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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India at the SCO Table – Bishkek Meeting and the Limits of Multilateral Diplomacy with Pakistan

 THE HINDU

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India at the SCO Table — Bishkek Meeting and the Limits of Multilateral Diplomacy with Pakistan

 The Hindu 25 April 2026 **GS2**

 The Hindu 3 tags ▾



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Rajnath Singh attends the SCO Defence Ministers' meeting in Bishkek (April 28) less than a year after Operation Sindoor. India's presence at SCO alongside Pakistan tests whether India can use multilateral forums to advance its counter-terrorism agenda while managing a geopolitically complex grouping that includes both China and Pakistan."

THE CORE ARGUMENT

India's participation in the SCO Defence Ministers' meeting in Bishkek on April 28, 2026 — less than a year after Operation Sindoor (May 7–10, 2025), and amid continued India-Pakistan bilateral freeze — tests a central question in India's multilateral foreign policy: can India use a China-Russia dominated grouping to advance its security interests, particularly on cross-border terrorism, without legitimising Pakistan's positions or subordinating its bilateral stance to multilateral norms? The editorial argues that India's SCO engagement remains instrumentally valuable — for Central Asia connectivity, information sharing, and not ceding diplomatic space to Pakistan and China — but that India must continue to resist multilateral consensus being weaponised against its bilateral positions.

INDIA'S SCO JOURNEY

SCO Membership Timeline

YEAR	MILESTONE
2001	SCO founded (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan)
2017	India and Pakistan become full SCO members
2023	Iran admitted; SCO hosted by India (digital summit)
2024	Belarus admitted
2026	Kyrgyzstan holds SCO Presidency; Bishkek hosts Defence + FM + NSA meetings

Current SCO membership (10): China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Belarus

THE POST-SINDOOR CONTEXT

India and Pakistan have been in a bilateral freeze since Operation Sindoor (May 7–10, 2025):

- Pahalgam attack (April 22, 2025): 26 civilians killed
- Operation Sindoor: India struck 9 terror camps in Pakistan/PoK — ~100 terrorists killed
- India suspended Indus Waters Treaty
- Pakistan closed airspace to India; suspended trade; reduced diplomatic staff
- Ceasefire understanding: May 10, 2025 — 88-hour conflict halted

India's army messaging (April 22, 2026): "Operation Sindoor continues" — signalling ongoing operational posture.

What Bishkek Tests

Can India and Pakistan defence ministers sit at the same SCO table in April 2026? History says yes — India has managed this before (notably at SCO Summits in 2019-2023). But the post-Sindoor context raises the diplomatic temperature: India's delegation will face pressure to:

- 1 Sign joint communiqués that avoid direct reference to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism
- 2 Engage in multilateral counter-terrorism frameworks that treat all terrorism as equivalent
- 3 Avoid bilateral escalation in a multilateral setting

INDIA'S SCO INTERESTS — WHY IT STAYS

Connectivity

SCO provides frameworks for **INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor)** expansion and **Chabahar port** integration — connecting India to Central Asian markets bypassing Pakistan. India's trade with Central Asia (~\$3 billion) is growing; SCO is the diplomatic umbrella.

Counter-Terrorism (On India's Terms)

SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is a counter-terrorism mechanism. India participates in RATS while simultaneously pushing for a definition of terrorism that includes state-sponsored cross-border terrorism — a category that squarely implicates Pakistan.

Not Ceding Space

If India exits SCO, China and Pakistan benefit from India-free multilateral narratives about the region. India's presence ensures it has a voice — and veto on communiqués — even in a China-dominated forum.

China Management

The Bishkek meeting brings India face-to-face with China's Defence Minister Dong Jun. The bilateral India-China relationship remains delicate (Galwan 2020, LAC disengagement ongoing). SCO meetings provide a channel for military-level communication that is distinct from formal bilateral talks.

THE SCO LIMITATION — PAKISTAN'S VETO POWER

SCO operates by consensus. Pakistan can (and does) block communiqués that name Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, support India's candidacies, or frame counter-terrorism in ways that hold state sponsors accountable. The 2025 SCO Summit (India as host) saw India refusing to sign a communiqué that omitted reference to cross-border terrorism — a precedent that signals India's limits of multilateral accommodation.

UPSC ANGLE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — IR	SCO membership; India's multilateral diplomacy; Operation Sindoor context
GS2 — IR	INSTC; Chabahar; Central Asia connectivity
GS3 — Security	Counter-terrorism frameworks; RATS; cross-border terrorism

Mains Keywords: SCO, RATS, Operation Sindoor, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan presidency, INSTC, Chabahar, India-Pakistan bilateral freeze, multilateral diplomacy

Probable Question: “India’s SCO membership serves strategic interests despite the presence of China and Pakistan in the grouping. Critically examine.” (GS2 Mains)

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