

Why is democratic India joining Russia and China's 'anti-Western' club, the SCO?

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in Russia this week for his first conference as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO is often dismissed in the West as a "dictators' club": out of its eight members, five are rated "unfree" on the widely-used Freedom House democracy scale, two are rated "partially free," and the last one is ... India.

What is a vibrant democracy like India doing in the company of countries like Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan? The short answer is that India has been hedging its bets, pursuing closer strategic ties with the United States and Japan while maintaining its long-term security links with Russia.

The start of SCO

The SCO was founded in 2001 by Russia and China to keep the former Soviet republics of Central Asia from falling under American influence. The seemingly quick and easy U.S. victory in Afghanistan put the pressure on Russia and China to consummate the marriage quickly. Russia's Vladimir Putin was a young and energetic leader determined to restore his country's place in the world, and a weak and isolated China was looking for all the friends it could get.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping shake hands at their meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, Thursday, June 8, 2017. Putin and Xi were in Astana to attend a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (Alexei Nikolsky/Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP)

Fast forward 15 years and Putin is now the beleaguered junior partner of China's Xi Jinping. Chronically low oil prices, tightening economic

sanctions, and the rapid rise of China have dramatically worsened Russia's strategic position. Russia is desperate to find a way to balance China lest its central Asian client states be tempted to switch over to the Chinese camp.

Enter India. India may be a rapidly modernizing, English-speaking, democratic country, but its army still drives Russian T90 tanks, its air force still flies Russian Sukhoi jets, and its navy's lone aircraft carrier is the Soviet surplus INS Vikramaditya, née Admiral Gorshkov, née Baku (the Russians had to change the name when Baku became the capital of independent Azerbaijan).

Modified Kiev-class Indian aircraft carrier Vikramaditya is seen during the International Fleet Review in Vishakapatnam, India, Saturday, Feb. 6, 2016. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

India's business elite has close ties with the U.S., but India's security analysts worry about only two things: Pakistan and China. India has fought six wars since independence in 1947: four with Pakistan and two with China. And that doesn't include minor skirmishes like this summer's Doklam Plateau standoff.

To make matters worse, Pakistan and China have a longstanding All Weather Friendship that far outstrips Pakistan's reluctant and half-hearted collaboration with the U.S. in the war on terror.

India as a counterweight

India is understandably nervous about encirclement, and looking for all the powerful friends it can get. So Russia took the opportunity to pull India into the SCO as a counterweight to China. China responded by insisting that its ally Pakistan be included too. As a result, both countries were admitted to the organization this June at the SCO heads of state meeting in Astana. Balance achieved.

Or perhaps not. Pakistan doesn't change much in the balance at the SCO, which already has four other Muslim-majority police states as members.

India is different. As a vibrant democracy with an independent civil society and an unruly free press, India may not play by the SCO's authoritarian rules. It is unlikely to cause trouble, but it is also unlikely to fall into line on the security issues that are the mainstay of the SCO's program.

With the SCO already riven by ethnic conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, water disputes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and a running political battle between the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, it is hard to see how the organization will be able to accommodate a new member that has traded punches with China and live fire with Pakistan in the short period between being admitted and attending its first summit.

Russia wanted India in the SCO to prevent the organization sliding under China's control. Instead it is likely to complete the organization's slide into irrelevance. As of last week, the agenda for the meetings to take place November 30 and December 1 had reportedly not yet been finalized. The eight heads of government meeting in Sochi will certainly talk about something, but it's difficult to imagine them agreeing on much.

Salvatore Babones

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