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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India at Bishkek — What the SCO Forum Can and Cannot Do for India's Counter-Terrorism Agenda

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THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's presence at the SCO Defence Ministers' Meeting in Bishkek serves India's diplomacy in two ways. First, it demonstrates that India remains engaged in Eurasian multilateral security architecture despite its geopolitical complexities — this matters for India's Central Asia relationships with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which look to the SCO framework for regional order. Second, it provides a platform for India to convey, formally and on record, its post-Operation Sindoor counter-terrorism posture to an audience that includes both Pakistan and China.

What it cannot do is produce meaningful action on either front. And understanding why is as important as understanding what the SCO meeting accomplishes.

THE SCO'S STRUCTURAL LIMITATION

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was designed by China and Russia as a Eurasian counterweight to US-led security architecture. Its security mandate — the “Three Evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism — was drafted with Central Asian stability in mind, specifically to manage threats from Islamist extremism in Xinjiang and Chechen-linked groups in Russia. The SCO's counter-terrorism body, RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, based in Tashkent), functions primarily as an intelligence-sharing and coordination platform among member states' security services.

India joined the SCO in 2017, along with Pakistan. This creates the organisation's central absurdity: India's primary terrorism concern is Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism directed against India. But Pakistan is also an SCO member. The SCO cannot, by its consensus-based decision-making, issue statements that would embarrass or implicate a member state. Every SCO counter-terrorism declaration is carefully worded to avoid naming sources of terrorism — and therefore carefully worded to avoid being useful to India.

THE POST-OPERATION SINDOOR CALCULUS

India's *Operation Sindoor* (May 7-10, 2025) — precision strikes on 9 terrorist camps in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir — changed the regional security dynamic in one important way. It established that India would act across the border when it determined that the threat was severe enough. The Indian Army's public messaging after the ceasefire maintained "Operation Sindoor continues" — a deliberate signal that the military option remains on the table.

Rajnath Singh's presence in Bishkek carries this subtext. India's defence posture is no longer ambiguous. The message to SCO partners who may be tempted to shelter Pakistani diplomatic positions at the forum is calibrated: India expects that counter-terrorism rhetoric in multilateral forums be matched by bilateral pressure on Pakistan to dismantle cross-border terror infrastructure. The presence of Russia — a strategic partner of India's and an SCO co-founder — gives India a back-channel to push this message.

Whether it is received is a different question. China's equidistance between India and Pakistan at the SCO is structural, not accidental. Beijing benefits from Pakistani leverage over India. It will not use its SCO influence to press Pakistan on terrorism.

WHAT INDIA GETS FROM THE SCO

India participates in the SCO primarily for three reasons that have little to do with the forum's counter-terrorism utility:

- 1. Central Asia Engagement.** India has strategic interests in Central Asia — energy, market access, transit connectivity via Chabahar (INSTC). The SCO provides a platform where India can maintain relationships with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan — relationships that bypass both Pakistan (which blocks land transit) and China (which dominates BRI connectivity).
- 2. Bilateral Meeting Opportunities.** Major multilateral forums provide cover for bilateral meetings that would otherwise require separate diplomatic visits. Rajnath Singh's bilateral meetings with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's defence ministers in Bishkek achieve substantive defence cooperation outcomes at lower diplomatic cost.
- 3. Presence at the Table.** India leaving the SCO or disengaging from its defence forums would cede influence over the Eurasian security conversation to China and Russia. The costs of absence exceed the costs of participation, even when participation is frustrating.

THE COUNTER-TERRORISM FORUM INDIA NEEDS

If the SCO cannot deliver substantive counter-terrorism action, India needs alternative frameworks. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has proven more effective than any security forum in pressuring Pakistan on terrorism financing — Pakistan’s grey-listing between 2018 and 2022 produced more policy changes than any number of SCO declarations. India should continue to use FATF processes, bilateral intelligence-sharing with the US, UK, and Gulf states, and UN Security Council designations to target Pakistan-based groups.

The SCO will remain useful for the relationships it enables. It should not be mistaken for the counter-terrorism instrument India needs.


UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — IR	SCO; India’s multilateral security strategy; counter-terrorism frameworks; FATF
GS3 — Security	Operation Sindoor; cross-border terrorism; RATS; bilateral vs multilateral
GS2 — Governance	India’s defence diplomacy; strategic autonomy

Mains Keywords: SCO, Bishkek, Rajnath Singh, Three Evils, RATS, Operation Sindoor, FATF, counter-terrorism multilateralism, India-Pakistan SCO dynamics, China SCO

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
SCO founded	2001; China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan
India joined SCO	2017 (Astana summit)
SCO full members	10 (added Pakistan 2017, Iran 2023, Belarus 2024)
SCO HQ	Beijing
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure; Tashkent
Three Evils	Terrorism, separatism, extremism
Current SCO chair	Kyrgyzstan (2025-26)
Operation Sindoor	May 7-10, 2025; 9 camps struck; post-Pahalgam response
FATF Pakistan	Grey-listed 2018-2022; removed on reforms; effective pressure tool
SCO PEACE MISSION	Joint military exercise series under SCO


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