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Q19

Critically examine the aims and objectives of SCO. what importance does it hold for India.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · GS II · 15 marks · Bilateral and Regional Groupings

Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine the aims and objectives of SCO. What importance does it hold for India
- Honour the official stem. Be critical of SCO aims and specific about India's stake
- Keep the explanation within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

SCO's aims are regional security, the 'three evils', and economic-connectivity cooperation under a China-Russia-centred Eurasian tent.

RATS is the concrete security limb; trade and a development-bank story have lagged BRI.

Terror definitions split, especially India-Pakistan; consensus yields thin communiqués.

For India, importance is Central Asia, strategic autonomy beside the Quad, and a limited China channel.

Do not treat SCO as a court against Pakistan or as a settlement mechanism for the LAC.

Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation grew from the **Shanghai Five (1996)** into a Eurasian grouping with China and Russia at the core and India and Pakistan as members from 2017. Its stated aims are security, connectivity and a multipolar order. For India the table is valuable; the meal is often thin, and China-Pakistan politics is the salt that spoils it.

Body

Stated aims and objectives

- The SCO Charter lists regional peace, security and stability, the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism - the 'three evils' - plus trade, energy, transport and cultural cooperation.
- The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent is the operational security limb; annual summits and a thickening set of ministers are the political limb.
- A deeper, less written aim is to organise Eurasia with China and Russia as convenors, offering members an alternative to Western-led security and finance clubs.
- Expansion to India, Pakistan, and later Iran, advertises SCO as a big-tent of the 'non-West', not a small Central Asian border club.

Critical examination

- Counter-terror language is real in exercises and RATS lists, yet members do not share a definition of terrorism when it touches each other's partners; India-Pakistan divergence is the obvious crack.
- Economic aims - a development bank conversation, energy club, and connectivity - have under-delivered beside Belt and Road, which is a China project that SCO communiqués often bless in spirit.
- Sovereignty and non-interference are official norms; they also shelter members from discussing each other's human-rights records, so the organisation is a states' club, not a citizens' one.
- **China-Russia leadership is structural:** agenda, finance, and diplomatic weight are not equal among eight or more flags. Multipolarity here can mean bipolar Eurasia with guests.
- Consensus culture avoids walkouts but produces lowest-common-denominator statements that rarely bind a PLA or a Taliban-era Afghan spillover.

Importance for India

- **Central Asia:** SCO is one of the few regular rooms where India sits with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia on terror, drugs, and connectivity (Chabahar, INSTC) without a Western chair.
- **Strategic autonomy:** membership balances Quad and Western minilaterals with a Eurasian file; it is not a substitute for the Quad, and it should not be.
- **China:** a channel for engagement even after Galwan, useful for signalling, limited for settlement of the LAC.
- **Pakistan:** a constrained multilateral space; RATS can name groups, but SCO will not become India's preferred counter-terror court against Islamabad.
- **Energy and connectivity:** talk of corridors and hydrocarbons matters if Indian firms actually move; otherwise importance stays diplomatic.
- **Recommendation:** use SCO for RATS, Central Asian diplomacy, and connectivity that does not run only through BRI; keep hard security with other partners when SCO consensus is China-shaped.

Flow diagram

SCO table peace three evils connectivity -> RATS Tashkent Tashkent

SCO table peace three evils connectivity -> Multipolar Eurasia

China Russia core -> SCO table table

India 2017 -> Central Asia energy autonomy

Pakistan divergence -> Limited terror consensus

Central Asia energy autonomy -> Importance for India

Limited terror consensus -> Importance for India

Conclusion

SCO aims at Eurasian security, anti-terror cooperation and a multipolar economic space, but it is critically a China-Russia-led consensus club with a soft economic spine and a cracked terror definition. For India it is important as a Central Asian and autonomy-preserving table, not as a substitute for bilateral China policy or for the Quad. Sit in the room; do not outsource the hard files to the communiqué.

Facts & figures

Shanghai Five / SCO

Border-confidence grouping (1996) that became the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2001 Charter).

India's membership

Full member from 2017, in the same expansion round as Pakistan.

RATS, Tashkent

Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure; the SCO's main security secretariat function.

Three evils

Terrorism, separatism, extremism - the official security trinity of the organisation.

INSTC / Chabahar

Indian connectivity bets toward Eurasia that SCO talk can support but not replace.

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