



By: The Editorial Board

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit – what is the future of a club based on anti-politics?



The annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) lasted only a few hours, as the leaders of the nine-member organisation needed to read prepared speeches. The online format of the SCO summit came as a surprise when India, as the host, announced it a little over a month ago.

Restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic have been lifted, even in China, and the previous summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, was held live last September and lasted for two days.

The host did not explain why they decided on a virtual, rather than a face-to-face format for the annual summit.

This sparked speculation regarding Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been cautious about travelling abroad due to the indictment and warrant issued against him by the International Criminal Court (ICC) during the period between the two SCO summits.

India is not a member of the ICC, but that might not have been convincing enough for the Russian leader's fear of traveling abroad.

Indian media also reported that some of the leaders, including Chinese President Xi Jinping, did not provide firm confirmation of their arrival, which hampered preparations for the high-level event and ultimately led to the online format.

Lots of elephants in the room

The video format of the SCO summit goes beyond the technical level. This made the SCO summit pass without bilateral meetings, which are often more significant than plenary talks on such occasions.

Also, the narrowing of the format to video presentations of the speakers provided India as the host relief at the end of its one-year SCO chairmanship, as a signal of the diminishing of the forum's importance.

The summit of an organisation, which aims to

be the backbone of a new global counterbalance to Western domination, took place with numerous "elephants in the room", of which the video format was one of the smaller ones.

The leaders of the most influential members of the SCO, primarily China, India and Russia, emphasised the issues arising from their national priorities and less from the scope of the organisation they lead.

Given that the SCO summit was Putin's first participation in a major international meeting after the coup attempt, it was very important for him to convey his gratitude to his Asian partners for supporting him in a crisis.

It was more important for him to convince them of his intact leadership, saying that "Russian political circles and all of society showed a united front against the attempted armed mutiny".

Chinese leader Xi Jinping called for resistance to the US "hegemony" and its desire to dominate global trends and build a multipolar world.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised concern for global economic issues, such as the food, energy and fertiliser crises.

His most significant one-on-one review at the multilateral conference was aimed at Pakistan.

Although he did not categorically mention it, the Indian Prime Minister called on colleagues to condemn and stand together against "terrorism, as an instrument of state policy and a threat to regional peace".

Pretending that Ukraine does not exist

Neither the speakers nor the final statement from the SCO summit mentioned the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Bearing in mind that all SCO members adhere to "neutrality" towards the Russian invasion, the summit under the chairmanship of India slipped into hypocrisy because of the pretence that the war in Ukraine does not affect them even after 500 days.

The previous meeting of the SCO leaders in Uzbekistan was more open in this regard, so Xi Jinping's striking statement remained memorable. He said that China had "concerns" regarding the Russian campaign. Then Indian PM Modi told Vladimir Putin that now "is not the era of war".

Due to internal rivalries, the SCO also denied China the much-needed general support for the Belt and Road Initiative at the last summit since India did not join the position of the others in the joint declaration to confirm support for this project.

Its border disputes with China and rivalry in ambitions for global influence mean that the SCO still has an intractable problem in its foundations, and even in its identity.

India's reservation

During the recent, high-profile visit of PM Modi to Washington, India has shown its desire to counter the growing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific region with the West.

Given its involvement in the Quad security format, along with the US, Australia and Japan, India's presence in the SCO appears to be a way to limit China's growing economic and security influence in Central Asia, also a very significant region for India.

Iran's admission to SCO membership during the virtual summit in New Delhi will give this forum an even more pronounced anti-Western and anti-US profile.

Beijing will be most grateful for that in its effort to profile the organisation as the main promoter of its model of international governance.

The announced admission of Belarus to full membership next year will give the SCO an even stronger character of the opposition to something already existing (Western influence), of which there is still too much compared with the advocacy of original, proactive policies.

The organisation's identity has been persistently built on anti-politics for more than 20 years, with a constant burden of major unresolved issues between the most influential SCO members.

The virtual summit under the chairmanship of India was only a confirmation that the organisation could not resolve the contradictions that have beset it since its establishment.