt on the political, economic and cultural initiatives the country had taken and the 134 meetings and events which it had convened during its SCO presidency. What Mr. Kwatra overlooked was the legitimate point – it is precisely because India had invested so much effort in the SCO that the summit should have been held physically or in a hybrid manner. That would have imparted it greater salience.

Mr. Kwatra's failure to give even one credible reason for having a virtual summit indicates that India is moving away from the approaches which led it to become an SCO full member in 2017. At that stage Prime Minister Narendra Modi still held the belief that he could reach a *modus vivendi* with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the contentious issues which plague the India-China relationship. Hence, despite the SCO's origins and the influence exercised by China over it, he enthusiastically went ahead with India's full membership.

### China's acts as reason

China's actions towards India in 2020 and the evolving international order have obviously compelled a re-appraisal of Indian interests in the SCO. This is evident from the point of not only holding a virtual summit but also Mr. Modi's combative assertiveness on issues of concern to India (terrorism and connectivity) on which it



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India's lack of a credible explanation in hosting a virtual Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit indicates New Delhi's diplomatic drift as far as the SCO is concerned

rightly has fundamental differences with China and Pakistan. On terrorism Mr. Modi said, "Some countries use cross border terrorism as an instrument of their policies, provide shelter to terrorists. SCO should not hesitate to criticise such nations. There should be no double standards on such serious matters." While neither Pakistan nor China will change course on terrorism, the issue resonates in the Central Asian Republics that continue to have deep concerns of terrorist groups using Afghanistan.

On connectivity, though, which is a core issue for the SCO, India's isolation in the organisation is apparent. Mr. Modi reiterated India's position that connectivity projects should respect national sovereignty. His target was China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which violates Indian sovereignty. Significantly, though, Mr. Xi announced, in his address at the summit, that on BRI's 10th anniversary, "China will hold the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation". For him, the BRI is the "path of happiness benefiting the whole world".

### The BRI and the Eurasian game

The BRI's negative consequences have not inhibited the enthusiasm of SCO members for it. India, therefore, needs to be alive to the danger of China integrating Eurasia and shutting it out of the region with Pakistan's active support. This is not to suggest that India should endorse the BRI, which is an instrument of Chinese expansionism, but it has to find ways to maintain close ties with Eurasia. Certainly, the promotion of Buddhist heritage, however laudable the endeavour, will not help in drawing SCO members towards India and prevent their growing links with China. Besides, the Chabahar project (Iran) has not moved ahead as it needs to. India has to devote

far greater resources and energy to develop connectivity through Iran though it is not easy to deal with it. Active air corridors with the Central Asian Republics and a pragmatic policy towards Afghanistan (that does not mean the diplomatic recognition of the Taliban) are also essential to remain, howsoever tenuously, in the Eurasian game.

### A silence on the Ukraine war

Expectedly, the SCO Declaration was silent on the Ukraine war. India, Pakistan or China also did not refer to it in their summit statements. Russian President Vladimir Putin mentioned Ukraine and castigated the West. It is also noteworthy that he thanked SCO countries for "supporting the Russian leadership in defending constitutional order" in the wake of "armed rebellion". Mr. Xi, who has been Mr. Putin's supporter during the entire period of the Ukraine war, made no reference of support for Russia in his summit statement.

The virtual summit ensured that Mr. Modi did not have to meet any of the leaders, including Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif, personally. That avoided ripples of the kind the SCO Foreign Ministers meeting generated in Goa, in May 2023. The price though paid in avoiding controversies and embarrassment including what would have been caused by the optics of Mr. Putin in India was in the demonstration of where India currently stands in Eurasia and its western neighbourhood.

Many eyes will now be on the BRICS summit in South Africa in August where Mr. Xi and perhaps Mr. Putin will be present. Will Mr. Modi go to South Africa or prefer to avoid any chance of muddying the waters before his great moment in the diplomatic sun – the G-20 summit in Delhi in September?