

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at 25: Bishkek and Beyond— A Reality Check

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Introduction

The leaders of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) gathered at Bishkek-Kyrgyzstan on 31 Aug-01 Sep 2026 for its 26th summit. Over the last 25 years, the organisation has grown into one of the Eurasia's most expansive groupings. It brings together China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) under one umbrella; an extraordinary concertation of geopolitical, demographic and economic heft.¹ Despite its enlarged geographic footprint, it lacks strategic cohesion.

The silver jubilee commemoration of the SCO offered an apt occasion for a reality check by the leaders. The ongoing conflicts between the members and the absence of mechanism to resolve these, notwithstanding the SCO, is a conundrum where internal contradictions and incongruities coexist. Quarter century since its inception, the SCO stands at an inflection point where its diversity turns out to be a fundamental weakness.

Border Management to Eurasian Entity

The SCO traces its origin to Shanghai Five, formed in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It was constituted primarily to manage military tension along the borders and build confidence. With the entry of Uzbekistan, the grouping was formally re-established as SCO in 2001. Its initial mandate deliberately focussed on regional stability, with agenda centred on combating the 'Three Evils', i.e., terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The creation of Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) provided the SCO its institutional security mechanism, which remains its significant achievement.²

Subsequent expansion of the SCO transformed both its purpose and profile. India and Pakistan became full members in 2017, Iran in 2023, followed by Belarus in 2024. Today, the 10-member organisation has Afghanistan and Mongolia as 'Observers', besides 15 dialogue partners.³ Its agenda has also expanded dramatically and includes security, trade, transport corridors, energy finance, digitisation, climate change, food security, culture, and people-to-people exchanges.⁴ The SCO projects itself as an institutional body of multipolar order, besides reflecting transformation of the Eurasia region.

With the emergence of China as a global power, the geopolitical equilibrium is steadily shifting eastwards. Russia's role in the Ukraine conflict has deepened the confrontation with the West. Central Asia's geostrategic importance has enhanced over the years. With India being a consequential player in the Indo-Pacific, its participation in the SCO has changed the Eurasian power dynamics.

Last two decades have been more about the SCO's expansion and extension of its outreach, perhaps at the cost of consolidation. This has made consensus building rather intricate, given divergent interests of the member nations. China perceives the organisation as an instrument of trans-continental connectivity to further the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and multipolar agenda. Russia visualises the SCO as a pivot to 'Greater Eurasia' and counter to Western domination. For the CARs, the forum serves the security and economic interests, while

ensuring strategic autonomy. Iran views its membership as means to expand its options amidst the Western pressure. For Pakistan, the SCO lends connectivity with Central Asia and consolidation of ties with China. India's interests are strategic—to gain access to Eurasia, continue engagement with CARs, Russia and Iran, and balance out China's influence.

Competing Visions and Inherent Rivalry

The strategic interests of SCO members are at gross variance, leading to inherent rivalry. India and China remain strategic competitors impacting the bilateral relations with unresolved border issue being a major irritant. On the other hand, India and Pakistan ties are marred by the cross-border terrorism sponsored by the latter, alongside territorial dispute and regional security dynamics. Meanwhile, Russia and China are opposed to the Western domination yet have varying long-term perspective over Central Asia, coupled with Moscow's apprehension on overdependence on Beijing. Iran brings another layer of geopolitical complexity to the dynamics.

There are differences even on connectivity, a binding factor and considered an imperative for the Eurasian integration. While the eight SCO members have formally supported China's BRI initiative, India has refrained to be part of it as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor transits through parts of Jammu and Kashmir which is under illegal occupation of Pakistan.

Incidentally, the original purpose of the SCO—security—is still relevant, in fact even more. Terrorism, radicalisation, trafficking, narcotics, cyber threats, organised crime, and instability emanating from Afghanistan remain common concerns. RATS provides framework for intelligence-sharing coordination and cooperation in the counter-terrorism operations. However, the security environment has fundamentally changed since 2001. The terrorism today is networked, technology-driven and transnational in character.⁵ The SCO also needs to transit into action mode rather than only being confined to periodic exercises. Ironically, with regards to terrorism, the SCO states are not on the same page. While proclaiming 'Zero Tolerance for Terrorism', its members sharply differ over the identification, sponsorship, and treatment of terrorist groups.

Due to inherent conflict of interests and lack of consensus amongst the members, SCO perforce is compelled to adopt 'Diplomacy of Least Resistance'—high on symbolism and low on substance. It is evident that more the SCO expands, greater is the risk of its redundancy.

India and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

For Delhi, it is a strategic imperative to be in the SCO tent to pursue its national interests through multilateral forums. It also enables India to maintain presence in the region despite China's significant economic influence.

India has used the forum to press for cooperation in counter-terrorism initiatives. It also has vital interest in progressing the North-South corridor through Iran—a key route to connect with Central Asia and beyond. Delhi perceives vast scope to expand its engagement in defence, digital infrastructure, health, energy infrastructure, and capacity building with the CARs. India also seeks to exploit its soft power to gain strategic influence in the region.

Delhi has made efforts to resist attempt to turn SCO either to be a Beijing-centric or an anti-Western platform. India as a member of SCO, Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa

grouping, and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, besides strategic partnerships with Russia, the United States and deep ties with Europe, retains flexibility and strategic autonomy.

Shanghai Spirit—Bishkek and Beyond

The motto of the 26th SCO summit was ‘Together for sustainable development and prosperity’. The Bishkek Declaration and substantial package of agreement sought to continue efforts to further consolidate the SCO. It aims to fulfil the objectives set out in the SCO’s Development Strategy until 2035. Additionally, it reaffirmed the commitments to the regional security, connectivity economic cooperation, sustainable, and global governance reforms. The declaration noted, “Interaction in SCO Plus format contributes to the formation of a broad inclusive global partnership”.⁶

The security remains the central pillar, wherein the leaders reinforced cooperation against terrorism, extremism, separatism, narcotics, and organised crime. The plans to further strengthen the institutional architecture indicates efforts to move towards operational coordination from declaratory consensus.

Next important theme, i.e., economic connectivity included transport corridor, logistics hubs, trade facilitations, and regional integrations. Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward four-point proposal, committing to development by aligning to the BRI and Global Development Initiatives, prioritising security as a key goal by positioning SCO as a platform for Global Security Initiatives, people-first approach, and upholding ‘Shanghai Spirit’.⁷

A significant new dimension was the expansion into artificial intelligence, digital technologies, information security, energy cooperation, and green development. These initiatives signify the SCO’s quest to expand the Eurasian ambit of governance beyond the traditional confines of security.

There was limited progress on SCO Development Bank.

For India, the main gains from the Bishkek Summit were reinforcing its counter-terrorism narrative, expanding engagement with Central Asian and Eurasian partners, and preserving its strategic space. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for dismantling the entire terrorist ecosystem and emphasised that there can be no double standards when it comes to fighting terrorists.

Reality Check

It is evident that over the years, SCO has acquired greater geopolitical weight as the international order is becoming increasingly multi-polar. However, due to competing visions and inherent rivalries, additionally, varying relationship with West impede unanimity and consensus-building.

Pakistan assumed the SCO Presidency after Bishkek and will host next summit in 2027. The transition itself will test whether the organisation can insulate multilateral cooperation from bilateral antagonism.

The primary thrust of the 25th SCO summit was on consolidation, rather than transformation. The SCO has widened its agenda and seeks to strengthen its institutional ambitions. The Bishkek Declaration provides an ambitious road map. The SCO’s credibility will depend on whether it can translate the pronouncements into tangible outcomes.

Endnotes

¹ SECTSCO, "Charter of The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, accessed 08 Sep 2026, <https://eng.sectSCO.org/files/203013/203013>

² SECTSCO, "Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, accessed 08 Sep 2026, <https://eng.sectSCO.org/files/207250/207250>

³ SECTSCO, "General Information", *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, accessed 08 Sep 2026, <https://eng.sectSCO.org/20260306/2185609.html>

⁴ SECTSCO, "Charter of The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation".

⁵ SECTSCO, "Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure".

⁶ SECTSCO, "The 26th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States and the "SCO Plus" Meeting Held in Kyrgyzstan", *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, accessed 08 Sep 2026, <https://eng.sectSCO.org/20260901/2493609.html>

⁷ Ma Jingjing, Chu Daye , Li Xuanmin , Li Meng, "Xi puts forward four-point proposal at SCO Bishkek Summit", *Global Times*, 02 Sep 2026, accessed 08 Sep 2026, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202609/1369605.shtml>

About the Author

Major General GG Dwivedi, SM, VSM**, Phd (Retd) was as Assistant Chief Integrated Defence Staff when he retired after 38 years of distinguished service in the Indian Army. A veteran of Bangladesh War, he subsequently commanded battalion in Siachen, a brigade in Kashmir Valley, and division in the North East. He has also served as Defence Attache to China, with concurrent accreditation to North Korea and Mongolia. An alumnus of National Defence College and Harvard Kennedy School, he holds a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University. An acclaimed author and strategic affairs commentor, he regularly appears as a panellist on various news shows.