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# Old Players, New Moves

## India's Strategy in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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# 1. Introduction

Amid great power rivalry, India has the chance to shape -not just adapt to- the evolving international order. The tensions between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (China) are leading to a structural change in the international balance of power. While this might appear to be a shift from a unipolar to a bipolar system, these developments actually offer small and middle powers the chance to push for a multipolar order.<sup>1</sup> The complementing transformation of power, moving from being unilaterally to plurally vested, is in fact opening opportunities for small and middle players to be more relevant players on the global stage.<sup>2</sup> India is amongst the states better positioned to favourably maneuver and exploit these conditions to gain significance in both the regional and international arena. In doing this, New Delhi can facilitate the transition to a multipolar order in which India holds a greater position of influence.<sup>3</sup>

As a steadily growing economic, technological, and military power, India is uniquely positioned to navigate the opportunities and challenges brought about by the ever-rising importance of the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>4</sup> India is recognised as the world's fastest growing major economy, with the International Monetary Fund forecasting 6.4% growth for 2025 and 2026.<sup>5</sup> Militarily, India was the fifth biggest spender in 2024, valued at \$86.1B<sup>6</sup>, and IT spending is expected to reach \$160B in 2025 as a 11.2% increase from 2024<sup>7</sup>. But to secure an advantageous position regionally and internationally, New Delhi needs to further invest in diplomacy, both bilaterally and multilaterally. The Indian government, conscious of this, has joined several multilateral frameworks, participating in organisations like the BRICS, Indian Ocean Rim Association and the G20.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, India has also made moves to revamp its position in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO is an intergovernmental "political, economic, security and defence

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi Randev, "Reshaping the Indo-Pacific Construct through Strategic Geopolitical Convergences: AUKUS as a Harbinger of a Multipolar Hegemony in the Region," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, January 2022, 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Jan/19/2002924380/-1/-1/1/JIPA%20-%20RANDEV.PDF>; Asia Pacific Task Force, "The Rising Importance of the Global South in 2025: A New Pillar of Multipolar Order," *Beyond the Horizon*, June 3, 2025, <https://behorizon.org/the-rising-importance-of-the-global-south-in-2025-a-new-pillar-of-multipolar-power/>.

<sup>2</sup> Asia Pacific Task Force, "The Rising Importance of the Global South in 2025: A New Pillar of Multipolar Order."

<sup>3</sup> Monish Tourangbam, "The Advantages and Pitfalls of India's Multidirectional Foreign Policy," *The Diplomat*, April 19, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/the-advantages-and-pitfalls-of-indias-multidirectional-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>4</sup> Darshana M. Baruah, *India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theater of Opportunity*, Working paper (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/06/india-in-the-indo-pacific-new-delhis-theater-of-opportunity?lang=en>; Muqtedar Khan, "Introduction: Is the Rise of India as a Global Power Inevitable?," *Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, August 18, 2023, <https://anthologies.newlinesinstitute.org/the-rise-of-india-as-a-world-power/introduction-is-the-rise-of-india-as-a-global-power-inevitable/>; Ravi Shankar Raj, "India's Rising Influence: Leading the Global South's Agenda in a Multipolar World," *Diplomatist*, January 15, 2025, <https://diplomatist.com/2025/01/15/indias-rising-influence-leading-the-global-souths-agenda-in-a-multipolar-world/>.

<sup>5</sup> Nikhil Inamdar, "India GDP Grows Faster than Expected, Latest Figures Show," *BBC*, May 30, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyn3dw9gl7o>; "IMF Slightly Raises India's Growth Forecast to 6.4%," *India, Reuters*, July 29, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/imf-slightly-raises-indias-growth-forecast-64-2025-07-29/>.

<sup>6</sup> Xiao Liang et al., *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024*, SIPRI Fact Sheet (sipri, 2025), 1, 2, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2504\\_fs\\_milex\\_2024.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2504_fs_milex_2024.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> "Gartner Forecasts India IT Spending to Reach \$160 Billion in 2025," *Gartner*, November 12, 2024, <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2024-11-12-gartner-forecasts-india-it-spending-to-reach-160-billion-us-dollars-in-2025>.

<sup>8</sup> "Briefs on Foreign Relations - Briefs on Multilateral Relations and Other Organizations," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://mea.gov.in/regional-organisations.htm>.

organisation" founded in 2001.<sup>9</sup> Its members include China, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and India. Encompassing 43% of the global population and 23% of the global economy.<sup>10</sup> The main objectives of the SCO include strengthening relations among members, promoting cooperation and safeguarding "regional peace, security, and stability".<sup>11</sup> The Shanghai Spirit, which forms the foundations of the organisation, constitutes an alternative to the Western liberal order by promoting non-interference, equality, multipolarity and the strength of small and middle powers (strongly aligned with the Chinese world conception and foreign policy).<sup>12</sup> Xi Jinping reiterated this as a priority at the September 1<sup>st</sup> 2025 Meeting of the Council of Heads of States SCO Summit. The SCO has a broad scope which is reflected in the different areas captured in its sub-entities, such as the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (SCO RATS), the SCO Business Council and the SCO Interbank Consortium.<sup>13</sup> Given India's geographic location between the 'east' and 'west' and its diplomatic role bridging the Global North and South, New Delhi is strategically placed to take advantage of this expanding scope.<sup>14</sup> Still, India faces both internal instability as well as a rivalry with the PRC, who has a vested interest in securing its own regional primacy and thus avoiding New Delhi's rise as a regional competitor.<sup>15</sup>

These dynamics invite key questions: in what ways can India maximise its geographic and diplomatic advantages within the SCO? What concrete opportunities and risks should it anticipate? And how can India convert its current positioning into lasting strategic gains?

The goal of this brief is to provide an answer to the abovementioned questions and in doing so, explore the significance of India's role in the SCO to provide a deeper understanding of New Delhi's foreign policy objectives.

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<sup>9</sup> Xiaoli Guo, "The Global Evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation," *The Interpreter*, July 12, 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/global-evolution-shanghai-cooperation-organisation>.

<sup>10</sup> Priyanka Shankar, "SCO Summit in China: Who's Attending, What's at Stake amid Trump Tariffs?," *Al Jazeera*, August 30, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/30/sco-summit-in-china-whos-attending-whats-at-stake-amid-trump-tariffs>.

<sup>11</sup> "Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)," *Asia Regional Integration Center*, accessed August 3, 2025, <https://aric.adb.org/initiative/shanghai-cooperation-organization>.

<sup>12</sup> "Staying True to SCO Founding Mission And Ushering in a Better Future," Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, September 1, 2025, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xw/zyxw/202509/t20250901\\_11699345.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202509/t20250901_11699345.html); Govind Gaurav and Shruti Rathore, "Balancing Indo-Pacific Dream: India at SCO Summit," *Diplomatist*, September 20, 2025, <https://diplomatist.com/2025/09/20/balancing-indo-pacific-dream-india-at-sco-summit/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions," *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, November 27, 2023, <https://eng.sectsco.org/20231127/1168690.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Guo, "The Global Evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation"; Baruah, *India in the Indo-Pacific*.

<sup>15</sup> Xue Gong and Daniel Balazs, "Where India and China Meet: Competing Regional Statecraft in Southeast Asia," *Political Science Quarterly*, ahead of print, July 9, 2025, 3, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqaf059>; Fatih Beyaz, "Threat Perception, Competition and the Quest for Hegemony in China-India Relations," *E-International Relations*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/05/19/threat-perception-competition-and-the-quest-for-hegemony-in-china-india-relations/>.



## 2. Framing India's geostrategic goals

Assessing how India can leverage its presence in the SCO to achieve its geostrategic goals first requires unpacking its overall strategic posture and foreign policy objectives, both at the regional and international level.

At a regional level, a high priority of India is achieving a multipolar Asia and multipolar Indo-Pacific, within which India is both a regional power and a global player.<sup>16</sup> This is especially crucial when it comes to balancing power in New Delhi's own backyard and on the global stage, as well as essential in safeguarding strategic autonomy and a position of influence. In effect, this allows India to participate in shaping an order that aligns with its interests. New Delhi thus has a dual-track regional objective of a multipolar Indo-Pacific alongside a strong India. This is exemplified by strategies such as the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' vision and the Neighbourhood First Policy.<sup>17</sup> Speaking at the 2024 QUAD Leaders' Summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed that a "Free, open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific" is a shared priority and commitment.<sup>18</sup>

In India's view, this means regional inclusiveness and openness, especially in trade and energy, that nurture its regional ambitions on enhanced connectivity, security, energy resources, investments and global trade.<sup>19</sup> Broadly speaking, this has translated into pursuing issue-based partnerships, whilst avoiding what Prime Minister Modi has dubbed as "alliances of containment"<sup>20</sup>, to achieve change through an "evolution rather than revolution"<sup>21</sup> and foster a new order based on existing regional institutions like ASEAN and BRICS. This approach has been underlined by former Foreign Secretary of India Vijay Gokhale who, in 2019, asserted that "India is today an aligned state—but based on issues" affording New Delhi "the capacity to maintain our decisional autonomy".<sup>22</sup> Through this, India is set to achieve "autonomous but interconnected growth" by collaborating "where interests converge" whilst preserving foreign policy flexibility.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jagannath Panda et al., "Priorities in India's Indo-Pacific Order: Astute Realpolitik or Flexible Diplomacy?," *The Diplomat*, December 6, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/priorities-in-indias-indo-pacific-order-astute-realpolitik-or-flexible-diplomacy/>.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Ladwig, "The Indo-Pacific in Indian Foreign Policy," April 30, 2024, <https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org>; Kaush Arha, "Japan and India Are Pillars of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific," *East Asia Forum*, May 13, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/05/13/japan-and-india-are-pillars-of-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>18</sup> "English Translation of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's Opening Remarks at the QUAD Leaders' Summit," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 21, 2024, <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/38314/English+Translation+of+Prime+Minister+Shri+Narendra+Modis+Opening+Remarks+at+the+QUAD+Leaders+Summit>.

<sup>19</sup> Ladwig, "The Indo-Pacific in Indian Foreign Policy," April 30, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Sourabh Gupta, "Modi's Address Charts Turbulent Seas in the Indo-Pacific," *East Asia Forum*, June 10, 2018, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2018/06/10/modis-address-charts-turbulent-seas-in-the-indo-pacific/>; Ladwig, "The Indo-Pacific in Indian Foreign Policy," April 30, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Ladwig, "The Indo-Pacific in Indian Foreign Policy," April 30, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Jeff M. Smith, "Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-Indian Relations," *The Heritage Foundation*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/china/commentary/strategic-autonomy-and-us-indian-relations>.

<sup>23</sup> Jagannath Panda, "Modi at SCO: The Significance of China in India's Foreign Policy," *South Asian Voices*, August 26, 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/geo-m-in-r-china-indian-foreign-policy-08-26-2025/>.

The regional objectives of India also translate in the country's global ambition to achieve the transformation of Asian multipolarity (and the vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific') into an international multipolar system. To put it in the words of Indian Prime Minister Modi, "the world needs a new multipolar and inclusive world order."<sup>24</sup> To achieve this, India is actively pursuing and advocating for equitable partnerships and bilateral relations with a wide range of partners including European Union states, the United States and Southeast Asian States.<sup>25</sup> Thereby balancing the playing field by diversifying global (inter)dependencies and by amplifying the voices and power positions of the Global South; in short, a counterweight to bi- or unipolar dominance. This approach is especially viable because India can present itself as a democratic alternative to China, already benefitting from a relatively positive perception and from being a key priority to Western states.<sup>26</sup> On top of this, as a prominent actor in the Global South, India is also a desired partner for other developing countries as an alternative to Western powers, and specifically the US.

This allows India to remain flexible and navigate the present without inhibiting future growth, potential and choices. A core of this foreign policy is the pursuing of flexible and issue-based partnerships to avoid over-reliance on a single partner or bloc.<sup>27</sup> Reinforcing their independence. India's unique positioning as a somewhat neutral state in international affairs, together with its fast growing economy raises widespread interest for other countries to form bilateral ties with New Delhi.<sup>28</sup> This appeal enables India to pursue a multi-directional foreign policy through which it can balance against China, achieve dexterity and strategic autonomy (as emphasised in the *Viksit Bharat 2047* roadmap<sup>29</sup>), pursue flexible issue-based partnerships, and creates more room for diplomatic and economic manoeuvring.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "At BRICS, Indian Premier Calls for 'Inclusive Multipolar' World," AA, July 6, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/at-brics-indian-premier-calls-for-inclusive-multipolar-world/3623585>.

<sup>25</sup> Panda et al., "Priorities in India's Indo-Pacific Order"; Khan, "Introduction: Is the Rise of India as a Global Power Inevitable?"; Raj, "India's Rising Influence"; Soumya Bhowmick, "Beyond North and South: India and the Future of Development," ORF Observer Research Foundation, March 4, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/english/expert-speak/beyond-north-and-south-india-and-the-future-of-development>; Amitabh Kant, "India's G20 Legacy," *The Global Governance Project*, n.d., accessed August 18, 2025, <https://www.globalgovernanceproject.org/indias-g20-legacy/amitabh-kant/>.

<sup>26</sup> Panda et al., "Priorities in India's Indo-Pacific Order"; Khan, "Introduction: Is the Rise of India as a Global Power Inevitable?"; Raj, "India's Rising Influence."

<sup>27</sup> Raj, "India's Rising Influence."

<sup>28</sup> Khan, "Introduction: Is the Rise of India as a Global Power Inevitable?"

<sup>29</sup> "Highlights from the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's Address on the 79th Independence Day," Prime Minister's Office, August 15, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/www.pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=2156841>.

<sup>30</sup> Tourangbam, "The Advantages and Pitfalls of India's Multidirectional Foreign Policy"; Walter Ladwig, "The Indo-Pacific in Indian Foreign Policy," April 30, 2024, <https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org>.

### 3. Strategic pathways for India within the SCO: opportunities and challenges

India's strategic posturing can hence be summarised in a sentence: encourage the upkeep of a multipolar order in which India can thrive domestically and internationally by deepening its bilateral and multilateral ties. Based on this, India stands to gain much from an international framework with a broad scope, as is the case with the SCO. In fact, the SCO provides India with three key avenues: a) a platform centred on regional development allowing India to cultivate and expand regional partnerships, b) a channel to establish and strengthen bilateral ties with other regional powers, and c) a mechanism for multi-directional diplomacy that favours multipolarity over bi- or unipolarity.

The three abovementioned key avenues provided by the SCO, can be translated into three concrete pathways for India to maximise the potential of its SCO's participation: reforming institutional priorities, deepening relations with Central Asian partners and balancing against other powers; all in the broader context of seeking to participate in a multipolar Indo-Pacific era. As summarised in Table 1, these SCO pathways support India's strategic goals of regional and international multipolarity, equitable growth and governance, and an Indo-Pacific era by providing a platform to reform a leading institutions' priorities, to diversify its own relations and dependencies, to subsequently prevent bi- or unipolar dominance, and thus to shape the governance of the new order and ensure a favourable position for itself

But what opportunities and challenges do these pathways bare?

Key Avenues <i>The SCO provides India with...</i>	Concrete Pathways <i>India pursues by...</i>	Strategic Goals <i>India achieves...</i>
A platform centred on regional development and partnerships	Reforming institutional priorities	Advancing equitable growth and governance
A channel to establish and strengthen bilateral ties with regional powers	Deepening relations with Central Asian partners	Supporting regional and international multipolarity
A mechanism for multi-directional diplomacy that favours multipolarity	Balancing against other powers	Anchoring an Indo-Pacific era

*Table 1: Summary of India's key avenues, pathways, and goals for its SCO strategy*

#### 3.1. Reforming institutional priorities

The increasing relevance, influence and power of key SCO-members and regional partners is facilitating the rising importance of the SCO as an institution to set the regional agenda and shape its interactions. As a leading regional institution, the SCO is providing India with a platform to steer the rules, governance and dynamics of the regional order. Bearing implications for both the new Indo-Pacific era and for the region's interactions with, and power vis-à-vis, international partners and rivals. In the recent Tianjin Summit, Prime Minister Modi endorsed the organisations' reform-oriented agenda<sup>31</sup>, but much work remains to be done. Thus, it is essential for the SCO's institutional priorities

<sup>31</sup> "Prime Minister Participates in the 25th SCO Summit in Tianjin, China (September 01, 2025)," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 1, 2025, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/40076/Prime+Minister+participates+in+the+25th+SCO+Summit+in+Tianjin+China+September+01+2025>.

to align with India's strategic goals to ensure that they do not counteract but instead reinforce one another.

In seeking to cultivate and expand regional partnerships and pursue multi-directional diplomacy, the SCO provides India with a platform to voice their institutional priorities (through acts, agendas and formal statements) and gain support. Especially on a bilateral basis, India has an opportunity to invest in partnerships and create a grouping of members that share institutional priorities. As seen in the September 1<sup>st</sup> SCO Summit, joint challenges such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and consequences of the Trump presidency have brought the member-states closer together, notably India and China marked by Prime Minister Modi's attendance.<sup>32</sup> Although the veto-risk remains, group pressure still makes a statement and is a step towards reform.

India has two key opportunities when it comes to reforming institutional priorities: mobilising their veto-privilege and having the platform to gather support for their own priorities. Veto-privilege is a built-in right deriving from unanimity-requirements within the SCO. India can veto proposals that diverge from their own SCO-priorities, having previously done this in the case of refusing to sign a 2025 joint document for the soft-approach taken by China and Pakistan against terror—a major institutional priority of India.<sup>33</sup>

In reforming institutional priorities, India faces three key issues, namely unanimity requirements, competing priorities, and the consequences of diplomatic rivalries. Despite seeking to reform the organisation to be more counterterrorism, more regional-connectivity and less anti-western focused<sup>34</sup>, India faces the obstacle of unanimity requirements in decision-making, meaning that every member with voting power has a built-in veto. If India attempts to reform the SCO's agenda or make proposals following their own SCO interests, they face the risk of being vetoed by other members who have diverging interests or would obstruct such proposals based on diplomatic rivalries. The topics of regional connectivity and enhancing anti-terrorism measures and security are, for example, a sore spot in India-Pakistan relations, which can result in Pakistan blocking Indian proposals on these fronts. Additionally, the SCO is at its core a forum of competing priorities. Despite the broad scope of issues it covers, the institution still lacks a clear mission and centralised consensus. Asymmetrical Chinese dominance also plays a role in this, as seen in the recent SCO Summit in Tianjin of which the wide participation demonstrates the reach and convening power of Chinese leadership.<sup>35</sup> The establishment of six new China-SCO cooperation platforms, centred on topic such as energy and technological innovation, reinforces China's institutional dominance.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Assel Satubaldina, "Key Takeaways from SCO's Largest Ever Summit in Tianjin," *The Astana Times*, September 3, 2025, <https://astanatimes.com/2025/09/key-takeaways-from-scots-largest-ever-summit-in-tianjin/>.

<sup>33</sup> TOI News Desk, "SCO Summit: Rajnath Singh Refuses to Sign Joint Document; Pakistan, China Go Soft on Terror Threat," *The Times of India*, June 26, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sco-summit-no-joint-statement-after-rajnath-singh-refuses-to-sign-document-pakistan-china-tried-to-go-soft-on-terror-threat/articleshow/122082287.cms>; ET Online, "India Refuses to Sign SCO Joint Statement as China, Pakistan Avoid Hard Line on Terror," *The Economic Times*, June 26, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-refuses-to-sign-sco-joint-statement-as-china-pakistan-avoid-hard-line-on-terror/articleshow/122083318.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>34</sup> Carla Freeman et al., "China, Russia See SCO as Counterweight to NATO but India Is Ambivalent," *United States Institute of Peace*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/china-russia-see-sco-counterweight-nato-india-ambivalent>; Harsh V. Pant and Ayjaz Wani, "India's Balancing Act in the SCO," *ORF Observer Research Foundation*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-s-balancing-act-in-the-sco>.

<sup>35</sup> Henrietta Levin, "China Showcases Global Ambitions at Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, September 3, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-showcases-global-ambitions-shanghai-cooperation-organization-summit>.

<sup>36</sup> Levin, "China Showcases Global Ambitions at Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit."



### 3.2. Deepening relations with Central Asian partners

In using the SCO as a channel to establish and strengthen bilateral ties with other regional partners, amongst which the Central Asian Republics are a key priority, the SCO platform provides India with critical access to the otherwise geographically separated region: overcoming the connectivity-limitation created by the lack of common borders.<sup>37</sup> Crucially, deepening relations with Central Asian partners is a rising security concern for India amid the strengthening of China-Pakistan-Russia ties and their deepening relations with the Central Asian states.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, as put by Prime Minister Modi: “Central Asia is central to India’s vision of an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood”, referring to Central Asia’s importance to India in both the domains of trade and security.<sup>39</sup> Here, Central Asia’s richness in critical resources (for example holding 20% of global lead and 8.7% of global titanium supplies<sup>40</sup>) and its advantageous geographical location are of great interest for regional connectivity, energy security and economic cooperation.

As part of its ‘extended neighbourhood’ vision, India has already invested in outreach through engagements like the 2012 ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy and the 2018 joining of the Ashgabat Agreement.<sup>41</sup> Through its multi-directional foreign policy, the continued deepening of India-Central Asia relations will help India achieve its objectives of multipolarity and will secure itself a stronger position of influence in the Indo-Pacific era by diversifying its (inter)dependencies, balancing against rivals, and thereby bolstering its regional presence and fostering stronger intergovernmental and bilateral ties with Central Asian states.<sup>42</sup> With the latter prospect being particularly important for India to realise its multi-directional foreign policy strategy.

The SCO mitigates the geographical gap by providing leaders with a critical platform to engage in dialogue and cooperate in diverse initiatives, projects and partnerships.<sup>43</sup> In seeking to promote trade, India has the opportunity to export its expertise (for example in pharmaceuticals and computer software) and stands to benefit from “expand[ed] cooperation in diverse areas” such as energy, gas and other critical raw materials.<sup>44</sup> Especially in the domain of rare earths and critical raw materials there are opportunities to deepen cooperation through joint exploration and extraction initiatives.<sup>45</sup> India has already been able to engage with Central Asian states through investing in the International North-South Transport Corridor, by joining the Ashgabat Agreement and through a range of other projects which, compared with Chinese projects, are perceived as more “transparent, consultative, economical, and reliable”, providing further foundations for India to deepen engagement with Central Asian states.<sup>46</sup> As security also forms a cornerstone of India’s interests in the broader region and

<sup>37</sup> Ashok Sajjanhar, “India and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Vital Partnership,” *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 17, no. 3/4 (2022): 197.

<sup>38</sup> Ayushi Saini, “Decoding the Rationale Behind the 4th India-Central Asia Dialogue,” *The Diplomat*, June 11, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/decoding-the-rationale-behind-the-4th-india-central-asia-dialogue/>.

<sup>39</sup> RFE/RL, “Modi Hosts Summit With Central Asian Leaders As India, China Compete For Regional Influence,” *News, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/modi-central-asia-summit-india/31674773.html>.

<sup>40</sup> “Central Asia’s Critical Raw Materials: The Next Frontier in Global Power Rivalry? - IHU,” Haydar Aliyev Center for Eurasian Studies, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://avrasya.ihu.edu.tr/en/central-asia-s-critical-raw-materials-the-next-frontier-in-global-power-rivalry>.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Balazs, “China vs India: Economic Outreach to Central Asia,” *The Diplomat*, January 3, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/china-vs-india-economic-outreach-to-central-asia/>; “Keynote Address by MOS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, June 12, 2012, <https://mea.gov.in/speeches-statements.htm?dtl/19791/>.

<sup>42</sup> Pant and Wani, “India’s Balancing Act in the SCO.”

<sup>43</sup> Sajjanhar, “India and Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 197.

<sup>44</sup> Sajjanhar, “India and Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 197, 198; Saini, “Decoding the Rationale Behind the 4th India-Central Asia Dialogue.”

<sup>45</sup> Saini, “Decoding the Rationale Behind the 4th India-Central Asia Dialogue.”

<sup>46</sup> Pant and Wani, “India’s Balancing Act in the SCO.”

Central Asia, the SCO also enables India to engage with Central Asian states on this front, namely through the SCO RATS initiative against threats of terrorism, extremism and radicalisation.<sup>47</sup>

The SCO platform also comes with a range of drawbacks which generally come down to India having to compete with fellow SCO member-states for influence over and opportunities in Central Asia. India is competing with China and Russia in their own backyard, with both these states having historical and cultural advantages when it comes to Central Asian states. Consequently, both within and beyond the SCO framework, India is already more limited and disadvantaged. Central Asian states are also generally torn between three foreign policy options: giving into Russian revanchism, aligning with China (generally under the One Belt One Road initiative) or pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy, of which only the latter approach actively favours India but still entails competition with other regional and international powers and groupings. On top of this, issue-based partnerships with Central Asian states rely on shared priorities and interests. In the absence of this, India risks losing opportunities to deepen ties to alternative actors whose strategies are more aligned.

### 3.3. Balancing against other powers

The SCO provides India with an avenue to pursue its multi-directional foreign policy strategy and a channel to secure and enhance bilateral partnerships, both essential for the objective of balancing against other powers, boosting its own regional status and in becoming a reliable global player. Regional rivals—including fellow SCO members like China, Russia and Pakistan—can create challenges for India's achievement of their interests. Prominently, China and Russia's pledge for a new Global Order at the recent SCO Summit, brings into question both India's institutional influence and position in this new order<sup>48</sup>: Will India bandwagon or balance? For example, India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar described India-China relations as “an incredibly complicated matrix” with different boundaries and balances.<sup>49</sup> Amid growing tensions, India also has a strategic interest in balancing against its rival Pakistan. The sentiment of Indian foreign policy towards Pakistan is timelessly captured in 2003 by former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as “friends can be changed but not neighbours”.<sup>50</sup> Involvement in the SCO provides India with an institutional platform through which it can balance against other competing and rival partners, like China and Pakistan, and thus prevent itself from being dominated or humiliated.

As seen in the recent Tianjin SCO Summit, the institutional platform is also bringing India and China closer, likely for opportunities in issue-based cooperation. Prime Minister Modi's attendance was significant and may signal Sino-Indian rapprochement on China's initiative, following a seven-year period of heightened tensions and border conflict, amid their common objectives of shaping a new multipolar order.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Sajjanhar, “India and Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 198.

<sup>48</sup> “From Rivalry to Realignment: China, India, and Russia at the SCO,” King's College London, September 5, 2025, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/from-rivalry-to-realignment-china-india-and-russia-at-the-sco-crossroads>; Al Jazeera, “China, Russia Pledge New Global Order at Shanghai Cooperation Summit,” Al Jazeera, September 2, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/2/china-russia-pledge-new-global-order-at-shanghai-cooperation-summit>.

<sup>49</sup> Asian News International, “‘China, India Creating A Certain New Equilibrium’, Says S Jaishankar,” NDTV, June 12, 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/china-india-creating-a-certain-new-equilibrium-says-jaishankar-8645862>.

<sup>50</sup> Do Thanh Ha, “‘NEIGHBOURHOOD FIRST POLICY’ UNDER NARENDRA MODI: INDIA'S STRATEGIC CONCERNS IN SOUTH ASIA,” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, *Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola* 9, no. 3 (2023): 386, <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2393450th>.

<sup>51</sup> Nadine Godehardt and Maximilian Mayer, “China's Claim to a New World Order,” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, September 2025, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/chinas-claim-to-a-new-world-order>; Chietigj Bajpae,

SCO membership allows India to, for example, highlight its security concerns (as a long-term priority of India in the SCO) in an intergovernmental forum, increasing the reach and legitimacy of its message.<sup>52</sup> Particularly against Pakistan, who India routinely accuses of engaging in state-sponsored terrorism<sup>53</sup>, an institutional platform is successful in putting them on the defensive and to cast a shadow over their regional affairs. Besides having the capacity to directly confront other powers through such 'naming-and-shaming' tactics, the SCO also allows India to indirectly balance against them (for example by refusing to sign joint statements<sup>54</sup>). India is in a good position to deepen bilateral relations with other SCO member states, like the ones in Central Asia as previously discussed, to circumvent their own engagements with competing powers and to solidify their position as a desirable alternative. This can be particularly effective in "countering Chinese dominance in regional connectivity projects" in Central Asia, thereby undermining China.<sup>55</sup> Indirectly, through their position in the SCO, India is also involved in the norm setting of the new Indo-Pacific era/order and is in a strategically good position to ensure its multipolar nature and to put India on the map as a reliable regional partner.

In the same way that the SCO platform provides India with an opportunity to balance against other powers, the platform affords its adversaries the same privilege, exacerbated by the power asymmetry and inherent structural imbalance favouring China in the SCO. This power asymmetry also transgresses the institutional platform to bilateral relations with SCO-member states, of which many are also structurally bound to China and to its rise (for example through One Belt One Road-initiative partnerships). India is further disadvantaged by having an equal status to Pakistan, giving neither an institutional upper hand. Unanimity and consensus requirements further prevent India from pushing for an India-favouring agenda, especially amid internal coalitions like the China-Russia and China-Pakistan groupings. While China may not feel directly threatened by India, it would be in China's interest to curb India's growing influence, which it can employ various institutional means to achieve. Table 2 summarises the findings of this section.

Pathway	Geostrategic goal pursued	Opportunities	Challenges
Reforming institutional priorities	Equitably growth and governance	Voicing priorities, mobilising veto privilege and lobbying for support	Unanimity requirements, competing priorities and diplomatic rivalries spillovers
Deepening relations with Central Asian partners	Regional and international multipolarity	Exporting expertise and expanding cooperation	Competing for influence with other member states
Balancing against other powers	Shaping the Indo-Pacific era	Highlighting security concerns against Pakistan and institutionally balancing	Institutional power asymmetry, equal status with Pakistan and unanimity and consensus requirements

*Table 2: Summary of key findings for India's SCO strategy*

"Modi's SCO Summit Visit Shows China and India Want to Reset Relations. But the 'Dragon–Elephant Tango' Will Be Tough," Chatham House, September 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/modis-sco-summit-visit-shows-china-and-india-want-reset-relations-dragon-elephant-tango>.

<sup>52</sup> Pant and Wani, "India's Balancing Act in the SCO."

<sup>53</sup> "India Accuses Pakistan of 'cross-Border Terrorism' after Deadly Civilian Attack in Kashmir," *Le Monde*, April 23, 2025, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/04/23/after-deadly-kashmir-attack-india-vows-loud-and-clear-response\\_6740551\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/04/23/after-deadly-kashmir-attack-india-vows-loud-and-clear-response_6740551_4.html); Soutik Biswas, "India and Pakistan Face Conflict Again - How Did They de-Escalate in the Past?," BBC, May 3, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn4wk22vk4zo>.

<sup>54</sup> "India Refuses To Sign SCO Joint Statement For Not Explicitly Addressing Concerns Over Pakistan-Sponsored Terrorism," News on Air, June 26, 2025, <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/india-refuses-to-sign-joint-declaration-at-sco-defence-ministers-meeting-in-china/>.

<sup>55</sup> Pant and Wani, "India's Balancing Act in the SCO."

## 4. Conclusion

India is playing an active role in shaping the opportunities of a multipolar era. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation creates a series of avenues for India to achieve its geostrategic objectives, namely a platform centred on regional development, a channel to establish and strengthen bilateral ties, and a mechanism for multipolar-oriented multi-directional diplomacy. These avenues in turn present India with three strategic pathways: to reform institutional priorities, deepen relations with Central Asian partners and to balance against other powers. In this way, India can make the most out of its SCO membership to cultivate bilateral bonds and to diversify its partnerships and dependencies.

However, these opportunities do not come without challenges. Reforming the SCO's institutional priorities to align more closely with India's interests, encompasses more challenges than opportunities. This mainly comes down to the SCO's institutional structure and the competing interests and states within the institution; each having the capacity to obstruct and undermine each other's influence and rise. In contrast, the SCO provides more opportunities than costs when it comes to deepening relations with the, otherwise distant, Central Asian republics. Institutional ties facilitate dialogue and partnerships, allowing India to expand bilateral partnerships across Central Asia, which aligns closely with its regional agenda and interests. However, India still needs to compete for influence on Central Asia with Russia and China, a challenge that will be hard to circumvent. When it comes to balancing against other powers, the opportunities and interests are more balanced as each can be applied in both directions: against and by India's competition. This balance is undermined by the ever-permeating trend of Chinese institutional dominance and internal-competition across the other two dimensions. Sino-Indian rapprochement signals opportunities for cooperation in shaping the new Indo-Pacific and global order but necessitates India's adherence to a multi-directional foreign policy to avoid consequences of strong-China alliance and being perceived as anti-Western.<sup>56</sup>

So, how can India navigate the SCO to achieve its geostrategic goals? India can make use of their SCO membership to move along three different paths. First, to invest in issue-based partnerships with fellow SCO-member states. This will facilitate the deepening of partnerships, importantly also with the Central Asian republics. Through issue-based diplomacy, India is able to strengthen its multi-directional foreign policy alongside its presence, influence and involvement in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia: bearing strategic advantages across the board. Second, through institutional means India has the capacity to contain competing powers like China, Pakistan, Iran and Russia. Through tools like veto-power and other tactics of silent obstruction, India can establish itself as a viable, reliable and desired alternative to these states. This will be an important status to achieve towards fellow SCO-member states, to alter both the institutional and regional balance of power, and towards the wider international community. Finally, India can make use of its SCO membership to actively participate in shaping the regional norms in the coming Indo-Pacific era. Despite the limited institutional ability to reform priorities and set the agenda, membership secures India's involvement in the process and subsequently its position as a major player in forming a multipolar Asian-oriented normative agenda.

While the weight of challenges is likely to constrain New Delhi's ability to fully capitalize on the opportunities created by SCO membership, these opportunities remain significant and strategically important for advancing India's regional and international ambitions. The SCO could play a central

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<sup>56</sup> Bajpae, "Modi's SCO Summit Visit Shows China and India Want to Reset Relations. But the 'Dragon–Elephant Tango' Will Be Tough."

role in shaping the emerging multipolar order and its accompanying norms and values, making India's membership strategically valuable. This, in turn, calls for sustained measures and efforts to maximize the benefits of membership and to strengthen India's influence within the organization. After all, the SCO is a vessel "created to adjust Western world-power dominance"<sup>57</sup> and its expanding partnership, and thus area of influence, reinforces their goal to play a bigger global geopolitical role.<sup>58</sup> SCO membership is a guarantee for India's seat at the table, but whether the organisation can truly fulfil this pledge remains to be seen.

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<sup>57</sup> Kamol Kamoltrakul, "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Aims to Challenge Western Dominance," *Elite+*, August 3, 2025, [https://www.eliteplusmagazine.com/Article/1192/Shanghai\\_Cooperation\\_Organisation\\_Aims\\_to\\_Challenge\\_Western\\_Dominance](https://www.eliteplusmagazine.com/Article/1192/Shanghai_Cooperation_Organisation_Aims_to_Challenge_Western_Dominance).

<sup>58</sup> Ross Bellaby, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Rising Global Ambition," *Asia Times*, December 25, 2023, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/12/shanghai-cooperation-organizations-rising-global-ambition/>; Fabio Indeo, "The SCO: Towards a Global Dimension," Nato Defense College Foundation, August 27, 2024, <https://www.natofoundation.org/central-asia/the-sco-towards-a-global-dimension/>.



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