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SCO's tourism ministers' conference in Varanasi

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Why is in news? India mooted an action plan to mark 2023 as the year of tourism development in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) region at the tourism ministers' conference in Varanasi recently

A brief about SCO

The SCO is an intergovernmental organisation founded on June 15, 2001 in Shanghai, China.

It was established as a multilateral association to ensure security and maintain stability across the vast Eurasian region, join forces to counteract emerging challenges and threats, and enhance trade, as well as cultural and humanitarian cooperation

The SCO currently comprises eight "Member States" (China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) with four "Observer States" (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia) interested in full membership. Both India and Pakistan became full members of the SCO in 2017.

The process of granting Iran "Member State" status was started in 2021 and is likely to be completed this year.

Apart from these states, SCO also has many "Dialogue Partners" including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey.

In 2021, it was announced that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt will also soon be given "Dialogue Partner" status, which was granted in 2022. Multiple other Gulf States including the UAE and Bahrain are also vying for "Dialogue Partner" status.

Aim and Functions of SCO

The SCO was founded with the primary aim to address security-related concerns, with addressing regional terrorism, ethnic separatism and religious extremism top in its list of priorities.

In 2004, at the SCO Summit held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was established.

Through RATS, SCO members share crucial intelligence, know-how, legal expertise as well as allow for extradition of terrorists.

According to *The Diplomat*, as of 2017, 600 would-be terror attacks had been nullified and more than 500 terrorists extradited using RATS.

While leaders of respective SCO countries have repeatedly stated that the SCO is not a military alliance, through its history, there have also been multiple instances of military cooperation with Member States holding joint military exercises and 'war games'.

Apart from this, the SCO promotes cooperation in the fields of economics and culture, with the aim of promoting regional development as a part of a holistic approach towards tackling security issues.

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To that end, it has signed various treaties to promote trade and cultural exchanges within members. The recently held conference was one instance of cultural cooperation.

The SCO has also forged close and crucial relationships with both individual nation states and international organisations.

It has been an observer in the United Nations General Assembly since 2005 and in 2010, the UN and SCO Secretariats signed a Joint Declaration on Cooperation. Over the years, the SCO has worked with various UN organisations to address various pressing global issues.

Tourism conference in Varanasi

India has assumed the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) Chairship for 2023.

As part of the tourism track activities under India's chairship, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India planned various activities such as (i) SCO Tourism Mart during SATTE (South Asia's Travel & Tourism Exchange) (ii) SCO Expert Level Tourism Working Group Meeting and SCO Tourism Minister's Meeting in Kashi (Varanasi and (iii) SCO Food Festival in Mumbai

The recent conference was aimed at improving tourism. At the end of the meeting, a joint action plan for implementing the agreement between the Member States on cooperation in the tourism sector was finalised and approved.

It comprises promotion of the SCO tourism brand, promotion of the cultural heritage of member states; sharing of information and digital technologies in tourism; and promotion of mutual cooperation in medical and health tourism.

The member countries will also undertake various activities jointly, such as SCO tourism exhibition, SCO Food Festival, webinars and seminars on tourism, conference and expert sessions on promotion of tourism in the region.

The meeting also adopted the Action Plan for 'Year of Tourism Development in the SCO Space in 2023'. The document identifies a list of activities and events to promote and showcase tourism products of SCO member states.

Significance of the conference

The eight member countries of SCO represent around 42% of the world population and 25% of the global GDP.

There is an immense tourism potential in the region which can be promoted by increasing awareness about SCO countries.

The total Cultural Heritage of the SCO member states, observers and partners include 207 UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

To showcase this unique product of the region, SCO member countries have decided to designate one city (from SCO member countries) as tourism and cultural capital every year under rotating initiative.

It is interesting to mention that "Kashi" (Varanasi) has been designated as the first cultural capital of the SCO under this initiative.

Officials say the recognition will bring the city to a greater prominence in the global tourist map. The initiative will highlight the spiritual, mystic and knowledge aspects of Kashi