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News: India, Pak. avoid blaming each other at SCO meeting

- External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Pakistani counterpart Ishaq Dar held an “informal interaction” at the conclusion lunch for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of Government meeting in Islamabad on Wednesday.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a permanent Eurasian political, economic, and military intergovernmental organization aiming to maintain peace, security, and stability in the region.
- SCO was established on 15th June 2001 with its headquarters in Beijing, China.
- Previously it was known as Shanghai-Five. With the inclusion of Uzbekistan on 15th June 2001, the grouping became Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
- Present members of the organisation are Belarus, China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
- Mongolia is an observer of the group.

- Dialogue Partners are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cambodia, Egypt, Kuwait, Maldives, Nepal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and United Arab Emirates (UAE).
- Culture has become an important element of SCO.
- SCO is the largest regional organization in the world in terms of geographical coverage and population, covering 80% area of the Eurasian continent and nearly 40% of the human population. As of 2023, its combined GDP based on PPP was around 32% of the world's total.
- Officially accepted languages in the group are Russian and Chinese.
- Recent meet of Prosecutors General hosted by India, adopted a protocol to strengthen cooperation in preventing and combating growing menace of human trafficking, especially women and children.
- Recently, Varanasi has been selected as the SCO region's first "Tourism and Cultural Capital".
- Varanasi "Cultural and Tourism Capital" has been decided under a new rotating initiative to promote people-to-people contacts and tourism among the member states.
- Each year a city of the cultural heritage of a member country that will take over the rotating Presidency of the organisation will get the title to highlight its prominence.

- The new initiative will come into force after the Samarkand summit (2022) following which India will take over the Presidency and host the next Heads of the State summit.

Objectives

- Strengthening mutual trust and neighborliness among the member states.
- Promoting effective cooperation in -politics, trade & economy, research & technology, and culture.
- Enhancing ties in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, etc.
- Maintain and ensure peace, security, and stability in the region.
- Establishment of a democratic, fair, and rational new international political & economic order.
- Guiding Principle – Based on Shanghai Spirit.
- Internal policy is based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a desire for common development.
- External policy in accordance with the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting any third country, and openness.

Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

- **Heads of State Council** – The supreme SCO body which decides its internal functioning and its interaction with other States & international organizations and considers international issues.
- **Heads of Government Council** – Approves the budget, considers, and decides upon issues related economic spheres of interaction within SCO.
- **Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs** – Considers issues related to day-to-day activities.
- **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)** – Established to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism.
- **SCO Secretariat** – Based in Beijing to provide informational, analytical & organizational support.

Importance for India

- India's membership of SCO can help in achieving regional integration, promote connectivity and stability across borders.

Security

- India through RATS can **improve its counterterrorism** abilities by working toward intelligence sharing, law enforcement and developing best practices and technologies.
- Through the SCO, India can also work on **anti-drug trafficking** and small arms proliferation.
- Cooperation on common challenges of **terrorism and radicalization**.

Energy

- **India being an energy deficient country** with increasing demands for energy, **SCO provides it with an opportunity to meet its energy** requirements through regional diplomacy.
- Talks on the construction of stalled pipelines like the **TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline; IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) pipeline** can get a much-needed push through the SCO.

Trade

- SCO provides **direct access to Central Asia** – overcoming the main hindrance in flourishing of trade between India and Central Asia.
- SCO acts as an **alternative route to Central Asia**.

- Economic Ties - Central Asian countries provides India with a market for its IT, telecommunications, banking, finance and pharmaceutical industries.

Geopolitical

- Central Asia is a part of India's Extended Neighborhood – SCO provides India an opportunity to pursue the “Connect Central Asian Policy”.
- Helps India fulfil its aspiration of playing an active role in its extended neighborhood as well as checking the ever-growing influence of China in Eurasia.
- Platform for India to simultaneously engage with its traditional friend Russia as well as its rivals, China, and Pakistan.

Challenges of SCO Membership for India

- Pakistan’s inclusion in SCO poses potential difficulties for India.
- India’s ability to assert itself would be limited and it may have to play second fiddle since China and Russia are co-founders of SCO and its dominant powers.
- India may also have to either dilute its growing partnership with the West or engage in a delicate balancing act - as SCO has traditionally adopted an anti-Western posture.