



India's Strategic Stakes in the SCO

This editorial is based on “[PM Modi's address to SCO 2025: Security, Connectivity, Opportunity](#)” which was published in The Indian Express on 02/09/2025. The article brings into picture India's three-pillar approach of Security, Connectivity, and Opportunity at the 25th SCO Summit, with a firm stance on zero tolerance for terrorism. It also highlights India's call for a civilizational dialogue forum and connectivity projects that respect sovereignty and territorial integrity.

For Prelims: 25th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit, [Chabahar Port](#), [China's Belt and Road Initiative](#), [SCO-Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure](#), [Tianjin Declaration](#), [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#).

For Mains: Opportunities that India Gain from its Engagement with the SCO, Major Challenges Confront India in its Engagement with the SCO.

At the **25th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit**, India reinforced its three-pillar approach of **Security, Connectivity, and Opportunity**, emphasizing **zero tolerance for terrorism** and proposing a **civilizational dialogue forum** to strengthen people-to-people ties. The Indian Prime Minister highlighted India's constructive role in combating extremism while advocating for connectivity projects that respect sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, India faces challenges in navigating the SCO due to **Pakistan and China's obstructive stances**, **China's Belt and Road Initiative dominance**, and diluted counterterrorism consensus. Balancing these with its deepening partnership with the US and strategic autonomy amid Sino-Russian influence remains India's key test.

What Opportunities does India Gain from its Engagement with the SCO?

- **Strengthening Geostrategic Influence in Central Asia:** India's engagement with the [SCO](#) provides a strategic foothold in Central Asia, which is crucial for regional security and economic expansion.
 - By deepening ties with Central Asian countries, India counters China's growing influence in the region.
 - For example, **India's \$1 billion line of credit to Central Asia for infrastructure development in 2020** solidifies its position as a key player in the region's economic integration.
 - Additionally, India's cooperation with **Central Asia on the [Chabahar Port](#) and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** enhances direct trade routes, **bypassing [China's Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#)**.
 - At the recent summit, India reiterated its opposition to “**connectivity that bypasses sovereignty**,” underscoring concerns over territorial integrity.



- **Counterterrorism Leadership and Regional Security:** India has used the SCO platform to assert its leadership in counterterrorism efforts, particularly addressing cross-border terrorism.
 - India successfully raised the issue of **Pakistan's state-sponsored terrorism** at the SCO, pushing for a unified stance on terror financing.
 - This was evident at the recent summit, where the **Indian Prime Minister emphasized the importance of rejecting "double standards" on terrorism** and called for a collective, consistent approach, with Pakistan's Prime Minister in attendance.
 - Also, **the Tianjin Declaration strongly condemned the Pahalgam attack.**
 - India's participation in SCO's counterterrorism initiatives, such as **SCO-Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure**, reflects the growing collaboration on regional security.
 - Notably, **India's advocacy for the UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT)** has gained support within the SCO, signaling a collective commitment to fighting terrorism.
- **Advancing Inclusive and Sustainable Development:** India's engagement in the SCO has positioned it as a key proponent of **inclusive and sustainable development**.
 - By focusing on innovation, green technologies, and digital inclusion, India has sought to influence the region's developmental trajectory.
 - Initiatives like the **SCO Startup Forum (4th edition held in India in 2024)** and collaborative efforts in traditional medicine, science, and technology have helped India shape the regional discourse on sustainable growth.
 - For instance, the **2023 SCO summit included discussions on digital inclusion and youth empowerment**, aligning with India's developmental priorities.
 - At the recent summit, the Indian Prime Minister outlined **India's 'Reform, Perform, Transform' mantra**, inviting member states to join India's development.
 - Also, **SCO has decided to establish a Development Bank** to bolster regional economic cooperation.
- **Enhancing People-to-People Ties through Cultural Diplomacy:** India's soft power within the SCO is increasingly focused on strengthening people-to-people relations, particularly through cultural exchanges.
 - The **proposed Civilizational Dialogue Forum under the SCO** aims to deepen cultural understanding and foster closer ties across Eurasia.
 - By emphasizing **shared Buddhist heritage** and **promoting youth empowerment programs**, India positions itself as a bridge between the diverse cultures of the region.

- India's successful hosting of **SCO International Conference on Shared Buddhist Heritage in 2023** highlights its soft power strategy.
- These initiatives underscore India's growing influence as a cultural and educational hub within the SCO, fostering mutual trust and collaboration.
- **Influence on Multilateralism and Global Governance:** India's active role in the SCO provides it with a platform to advocate for reforms in global governance institutions, notably the United Nations.
 - India has consistently called for an **inclusive, multipolar world order** within the SCO framework, advocating for the reform of international institutions to reflect the aspirations of the **Global South**.
 - **India's endorsement of the Tianjin Declaration** emphasized the need for a reformed UN that addresses contemporary global challenges.
 - Also, the SCO adopted India's civilisational message of **"One Earth, One Family, One Future"** in the **Tianjin Declaration**, setting the tone for its future priorities.

What Major Challenges Confront India in its Engagement with the SCO?

- **Divergence in Counterterrorism Approaches within the SCO:** India faces a major challenge in aligning the SCO's counterterrorism stance due to divergent views among member countries, **particularly China and Pakistan**.
 - While India strongly advocates for a unified approach to counter state-sponsored terrorism, some member states, particularly **China, continue to shield Pakistan's activities**.
 - This divide hampers effective regional cooperation against terrorism. For instance, despite India's push for collective action, Pakistan-based terror groups continue to operate freely, undermining SCO's counterterrorism efforts.
 - This divergence is evident in the continued inaction on terror sanctuaries despite SCO's repeated resolutions.
- **Limited Connectivity and Border Tensions:** India's pursuit of enhanced connectivity within the SCO is complicated by unresolved border issues with both China and Pakistan, hindering cross-border projects.
 - China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** is a part, directly violates **India's sovereignty**, and **New Delhi consistently objects to the initiative**, creating a clear point of friction.
 - Notably, despite India's push for projects like the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**, these **remain stalled due to geopolitical frictions**.
 - This underscores India's struggle to ensure regional connectivity without compromising its sovereignty.
- **Challenges in Multilateral Cooperation on Afghanistan:** The evolving situation in Afghanistan, particularly since the Taliban's return to power, poses a significant challenge for India within the SCO.
 - Despite **India's advocacy for an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled" peace process**, the SCO's lack of consensus on Afghanistan's future undermines collective action.
 - Furthermore, the **SCO's inability to address the humanitarian crisis and terror-related activities emanating from Afghanistan** is a source of tension within the organization.
 - India's efforts to keep Afghanistan's issues central to SCO discussions have been limited by the divergence in priorities among member states.
- **Limited Influence on SCO's Economic Agenda:** India's influence within the SCO's economic framework remains limited due to competition with China, which dominates the group's economic initiatives.
 - Despite India's growing global trade profile, its engagement with Central Asia remains marginal.
 - As of 2021, India's trade with Central Asia remains **less than 0.5% of India's total trade**, amounting to around **USD 2 billion**, in stark contrast with China's trade with the region at about **USD 100 billion**.
- **Tensions in Balancing Relations with China and Russia:** India's diplomatic balancing act

between **China and Russia within the SCO poses a challenge**, especially as both powers increasingly align on certain regional issues.

- While Russia continues to be a strategic partner for India, its growing rapprochement with China complicates India's position.
- For instance, **Russia's support for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** and its role in fostering closer ties with Beijing makes it difficult for India to assert its priorities in the SCO.
- This growing Sino-Russian axis within the SCO limits India's leverage in the forum.

▪ **Balancing Strategic Autonomy Between East and West: A core challenge for India is reconciling its commitment to a multipolar world, championed by the SCO, with its deepening strategic partnerships with Western nations.**

- India's participation in Western-led groupings like [the Quad](#) and its growing defense cooperation with the US and France often puts it at odds with the SCO's anti-Western rhetoric.
- The US administration's recent imposition of steep tariffs on Indian exports, and the resulting strain on the India-US relationship, has made this balancing act even more precarious, prompting India to seek closer ties within forums like the SCO.

How can India Deepen its Engagement with the SCO to Advance its Strategic Interests?

▪ **Champion Anti-Terror Frameworks with Mutual Accountability: India should spearhead the creation of a robust, coordinated, and data-driven counterterrorism framework undergirded by the principle of "zero tolerance and no double standards," pushing for institutional mechanisms to verify, investigate, and sanction cross-border support for extremism.**

- This measure would elevate India's leadership in shaping SCO norms and ensure shared responsibility in combating terrorism, making the regional security architecture credible and resilient

▪ **Instituting a Civilizational Dialogue Forum:** Building on its G20 presidency and its "One Earth, One Family, One Future" ethos, India should lead the creation of a "Civilizational Dialogue Forum" within the SCO (as proposed in the recent summit).

- This forum would institutionalize cultural and people-to-people exchanges, promoting shared heritage and fostering greater mutual understanding.
- This would serve as a powerful diplomatic tool to project India's soft power, counterbalance the security-centric narrative of the SCO, and create durable bonds that transcend political differences.

▪ **Establishing an SCO Start-up and Innovation Corridor:** To leverage its economic dynamism and position as a tech powerhouse, India should advocate for an "SCO Start-up and Innovation Corridor."

- This measure would involve creating a dedicated fund to support joint ventures, fostering incubators, and organizing annual tech summits across member states.
- Such an initiative would diversify the SCO's economic agenda beyond traditional energy and trade, positioning India as a key driver of modern, knowledge-based economic integration and creating new avenues for youth empowerment and collaboration.

▪ **Diversifying Strategic Partnerships within the SCO:** Rather than focusing solely on the major power dynamics with Russia and China, India should pursue a strategy of diversifying its strategic partnerships within the SCO.

- This includes forging closer security and economic ties with the Central Asian republics and Iran.
- By engaging in bilateral and mini-lateral frameworks on issues of shared interest, such as energy security, counter-narcotics, and regional stability, India can build a broader coalition of support that enhances its diplomatic leverage and ensures its concerns are not overlooked.

▪ **Sovereignty-Centric Connectivity Push:** India can further its strategic interests by driving the conversation within the SCO on connectivity that respects territorial integrity and promotes transparency.

- India should prioritize the swift completion of projects like the INSTC, making it inclusive

and beneficial for all member states.

- India's leadership in regional connectivity, coupled with its active involvement in infrastructure projects, would foster trust and economic interdependence among SCO members.
- Pushing for connectivity based on shared civilizational links and respecting national sovereignty would allow India to maintain its strategic autonomy while advancing regional cooperation.

- **Operationalizing a Counter-Radicalization Initiative:** Alongside counter-terrorism efforts, India should propose a dedicated actionable framework within the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) to specifically combat radicalization and extremist ideologies.
 - This would involve the creation of a working group on de-radicalization, focused on sharing best practices, conducting joint research on emerging threats, and building a unified digital information warfare strategy.
 - This proactive approach would directly address the root causes of terrorism and hold member states accountable to a higher standard of security cooperation.
- **Promoting a Unified SCO Voice on Environmental Sustainability:** India can drive regional cooperation on climate change by pushing for stronger commitments within the SCO to address environmental sustainability.
 - Given the shared challenges posed by climate change, India should advocate for SCO-wide initiatives to mitigate its effects through joint research, technology transfer, and the adoption of green technologies.
 - India's expertise in [renewable energy](#) can be leveraged to offer solutions for the region's energy transition, particularly for Central Asia, which is highly dependent on fossil fuels.
 - By positioning itself as a leader in climate diplomacy, India can enhance its influence within the SCO while contributing to a global solution to environmental crises.

Conclusion:

India's engagement with the SCO reflects both opportunity and complexity, offering avenues to shape **regional security, connectivity, and sustainable development** while navigating geopolitical frictions. By advancing a **sovereignty-centric, inclusive agenda**, India positions itself as a responsible stakeholder and **bridge between East and West**.

Drishti Mains Question:

India's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) reflects both opportunities for regional engagement and constraints due to geopolitical rivalries. Discuss the key challenges India faces in the SCO framework and suggest strategies to leverage the platform for advancing its national interests.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year's Question (PYQs)

Mains

Critically examine the aims and objectives of SCO. What importance does it hold for India? (2021)