

2. India-China Bilateral Meet – International Relation

Prime Minister's bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The India-China relationship is primarily defined by a long-standing, unresolved border dispute along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), causing significant military tension. This core conflict is compounded by a massive trade imbalance favouring China and a broader strategic rivalry for influence across Asia.

India-China Bilateral Meet at the 25th SCO Summit, Tianjin (2025)

Symbolic Reset & A Cautious Thaw

First Major Meeting – This marked the first formal, structured bilateral meeting between the leaders of India and China in seven years.

Post-Galwan Context – The meeting is highly significant as it represents a "cautious thaw" in relations following the deadly Galwan Valley clashes in 2020.

Reframing the Relationship – Both leaders publicly shifted the narrative by affirming that India and China should be "development partners, not rivals," signalling a move away from confrontation and towards coexistence.

Reopening Dialogue – The talks successfully reopened high-level dialogue channels that had been stalled for years and showed a mutual willingness to recalibrate the strained relationship.

The Border Question & Security

Commitment to Peace – Both nations reaffirmed their commitment to the peaceful resolution of standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) through ongoing military and diplomatic channels.

Contrasting Core Priorities – The meeting highlighted a fundamental difference in approach –

1. **India's Stance (Security-First)** – India firmly stated that peace and tranquility on the border are the absolute prerequisite for achieving stable and normal relations in other areas.
2. **China's Stance (Economics-First)** – China's focus was on overall regional stability and economic ties, preferring to handle the border disputes separately rather than making them a condition for progress.

About the Line of Actual Control (LAC)

De Facto Boundary – The LAC is the unofficial boundary that separates Indian- and Chinese-controlled territories. It is not a formally agreed-upon international border, and its perception differs between the two countries.

Geography – It stretches for approximately 3,488 km across five Indian states and union territories – Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Segmentation of the LAC –

1. **Western Sector (Ladakh)** – At ~1,597 km, this is the most contentious area, containing the Aksai Chin dispute. It was the site of the 2020 Galwan clashes.
2. **Middle Sector (Uttarakhand, Himachal)** – This ~545 km stretch is the least disputed, with only limited patrol incidents.
3. **Eastern Sector (Sikkim, Arunachal)** – This ~1,346 km boundary is highly sensitive, as China claims the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet." It was the site of the 2017 Doklam standoff.

Revival of the Panchsheel Principles

India's Invocation – The Indian Prime Minister recalled the Panchsheel principles of 1954 as a foundational guiding framework for ensuring mutual sovereignty and peaceful coexistence.

China's Corresponding Plan – The President of China complemented this by outlining a 4-point plan focused on building trust, communication, cooperation, and safeguarding interests.

Symbolic Importance – This mutual reference to a historic agreement was a deliberate diplomatic move to anchor the current relationship in past cooperative traditions, providing a framework to ease present frictions.

Economic Dimensions

Acknowledging the Imbalance – The talks openly addressed the massive \$100 billion trade deficit that heavily favours China.

Areas for Cooperation – Discussions were held on exploring potential collaboration in key sectors like renewable energy, Artificial Intelligence (AI), pharmaceuticals, and connectivity.

Differing Economic Focus –

1. **China's Offer** – Beijing offered financial support through the SCO's \$1.4 billion loan package and a proposed SCO development bank.
2. **India's Demand** – New Delhi pressed for measures to create balanced trade and enhance supply chain resilience to reduce its economic dependency.

Strategy – Economic engagement was positioned as a potential pathway to stabilize the overall relationship, even with the persistent trade asymmetry.

Geopolitical Balancing & Narratives

India's SCO Vision – India presented its vision for the bloc with the acronym S-C-O = Security, Connectivity, Opportunity, projecting its identity through soft-power and civilizational diplomacy.

China's SCO Vision – China pushed for tighter bloc integration and the creation of financial instruments, using the SCO as a platform to reinforce its leadership role among the nations of the Global South.

Clash of Approaches – The meeting clearly contrasted India's emphasis on civilizational messaging with China's focus on financial and institutional statecraft.

Border Peace Mechanisms

Focus on Crisis Management – The immediate priority was placed on preventing future conflicts rather than achieving a final territorial settlement.

Strengthening CBMs – Both sides agreed to strengthen Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) to maintain stability along the LAC.

Specific Measures – These CBMs include enhancing the use of military hotlines, increasing local-level dialogues between commanders, and reactivating working groups on border affairs.

Broader Significance of the Meeting

Strategic Autonomy for India – India used the summit to underscore its policy of strategic autonomy, navigating its relationship with China independently and avoiding being forced into a binary choice in the US-China rivalry.

Global South Leadership for China – China utilized the SCO as a major platform to display its leadership credentials and influence within the Global South.

Compartmentalizing Disputes – Both nations agreed to the principle of compartmentalizing the border dispute, allowing for an expansion of cooperation in multilateral forums like the SCO, BRICS, and G20.

A Stage for a "Narrative Reset" – The summit effectively blended bilateral diplomacy with multilateral optics, making it a crucial stage for both countries to attempt to reset the narrative of their contentious relationship.

Panchsheel – The Five Principles

Formal Agreement & Signing – The agreement is formally known as "The Agreement on Trade and Intercourse with Tibet Region." It was signed on April 29, 1954, between India and China. The signatories were N Raghavan, the Indian Ambassador to China, and Zhang Han-Fu, China's Foreign Minister.

The Five Guiding Principles – The core of the treaty is its preamble, which lays down five foundational principles for peaceful relations –

1. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.
2. Mutual non-aggression.
3. Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
4. Equality and mutual benefit.
5. Peaceful co-existence.

Aims of the Agreement – The treaty was designed with several objectives in mind –

1. To enhance and formalize trade and cooperation between the two nations.
2. To establish trade centers for each country in the major cities of the other, facilitating commercial exchange.
3. To lay out a comprehensive framework for conducting trade.
4. To manage and facilitate important religious pilgrimages, detailing provisions for pilgrims and the specific routes and passes they could use.

Primary Geopolitical Significance – A key outcome of this agreement was that India, for the first time, formally recognised Tibet as the "Tibet Region of China," thereby accepting Chinese sovereignty over the region.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

Meaning & Origin – The SCO is a major Eurasian political, economic, and security organization. It originated from the "Shanghai Five," a mutual security agreement formed in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The group was officially expanded and renamed the SCO on June 15, 2001, with the inclusion of Uzbekistan.

Key Facts –

1. **Headquarters** – Beijing, China.
2. **Official Languages** – Russian and Chinese.

Membership Evolution –

Founding Members (2001) – China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan.

Major Expansion –

1. **2017** – India and Pakistan joined as full members.
2. **2023** – Iran became a full member.
3. **2024** – Belarus became the 10th full member.

Observer States – Afghanistan, Mongolia.

Dialogue Partners – There are 14 dialogue partners, including key nations like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Myanmar, Qatar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Türkiye.

Scale & Global Reach – The SCO member states collectively account for approximately 43% of the world's population. Together, they represent about one-quarter (25%) of the global economy.

Core Objectives of the SCO – To maintain and ensure regional peace, security, and stability. To collectively counter the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, primarily through its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which is headquartered in Tashkent. To promote cooperation in economic, energy, and technological domains. To improve connectivity and cultural exchanges across the vast Eurasian landmass. To encourage the development of a multipolar world order, reducing dependence on Western-led global institutions.

Significance for India –

1. **Strategic Outreach** – The SCO is a crucial platform for India to enhance its diplomatic and strategic engagement with the nations of Central Asia and the broader Eurasian region.
2. **Energy Security** – It provides India with access to the rich oil, gas, and uranium resources of Central Asian member states.
3. **Counter-Terrorism** – It offers a vital forum for India to cooperate with other members against the threat of cross-border terrorism.
4. **Balancing China** – While cooperating within the SCO, India also gets an opportunity to deepen its ties with Russia and Central Asian countries, which helps balance China's influence in the region.
5. **Soft Power Diplomacy** – The platform allows India to promote its rich cultural linkages and civilizational dialogue, strengthening its soft power.

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