



Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif with other leaders in Astana on Friday. Reuters **REPORTS, P9**

# India, Pak enter Shanghai group, Modi message to Xi and Sharif

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THE DIPLOMATIC games between India, China and Pakistan were in full play in Astana on Friday, as both India and Pakistan became members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

While Chinese President Xi Jinping started the day by telling

Prime Minister Narendra Modi that he “liked” the Aamir Khan-starrer *Dangal*, sources said he did not raise the One Belt One Road (OBOR) issue — India boycotted the summit in Beijing last month.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who had a meet-and-greet with Modi on Thursday evening, is understood to have met Modi again on Friday, before and after the SCO summit, when the two leaders

were in the lounge. During the SCO summit at the Palace of Independence, Modi and Sharif were seated separately, with the Iranian delegation led by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif sitting between them. There were five people separating the two leaders, including National Security Advisor Ajit K Doval and Pakistan PM’s Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz.

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At the summit, the leaders articulated their views, consistent with their stated diplomatic objectives.

Pushing for OBOR, Xi sought deepening of “practical cooperation” and said the SCO may well serve as an “important platform” for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

With Xi listening in, Modi made India’s objections on OBOR clear, as he said that connectivity projects in the region should respect “territorial integrity and sovereignty”, and maintain “inclusivity and sustainability”.

“Connectivity with SCO countries is India’s priority, and we totally support it. For the success and approval of the connectivity initiatives and proposals, sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected, and inclusivity and sustainability is essential,” said Modi, as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres looked on.

“Terrorism is one of the biggest violators of human rights and values. So, coordination between SCO countries is an important part of the fight against terrorism and extremism. I have full faith that India’s cooperation with SCO will give a new direction and energy in the fight against terrorism,” he said, with Sharif and Aziz listening attentively.

Modi also emphasised the need for coordinated efforts to fight terrorism, including radicalisation, recruitment, training and financing of terrorists.

With Modi’s speech, delivered in Hindi, India sent a strong message to both countries on the hot-button issues.

Sharif, meanwhile, used the opportunity to bat for CPEC and OBOR. He said the SCO’s expansion was taking place at an opportune time, as the BRI transforms global economic landscape. “And, in Pakistan, we are diligently implementing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the flagship of the BRI. What is more, these mega projects will benefit the entire SCO community,” he said.

Interestingly, these speeches took place

about four hours after Modi met Xi at about 10 am at the Beijing Palace hotel here, where the Chinese leader and his delegation are staying.

According to Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar, the 40-minute meeting was “very positive and cordial”. This was a markedly different posturing from their last meeting in Goa, where they met on the margins of the BRICS summit, when all the hot-button issues were raised, ranging from NSG to Masood Azhar.

“There was also an understanding that where we have differences, differences should not become disputes. In fact, if handled well, (it) can even become opportunity,” he said, indicating India’s softening stand and efforts to bring down the temperature in the relationship.

“The sense of the meeting was that the two countries have great interest in working with each other and we will have differences. Where we have differences, how to work and find common ground. And wherever we have concerns, each side will look at it with a degree of seriousness,” said Jaishankar, in remarks perceived as an attempt to create a more diplomatic maneuvering space for dealing with China.

“They are the President and the Prime Minister... I think you must see this summit-level meeting for what it is,” said Jaishankar, not wanting the top leaders to get boxed in with specifics.

The last two meetings between Modi and Xi, in Goa in October and in Tashkent in June last year, when the leaders went into specifics, did not go well. While Tashkent was a disappointment since Xi did not yield to Modi’s request for NSG membership, Goa witnessed no softening of position on Masood Azhar’s listing at the UN.

Indicating that the two leaders talked about closing ranks, in the face of an unpredictable US administration under President Donald Trump, Jaishankar said, “The broad thrust was that at a time of global uncertainty, India-China relations

are a factor of stability. As the world becomes more multipolar, it is important for India and China to work together closely.”

He also said that a number of issues came up for discussion, including economic cooperation, investment, connectivity, establishment of industrial parks, cooperation in railways, security and defence exchanges, counter-terrorism. They also talked about the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, and parliamentary and youth exchange programmes.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry in Beijing said Xi told Modi that “China and India, as two major countries, should focus more on cooperation and work alongside to provide assistance with each other’s development goals.” Xi also called for both sides to “properly address sensitive and major issues,” said the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

Sharif, while addressing the SCO summit, said, “The SCO goals resonate with Pakistan’s national ethos, and so do the core values of the Shanghai spirit and the SCO charter with our own quest for peaceful neighbourhood.”

Welcoming Xi’s proposal on a five-year treaty for ‘good neighbourliness’ among SCO members, he said, “As leaders, we should leave a legacy of peace and amity for our future generations, not a toxic harvest of conflict and animosity. Instead of talking about counter-weights and containment, let us create shared spaces for all.” He did not mention the Kashmir dispute.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s media reported another round of handshakes between Modi and Sharif, even circulating a purported photograph. There was, however, no official confirmation or denial from the Indian side.

The summit concluded with India and Pakistan’s admission as members of the SCO. The leaders also visited Expo-2017, which is a flagship business and cultural event organised by the Kazakhstan government.