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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India's Balancing Act in the SCO: Engage, but on Sovereign Terms

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 **The Indian Express** 28 June 2026 **GS2**

Source: ujyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India stays in a grouping where it disagrees with two members on terrorism and connectivity. Is the SCO a strategic asset for India, or a forum that legitimises rivals' agendas?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [The Indian Express](#)

 **Every fact web-verified against primary sources** (<https://ujyari.com/how-we-verify/>)

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is back in focus as its **defence and security tracks** keep India in close, and often uncomfortable, proximity to China and Pakistan. For an aspirant, this is a core GS2 case in India's foreign policy: a Eurasian platform that offers **counter-terror cooperation, connectivity and Central Asia access**, set against India's firm red lines on **cross-border terrorism** and on **connectivity that must respect sovereignty** (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/sovereignty/>). The examiner's interest is the balance itself: why India engages, where it draws the line, and how it builds alternatives.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

The **SCO** gives India a seat in a Eurasian security and connectivity order, **RATS** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/rats-sco/>) counter-terror cooperation and Central Asia access. But it is **China-led** and includes **Pakistan**. India engages without diluting red lines: it refuses documents that soft-pedal **cross-border terrorism** (Qingdao, June 2025) and opposes **CPEC** through **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir**, an integral part of India, pushing **INSTC** (<https://ujyari.com/terms/instc/>) and **Chabahar** instead.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

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CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
SCO	Eurasian security grouping, founded 2001	India's Eurasian platform with rivals inside
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, Tashkent	Counter-terror intelligence cooperation
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor	Passes through PoK; India objects on sovereignty
INSTC / Chabahar	India-backed corridor and Iranian port	Reach Central Asia bypassing Pakistan
Sovereign connectivity	Projects must respect territorial integrity	India's principled red line

THE ANALYSIS: ENGAGEMENT WITH FIRM LIMITS

- 1 **The platform has real value.** The SCO is the only forum where India sits with Russia, Central Asia, China, Pakistan and Iran on security and connectivity, useful for counter-terror cooperation and Central Asia outreach.
- 2 **India will not dilute its red lines.** At the **Qingdao defence ministers' meeting in June 2025**, India declined to endorse a joint statement that omitted the Pahalgam terror attack, rejecting double standards on terrorism.
- 3 **Connectivity must respect sovereignty.** India opposes **CPEC** because it runs through **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir**, an integral part of India; **Aksai Chin**, illegally occupied by China, is likewise an integral part of India.
- 4 **India builds alternatives.** The **INSTC** and **Chabahar Port** (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/chabahar-port/>) offer connectivity to Central Asia and Afghanistan that bypasses Pakistan, advancing India's interests on its own terms.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

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founded **2001** (Shanghai), grew out of the Shanghai Five (1996); founding members China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan; **India and Pakistan joined 2017, Iran 2023, Belarus 2024; now 10 full members. Organs: Secretariat at Beijing; RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure) at Tashkent. Recent milestones: 25th SCO Summit, Tianjin, China, August-September 2025; defence ministers' meeting, Qingdao, June 2025, where India did not endorse the joint statement. India's connectivity stand: opposes CPEC (through PoK); promotes INSTC and Chabahar Port (Iran). Govt of India position: Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin are integral parts of India. Guiding idea: the "Shanghai Spirit" of mutual trust and respect for sovereignty, which India holds the grouping to.**

THE DEBATE

Argument to disengage or downgrade: The SCO is China-led and Pakistan-friendly; India is outnumbered, its red lines are routinely tested, and membership risks lending legitimacy to agendas India opposes for limited returns.

Argument to stay engaged: Exiting cedes the Eurasian space to China and Pakistan. Presence lets India shape the agenda, block adverse language, sustain counter-terror cooperation and pursue Central Asia ties that no other forum offers.

The balanced verdict: India's actual practice is the synthesis, **disciplined engagement**. Remain at the table to influence outcomes and access Central Asia, but hold firm on **terrorism** and **sovereign connectivity**, decline documents that cross red lines, and steadily build **INSTC and Chabahar**. Engagement is a tool, not a **concession** (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/concession/>).

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

Belonging to a grouping is not endorsement of its agenda; the question is what a state extracts and what it refuses. The strong answer maps the forum on two axes, what India gains (access, cooperation, voice) and what it guards (terrorism, sovereignty), then shows how India uses presence to advance one without conceding the other. This "gain versus guard" framing works across IR questions on QUAD, BRICS, SCO and the UN.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

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SCO membership -> access to Eurasia + RATS counter-terror + Central Asia outreach while China-led forum + Pakistan inside -> pressure on terrorism wording + CPEC through PoK. India's response: hold red lines (no soft terror language) + reject CPEC + build INSTC and Chabahar -> engagement on sovereign terms.

THE WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Stay engaged to shape the agenda** from within rather than ceding Eurasian space to rivals.
- ❷ **Hold firm on terrorism**, refusing any document that dilutes references to cross-border terror.
- ❸ **Insist on sovereign connectivity**, opposing CPEC and any project through territory integral to India.
- ❹ **Advance alternatives**, accelerating INSTC and Chabahar to anchor India's own Central Asia connectivity.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

“For India, the SCO is a platform of opportunity and friction in equal measure.” Critically examine India's balancing act. (250 words)

“India's SCO strategy is neither embrace nor exit but disciplined engagement: present at the table, immovable on terrorism and sovereignty, and building its own connectivity alternatives.”

SCO (2001, Shanghai Five) · 10 members (India/Pakistan 2017, Iran 2023, Belarus 2024) · Secretariat Beijing · RATS Tashkent · CPEC · INSTC · Chabahar Port · Tianjin Summit 2025 · Qingdao DM meeting 2025.

Should India remain in a forum where it must repeatedly defend its core interests, or does steadfast presence itself project strength?

Connects to GS2 PYQs on regional groupings, India's neighbourhood and connectivity diplomacy; probable forward question is the “engage on sovereign terms” framing above.

static GS2 on regional and global groupings, India's bilateral (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/bilateral/>) and multilateral relations, and connectivity diplomacy.

Sources: *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com>), *Ministry of External Affairs* (<https://www.mea.gov.in>), *PIB* (<https://pib.gov.in>)

● **KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE**

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation offers India a Eurasian platform on security, counter-terrorism and connectivity, but India must balance engagement with firmly managing differences over terrorism and connectivity that must respect sovereignty.

✓ **SUPPORTING**

- The SCO gives India a seat in a Eurasian security and connectivity architecture and access to Central Asia, energy and counter-terror cooperation through the RATS mechanism.
- India has shown it will not dilute its red lines, declining to endorse SCO documents that soft-pedal cross-border terrorism, as at the Qingdao defence ministers' meeting in June 2025.
- India insists that connectivity must respect sovereignty and territorial integrity, and objects to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, an integral part of India.

⚠ **COUNTER**

Critics argue the SCO is China-led and Pakistan-friendly, that India is outnumbered, and that membership risks legitimising agendas India opposes while delivering little.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

India should stay engaged to shape the agenda from within, hold firm on terrorism and sovereignty, push alternatives like INSTC and Chabahar, and use the SCO for Central Asia outreach without conceding its red lines.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

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QUESTION

"For India, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is a platform of opportunity and friction in equal measure." Critically examine India's balancing act in the SCO. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Multilateralism is rarely comfortable. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation places India alongside both partners and rivals, making it a platform of opportunity and friction at once.

BODY

The opportunity is real. The SCO gives India a seat in a Eurasian security and connectivity architecture spanning Russia, Central Asia, China, Pakistan and Iran, with counter-terror cooperation through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) at Tashkent and access to energy-rich Central Asia.

The friction is equally real. The grouping is China-led, includes Pakistan, and its documents can dilute references to cross-border terrorism.

India has responded not by exiting but by holding its ground: at the June 2025 defence ministers' meeting at Qingdao, India declined to endorse a joint statement that omitted the Pahalgam terror attack while referencing other regions, refusing to accept double standards on terror. On connectivity, India's position is principled and firm: projects must respect sovereignty and territorial integrity.

India therefore opposes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, an integral part of India, and instead promotes the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chabahar Port to reach Central Asia and Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan. The balance is to engage enough to shape the agenda from within, while never trading away its core interests.

CONCLUSION

India's SCO strategy is neither enthusiastic embrace nor exit, but disciplined engagement: present at the table, immovable on terrorism and sovereignty, and steadily building its own connectivity alternatives.


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