

2. 25th SCO Summit – International Relations

The 25th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit held in Tianjin, China (Aug 31–Sept 1, 2025) gathered record leaders, shaping debates on multipolarity, security cooperation, and regional connectivity.

25th SCO Summit (2025) – Overview

Theme – The summit was organized under the theme “*Promoting the Shanghai Spirit – SCO in Action*”, emphasizing mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, multilateral dialogue, and collective action in addressing regional and global uncertainties.

Location & Dates – The summit was hosted by China in Tianjin at the Tianjin Meijiang Convention & Exhibition Center, held from August 31 – September 1, 2025.

Special Feature – This was the largest SCO Summit ever held, reflecting the grouping’s expansion, deepening institutional mechanisms, and growing centrality in Eurasian geopolitics.

Key Outcomes of the 25th SCO Summit

Tianjin Declaration – The declaration was the central political outcome of the summit. It explicitly condemned the April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack in India, which claimed 26 lives. The declaration underscored that double standards in counter-terrorism are unacceptable and perpetrators and sponsors must be held accountable. This was a rare explicit mention of a terror incident in SCO documents, marking a diplomatic breakthrough for India.

Security and Counter-Terrorism – India reiterated that terrorism cannot be justified under any circumstances, calling for collective regional action under SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). Attempts by some members to dilute references to cross-border terrorism were strongly resisted by India, indirectly isolating Pakistan. The summit approved the creation of four new SCO centers dedicated to tackling organized crime, drug trafficking, cyber threats, and radicalization.

Long-Term Strategy and Cooperation – The SCO approved the Development Strategy 2026–2035, laying down long-term priorities for the next decade. It also adopted a Cooperation Program (2026–2030) aimed at countering extremist ideology and strengthening social stability in Eurasia.

Institutional Reforms and Expansion – Observer states and dialogue partners were merged into a single unified category called “SCO partners.” Laos was granted SCO partner status, expanding the organization’s family to 27 nations (10 full members and 17 partners). This streamlining aimed to improve efficiency and reduce duplication in engagement.

Economic and Development Initiatives – Decision to establish an SCO Development Bank to support infrastructure, energy, and social cooperation projects among member states. Adoption of a Roadmap for SCO Energy Cooperation until 2030, focusing on sustainable energy security. Russia proposed SCO bonds and new payment mechanisms to reduce dependence on Western financial systems, though India maintained a cautious stance, supporting financial diversification without creating new vulnerabilities. China pledged \$1.4 billion in grants and loans to SCO members, strengthening its influence in Eurasian development.

India’s Vision – The Three-Pillar Framework (S-C-O) –

1. **Security (S)** – India emphasized firm collective action against terrorism, organized crime, and cyber threats.
2. **Connectivity (C)** – Advocated for trust-based, inclusive, and sovereignty-respecting infrastructure development, projecting alternatives to China’s BRI.
3. **Opportunity (O)** – Highlighted economic, cultural, and technological cooperation free from coercive dependency, including scholarships, youth festivals, and AI cooperation.

Strategic Diplomacy by India – India adopted a balancing strategy among Russia, China, and Central Asian states, carefully avoiding entanglement in divisive global conflicts (e.g., Israel–Palestine). India resisted attempts to insert issues unrelated to SCO’s mandate, instead steering discussions back to core

priorities – security, connectivity, and development. India's Prime Minister proposed a Civilizational Dialogue Forum to build people-to-people and cultural ties, complementing economic and security cooperation. The Chinese President's remark that "*the dragon and the elephant must dance together*" highlighted a push for India–China cooperation, though underlying tensions persisted.

Cultural, Educational, and AI Cooperation – Member states endorsed the rotation of SCO Youth Cultural Festival and SCO Summit Forum (2025–2027). They approved joint university training and 5,000 annual scholarships, fostering deeper educational exchanges. Agreement reached on artificial intelligence (AI) collaboration, with India stressing equal access and fair participation for all SCO members. Cholpon Ata in Kyrgyzstan was designated as the SCO Tourist and Cultural Capital (2025–2026).

Global Governance Reform – The Chinese and Russian Presidents called for a new global governance order, arguing that SCO should champion multipolarity and inclusive globalization as alternatives to Western-dominated institutions. India cautiously supported multipolarity but emphasized the need for sovereignty-respecting, inclusive, and non-coercive global reforms.

India's Diplomatic Gains

Explicit Reference to Pahalgam Terror Attack – A major diplomatic victory for India, as SCO rarely singles out specific terror incidents. It internationalized India's concerns about cross-border terrorism, indirectly isolating Pakistan. Strengthened RATS as a counter-terrorism mechanism, ensuring terrorism remains a priority agenda in SCO declarations.

Strategic Balancing – India managed to push its core agenda on terrorism and connectivity, while avoiding overcommitment to China–Russia-led anti-West positioning. India's "maximum engagement with minimum entanglement" approach reinforced its strategic autonomy.

Broader Significance of SCO for India

Security Dimension – Provides a forum to highlight terrorism, radicalization, and organized crime threats, using RATS to access intelligence-sharing and counter-terror coordination.

Energy and Economic Access – Offers access to Central Asian hydrocarbon resources and emerging financial cooperation mechanisms (SCO Bank, energy roadmap).

Connectivity Alternatives – Enables India to promote INSTC and Chabahar Port as viable alternatives to BRI-linked projects.

Diplomatic Utility – Provides India with a multilateral platform to engage with Russia, China, and Pakistan simultaneously, without bilateral confrontations.

Strategic Challenge – However, China's growing dominance and Pakistan's membership complicate India's space within SCO.

Way Forward for India in SCO

Deepening Security Cooperation – Strengthen RATS operations, push for globally accepted definitions of terrorism, and expose state-sponsored terrorism.

Balancing Connectivity with Sovereignty – Promote alternatives like INSTC while opposing CPEC within BRI.

Economic and Technological Engagement – Actively leverage SCO Bank, AI initiatives, and fintech cooperation for India's benefit.

Cultural & Educational Diplomacy – Expand India's scholarship programs, youth exchanges, and civilizational dialogue forums to project soft power.

Pragmatic Diplomacy – Maintain strategic autonomy, avoid anti-West entanglements, and focus on issue-based cooperation.

Source – https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pm-participates-in-the-25th-sco-summit-in-tianjin-china/