**A different alliance**

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Thursday, Sep 30, 2021

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is progressing slowly but with consistent pace. It started as a small organisation, the Shanghai Five. Since its inception it has covered a long distance. It is now one of the most powerful regional organisations with global relevance. Moreover, the consistency and focused nature of organization is helping create an increasing sphere of influence.

The SCO have proved its significance by delivering on promised objectives like settling border disputes, security, extremism and separatism. It also played a vital role during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The importance of the organisation is on rise because existing alliances and global institutions are deteriorating. Examples would be the way the WHO was undermined during Covid-19 by Western countries; and the recent spat among France, USA, Australia and the UK. The episode global political economy impact of Covid-19 resulted in many unsettling outcomes. Western countries, joined by India etc, turned this global issue into a nationalistic slogan. They started to run campaigns to malign others. The most disturbing part was that many countries started to use Covid-19 as a weapon of influence and to secure economic interests. They started to hoard equipment and protective material.

And now politics has started on the provision of vaccines and recognition of vaccines of other countries. Many countries started to hoard vaccine raw material or ban the export of vaccine or raw material. The US, the self-declared champion of humanity, led in this. Now some Western countries are refusing to accept the efficacy of Chinese vaccines. They are promoting only their brand and want to earn maximum economic revenue. They also tried to undermine China’s efforts to provide free vaccines to poor populations.

There is also the matter of a rift among the existing Western alliances. The most recent is the one between France and AUKUS. The Five Eye alliance members betrayed their Nato ally. The US and UK secretly struck a deal with Australia. The new alliance hurt France on two fronts. First, France lost an agreement of $ 66 billion with Australia. Australia had signed an agreement with France to buy submarines. France was working on the production of the submarines, but Australia suddenly abandoned the agreement. Now the US will be securing the deal -- and earning hefty money in the process. France’s economy is already facing problems and this incident will further complicate the situation.

Close allies of France were negotiating a new alliance to work in the Asia-Pacific region. They completely kept France in the dark, despite the fact that France had been working on an Asia-Pacific strategy – under the name of ‘India-Pacific strategy’ for a long time. Thus, France feels it has been backstabbed and lifted out of the new alliance, and that this is a deliberate attempt to undermine the country.

The above two examples highlight one very critical lesson: the global governance structure and alliances were built on the principle of ‘national interest’, not with the formula of win-win cooperation. Whenever alliance members feel they can maximize their share of the cake they do not hesitate to sideline others. The worst part is that they do not even hesitate to snatch the others’ cake, which is apparent from the submarine deal. Moreover, if global institutions do not serve the interest of powerful Western countries then the latter refuse to accept their advice like in the case of Covid-19 or the UN General Assembly’s vote on the issue of Israel shifting its capital.

In this context, the importance of the SCO becomes more enhanced, since it is an entirely different entity as compared to global structures and alliances. The SCO has been built on three principles. First, the principle of partnership; it is not a binding organisation. Second, the principle of relationship, which encourages the members to respect each other’s interest. Third, it promotes win-win cooperation, especially in the fields of economy and trade like the Belt and Road Initiative by China. Thus, it encourages solutions that are beneficial for everyone and there should be no backdoor channels to betray others like what happened to France. Besides, it also believes in peaceful co-existence without pressuring other countries to follow instructions; for example, it solved border issues with SCO members via dialogue.

In the pursuit of its objectives of peaceful co-existence and mutually beneficial development, it is now focusing on the issue of Afghanistan. The 21st meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Tajikistan comprehensively deliberated on this. The heads of states also deliberated on other things including economic cooperation, connectivity, trade, climate change but Afghanistan was a key area of discussion. This was the most discussed issue and heads of states tried to figure out how the SCO and regional countries could help figure out a resolution. The SCO tried to find a solution by keeping the interests of the people of Afghanistan at the center, which in itself makes it different from other such alliances and organisations.

As regards Afghanistan, the SCO deliberated on how an inclusive government can be structured there, and how different players can join hands for the welfare of the people. Second, they deliberated on the possible avenues of economic cooperation. China stressed that in these efforts the integrity, sovereignty and national needs of Afghanistan must be respected. There should be no dictation from outside; rather there is a need to work with the Afghan people according to their needs for ensuring their welfare.

Russia asked the world to work with the Taliban and emphasized that there is no need to sanction them. Iran and India have a different point of view and stance on the Taliban. However, the SCO showed unity to work with the Afghan people. Pakistan was asked by the SCO, especially by China and Russia, to work with the Taliban and the Afghan people to find a solution for the establishment of an inclusive government.

In conclusion, Afghanistan presents an opportunity to the SCO to further strengthen its status as a partnership-based organisation with the principles of relationship and win-win cooperation. It is also an opportunity to present to the world an alternative model to alliance-based organisations like Nato, G-7 etc. These organisations were focused on self-interest and to undermine the rights of other nations, even the rights of their own members. The SCO can also present an opportunity to less developed countries to deal with developed countries in a respectful way. Let’s hope the SCO can live up to these expectations.

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