

Post-Covid regional trade to be on PM's agenda at SCO Summit

SUBHAYAN CHAKRABORTY

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Building stronger intra-regional trade and connectivity in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, and greater cooperation on health care will be on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's agenda at the 22nd Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit that begins on Thursday, officials said.

Scheduled to be held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the two-day summit will be the first in-person meeting of most national leaders.

Establishing a stronger alliance that pushes for reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO) will also be pushed by India, officials added. Bilateral meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin would be the high point of Modi's visit.

The SCO is a political, economic, and security alliance of eight nations, historically led by Russia and China. It is con-

sidered the most important conclave in the Central-Asian region. Set to be the fifth summit that India participates in as a full-fledged member, the summit will see India assume the rotational presidency of the SCO. New Delhi may also offer a glimpse of what it intends to focus on, during its tenure over the next one year.

India has prioritised securing greater trade with Central-Asian nations in the past few years. This is because India's trade with the region stands at \$2 billion, while that of China is at \$100 billion, according to official estimates. New Delhi is also looking for ways to expand the \$1-billion line of credit it announced in 2020 for infrastructure projects in the region.

As had been the case earlier, the summit may see New Delhi hard pressed to steer clear of discussing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, which has promised economic growth to the landlocked region. Beijing has invested more than \$200 billion through



PM Narendra Modi may hold first bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping since 2019

the initiative, according to the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

"While China has abandoned its efforts to bring India to the discussion table on BRI, it has protested New Delhi's denouncing of the project," a Ministry of External Affairs official said. India has stressed that the BRI violates its sovereignty, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passing through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Modi will meet Xi in person for the first time since the 2019 BRICS Summit in Brazil. Since then, Indian and Chinese troops have faced off in a series of deadly skirmishes as a result of multiple Chinese intrusions in Ladakh and Sikkim.

"A lot of bilateral diplomacy has gone into de-escalating the situation and the upcoming meeting between the leaders will be crucial in confirming this, face to face," the official said. He said the process of disengagement between Indian and Chinese troops in Gogra-Hot Springs in eastern Ladakh was expedited keeping the leaders' meeting in mind. However, the meet with China is still set to be frosty as India has continued to up the ante against the import of Chinese products, cracked down on Chinese firms in India, and has joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to establish alternative supply chains for key commodities.

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