

1. 2026 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – International Organization

India's Defence Minister called for unified SCO action against terrorism and warned against double standards at the 2026 Defence Ministers' Meeting held in Kyrgyzstan.

1. Background

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union when border disputes among newly independent Central Asian republics and China necessitated dialogue and demilitarization. What began as the Shanghai Five in 1996—comprising Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan—transformed into the SCO in 2001 with Uzbekistan's accession. Originally focused on border security and combating separatism, the organization evolved into a comprehensive regional security and economic cooperation platform. India's entry as a full member in 2017 marked a significant geopolitical shift, bringing the world's largest democracy into a China-Russia dominated grouping. The recent Defence Ministers' Meeting reflects ongoing tensions around terrorism definitions, with India consistently pushing for concrete action against all forms of terrorism without selective approaches that serve narrow national interests.

2. Understanding the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Genesis and Evolution

1. The Shanghai Five emerged in 1996 through border demarcation and demilitarization negotiations between four former USSR republics and China.
2. Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan formed the original grouping to resolve territorial disputes peacefully.
3. Uzbekistan's accession in 2001 transformed the Shanghai Five into the formal Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.
4. The organization's primary objective centres on enhancing regional cooperation to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism across Central Asia.

Membership and Global Significance

1. The SCO currently comprises 10 full members including China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, Belarus, and four Central Asian nations.
2. India achieved full membership status in 2017 and assumed the rotating chairmanship in 2023, demonstrating its growing regional influence.
3. Member countries collectively contribute approximately 30% of global GDP and represent about 40% of the world's population.
4. Afghanistan and Mongolia hold observer status, maintaining engagement without full decision-making powers.

Organizational Structure

1. The Council of Heads of States serves as the supreme decision-making body, convening annually to set strategic directions.
2. Russian and Chinese function as the official languages, reflecting the founding nations' dominance.
3. Two permanent standing bodies anchor the organization—the Secretariat in Beijing handles administrative functions while the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure executive committee operates from Tashkent.

3. Strategic Significance for India

Security Cooperation Framework

1. The SCO provides India a crucial platform for addressing terrorism, separatism, and extremism—existential threats to national security.
2. Through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, India participates in intelligence sharing and coordinated counter-terrorism operations with member states.

3. The framework enables India to voice concerns about cross-border terrorism and seek regional consensus on defining and combating terrorist activities.

Geopolitical Balancing Act

1. Despite China and Pakistan's SCO membership, the forum allows India to assert its strategic positions and prevent anti-India narrative formation.
2. India can directly engage with both adversaries in a multilateral setting, reducing bilateral tensions through institutional dialogue mechanisms.

Energy Security Imperatives

1. Central Asia's vast reserves of oil, gas, and uranium make the SCO critical for India's energy diversification strategy.
2. SCO membership facilitates India's efforts to strengthen bilateral energy partnerships with resource-rich Central Asian republics.
3. These connections reduce India's dependence on volatile Middle Eastern energy supplies and enhance long-term energy security.

Economic Integration Opportunities

1. The organization creates platforms for economic collaboration, enhancing trade and investment flows between India and member states.
2. Central Asian markets offer significant opportunities for Indian businesses in infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, information technology, and consumer goods.
3. SCO-facilitated economic corridors can bypass traditional Pakistan-controlled routes, improving India's connectivity to Eurasian markets.

Central Asian Connectivity

1. The SCO holds special importance for India because its structure and focus emphasize Central Asia—a region where India seeks deeper engagement.
2. India faces inherent geographical constraints in reaching Central Asia due to hostile Pakistan blocking direct land routes.
3. The SCO provides diplomatic and institutional frameworks to overcome these connectivity challenges through multilateral cooperation mechanisms.

4.Challenges Confronting India

China-Pakistan Strategic Alignment

1. The robust China-Pakistan partnership within SCO complicates India's strategic positioning and limits its influence in regional security discussions.
2. Joint China-Pakistan positions on Kashmir and terrorism definitions often marginalize Indian concerns during deliberations.
3. This axis occasionally prevents consensus on issues critical to India's national security interests.

Geopolitical Tensions Spillover

1. Ongoing border disputes with China along the Line of Actual Control and unresolved Kashmir issues with Pakistan create friction within SCO forums.
2. These bilateral tensions make constructive multilateral engagement difficult, as adversaries use the platform to raise contentious issues.
3. India must balance assertiveness on core national interests with the need for cooperative regional engagement.

Security Versus Development Imbalance

1. The SCO's overwhelming focus on security issues—terrorism, separatism, extremism—often overshadows economic and developmental cooperation agendas.
2. This security-centric approach limits India's ability to leverage the organization for trade expansion, investment facilitation, and infrastructure development.
3. Economic integration, which could deliver tangible benefits to Indian businesses and consumers, receives insufficient institutional attention.

Institutional Decision-Making Constraints

1. The consensus-based decision-making model within SCO slows progress on critical regional issues requiring urgent action.
2. Any single member can effectively veto proposals, creating deadlocks on contentious matters like terrorism definitions or infrastructure projects.
3. This institutional limitation reduces the organization's effectiveness in responding to rapidly evolving security and economic challenges.

5.Way Forward

Translate Regional Commitments into Action

1. India should push for converting SCO declarations and pledges into concrete, measurable actions with clear timelines and accountability mechanisms, particularly regarding counter-terrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing frameworks.

Strengthen Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

1. Advocate for expanding the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure's mandate and resources to conduct joint operations, training programs, and real-time intelligence exchanges that directly address India's security concerns, especially regarding terror groups operating from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Leverage Economic Diplomacy

1. India must actively promote economic and trade cooperation within the SCO framework, utilizing platforms like business forums and working groups to expand market access for Indian goods and services while attracting investment from resource-rich Central Asian nations for infrastructure and technology sectors.

Conclusion

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation serves as a strategic platform for India to engage with Eurasian powers, promote regional stability, and secure economic and energy interests while enhancing counter-terrorism cooperation. Despite challenges posed by the China-Pakistan axis and institutional limitations, India leverages SCO to advance its vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region, balancing Western alliances with deeper Eurasian engagement for comprehensive national security.

Source - <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/defence-minister-rajnath-singh-highlights-scos-role-amid-rising-global-fragmentation-at-bishkek-meet/>