
India in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Neorealist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

India's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017 introduced a dramatic change in its Eurasian partnership. Although the SCO can be seen as a forum of regional cooperation and counterterrorism, this paper argues that India's participation is better explained through the lens of neorealism. Through the structural realist theory, the study claims that India became the member of SCO it wanted to safeguard its strategic interests and did not want to be marginalized in a China-dominated Eurasian order. India's selective involvement, opposed to China-led initiatives and emphasizes its strategic independence which reflect balancing strategy rather than profound institutional alignment. The paper concludes that India's SCO policy is a calculated approach of keeping itself in a strategic presence and soft balancing in a world that is changing into multipolar system.

1. Introduction

The emergence of China and the Eurasian geopolitical environment have been significantly changed, which has greatly impacted the external strategic environment of India (Xue, Y., & Makengo, B.M, 2019). In this framework, the membership of India as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the year 2017 is a momentous change in the foreign policy alignment of this nation. Though SCO was initially set up to address local security issues in Central Asia, with the passage of time, it has evolved to become a leading institution in the Eurasian region with China taking a center stage.



Scholars such as Meena Singh Roy (2014) and Bandana Upadhyay (2016) often view India's participation as part of its expanding central asia policy which also focuses on counterterrorism collaboration, regional connectivity, or diplomatic support of Central Asia. However, such explanations cannot be fully applicable to the reality of structural power, which defines the foreign policy decisions of India. This paper has argued that the Indian involvement in SCO can be explained by applying the principles of neorealism. In this sense, the involvement of India is not so much about the institutional cooperation but rather the continuation of the strategic relevance and countering the growing China in the Eurasia.

The main research question of this paper is:

How far does the Indian membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization represent a neorealist balancing behavior to structural changes in power in Eurasia?

The article hypothesizes that the Indian policy towards the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would be a kind of strategic balancing, because of the intention to avoid marginalization by regional decisions, as well as limit the unquestionable power of China to be dominant in the Eurasian institutions.

2. Theoretical Framework: Neorealism and Institutional Behaviour

Neorealism as developed by Kenneth Waltz views the international system as anarchic meaning that a supranational power does not have normative authority over independent states. In this anarchic environment, the states have to focus on survival and security and their actions are not based on a conscious intention but rather on the distribution of material capabilities within the system. John Mearsheimer (2001) further argues that rising powers inevitably generate insecurity among other major states.

According to the neorealist view:

- (a). The institutions do not override power politics.
- (b). States can only cooperate in order to benefit themselves in achieving security.
- (c). Relative gains are considered to be more substantial as compared to absolute gains.
- (d). The rise of new powers brings countermeasures by the rest of the states.



Schweller (1994) further argues that states balance when they perceive threats to their relative position in the system. Using this analytical framework as an approach to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, one would expect that India is largely driven by power-relative interests and not a desire of good norms of regional integration. In the event that the Chinese influence in the Eurasia region grows under the SCO, India faces the threat of marginalization in terms of strategy (Xue, 2019).

Neorealism would predict that India:

1. Opposes the processes which strengthen the power of China (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative).
2. Has strategic independence in the organisation.
3. Does not rely on alignment in restricting its wider Indo Pacific strategy.
4. Relies on the institutional membership to avoid the exclusion by regional security frameworks.

The following empirical discussion evaluates how the behaviour of India is in line with these projections.

3. India's SCO Membership: Strategic Entry or Cooperative Turn?

Meena Singh Roy (2018) argues that accession of India to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization happened in a time when China is consolidating its alliance with Pakistan and the Chinese-led connectivity projects are rapidly increasing across Eurasia. Within such a dynamic geopolitical landscape being out of the SCO might have limited the control that India has had over regional politics, and thus China would have played at will without any opposition.

According to the neorealist view of the matter as such, thus, entering the SCO was a calculated move that was undertaken in order to prevent marginalization, as well as in order to ensure that India would remain relevant in the Eurasian decision-making processes. Lalit Chandran Kumar (2020) notes that India's engagement reflects pragmatic diplomacy.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) serves as a strategic platform through which India can interact with China and Pakistan without introducing any fundamental changes in the rivalry. The example of Indian and Pakistani leaders holding sideline talks at the 2009 Yekaterinburg Summit, where institutions were not used to help the two nations to reconcile but acted as a limited interaction space with certain goals in mind (Khan 2013, cited in Surendra Kumar 2013).



The accession of India could therefore be viewed as a response to changing power imbalances, and not an abrupt acceptance of Eurasian institutionalism (Raja Mohan, 2013). By joining, India gains access to a participatory nature in the discussion of Central Asian security, Afghanistan, and connectivity in the region.

However, India's behavior within the SCO reveals caution rather than deep integration. For example:

- (a). In the official statements of the SCO, India has continued to refuse to support the Belt and Road Initiative.
- (b). India emphasizes the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity thus indirectly challenging the China-Pakistan Economic corridors.
- (c). In its turn, India promotes other connectivity projects, such as the Chabahar port and the International North-South Transport Corridor.

Such trends suggest a selective participation, as opposed to complete conformity to SCO objectives.

4. China–Pakistan Axis and Structural Constraints

Rashid Alimov (2018) argues that the inclusion of India and Pakistan in the status of full-fledged members has brought about natural geopolitical competition in the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The strategic alliance of China with Pakistan is yet another challenge that puts India in a difficult position in the organization.

But the neorealism is based on the assumption that a state will assume a defensive stance in the institutions where a competing power has a structural advantage. Also both the Russian scholars such as Sergey Luzyanin (2016) and Yury Tavrovsky (2017) describe Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an Eurasian framework mainly led by Russia-China, the composition of which is determined by the hierarchy of existing power. In the neorealist perspective, this structural arrangement limits the autonomy of India in terms of its strategy in the organization.

India has been exhibiting a guarded approach to the issue of terrorism, especially with respect to transnational terrorism, as a way of maintaining the discourse and avoiding the intensification of the situation in the institutional context. This behavior is incompatible with approaches of cooperative trustbuilding but of defensive balancing (Waltz, 1979).



5. Strategic Autonomy and Soft Balancing

The overall foreign policy doctrine in India anticipates the concept of strategic autonomy. India's involvement in the SCO does not replace its involvement in alternative frameworks like the Quad but is an example of multi-alignment in a multipolar order. From a neorealist perspective, India's behaviour in the SCO shows caution and calculation. India does not openly oppose China inside the organization, but it also does not blindly support Chinese proposals. By staying involved, India makes sure that important regional decisions are not taken without its presence.

At the same time, it avoids giving China complete dominance within the group. The involvement of India in the Central Asian region must be seen within the broader framework of a strategic plan to resume the relationship with the region in the post-Cold War world. (Nirmala Joshi, 2007). She argues that India has been driven by the need to find sources of energy, access geopolitical power and find a solution to the instability emanating out of Afghanistan.

Robert Pape's (2005) concept of soft balancing is relevant in the context of India. In this sense, India's SCO policy combines participation with careful distance—it cooperates where necessary but avoids becoming strategically dependent.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that the Indian participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can best be understood in terms of neorealism as driven not by a transition to Eurasian institutionalism, but by the changing Eurasian power formations.

India's engagement within the SCO - marked by selective cooperation, usually resist to China-led connectivity initiatives i.e. BRI, and focus on sovereignty and cautious in its diplomacy in line with the neorealist expectations of balancing and relative gains. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an organization that works as a forum of controlled competition instead of deep cooperation. India is mainly involved largely to counter the role of China, considering the multipolar international system. Future changes in the Eurasian geopolitics are likely to determine whether this balancing act would result in greater involvement or maintain the state of strategic first-aid.



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