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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Why the SCO Now Matters More to India Than It Once Did

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 The Indian Express

29 August 2026

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India joined the SCO in 2017 and has spent much of the time since raising terrorism and connectivity objections aimed at two fellow members. Is a grouping where your main contribution is a complaint worth the membership, and what would change that?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)
[The Indian Express](#)
 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

India has a strategic partnership with almost every Central Asian state, a named policy since 2012, a prime ministerial visit to all five republics, and full membership of the region's principal organisation. It also has no road to get there. Architecture is not access.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is a preview piece, written before the summit rather than after it, which makes it unusually useful: it lays out the analytical frame you should carry into the outcome. Central Asia and the SCO are recurring GS2 territory, and the topic pairs the [multilateral](#)-groupings syllabus item with the connectivity and energy-security themes of GS3.

GS Paper 2: [Bilateral](#), regional and global groupings and agreements involving India or affecting India's interests; India and its neighbourhood; effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

*As this edition goes out, the Prime Minister is on the **Tashkent bilateral leg (29 to 30 August)**. The **26th SCO Summit at Bishkek runs from 31 August to 1 September** and has **not yet taken place**. Nothing here should be read as a summit outcome. This is the frame to judge the outcome against.*

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation** grew out of the **Shanghai Five** of 1996, an arrangement between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan whose original purpose was the settlement of post-Soviet border disputes and the building of mutual military confidence along them. It was formalised as the SCO in **2001** with Uzbekistan's accession. **India and Pakistan became full members in 2017, Iran in 2023 and Belarus in 2024.** The Secretariat is in **Beijing**; the **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)** is in **Tashkent**.

That origin story matters to the editorial's argument. The SCO was built to manage a **China-Russia-Central Asia equilibrium**, and India was not part of the balance it was designed to hold. The Central Asian states valued India's potential as a counterweight, but the organisation's institutional habits were set before India arrived.

India's own Central Asia policy has a documented and largely unfulfilled history. New Delhi holds **strategic partnerships with every Central Asian republic except Turkmenistan**, which maintains a policy of permanent neutrality. India announced the **12-point Connect Central Asia policy in 2012**. Prime Minister Modi visited **all five republics in 2015**, the first Indian Prime Minister to do so in a single tour. The **India-Central Asia Dialogue** operates at foreign-minister level, and an India-Central Asia Summit was held in virtual format in 2022.

The obstacle throughout has been physical. India shares no border with Central Asia. **Pakistan denies overland transit.** Afghanistan, the only alternative land bridge, has been unstable for the entire period. The workaround runs through Iran: the **Chabahar port**, on which India signed a long-term operating agreement, and the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**, a **multimodal** route from Mumbai through Iran to Russia and onward. Both have been slowed less by engineering than by **sanctions exposure**.

THE ANALYSIS

The editorial's central diagnosis is that India's SCO engagement has been reactive, and that reactivity has a cost. For most of its membership, India's visible contribution has consisted of raising terrorism, invoking the SCO's own **"three evils" of terrorism, separatism and extremism**, and objecting to Chinese connectivity projects on **sovereignty** grounds. India has consistently declined to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative in SCO documents, because the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor** traverses territory that is an integral part of India under illegal occupation.

Those positions are correct and India should not abandon them. But the editorial's point is that they are defensive: they prevent outcomes India dislikes without producing outcomes India wants. A state whose entire footprint in a forum is a set of reservations acquires a reputation for obstruction rather than leadership, and, more practically, gives smaller members no reason to align with it.

The second argument is that the conditions for a shift have improved, and this is the part that requires care. The editorial cites positive developments in India-China relations including the **eight-point consensus on the boundary question** reached at the **25th Special Representatives' talks**, and notes that the **SCO Development Strategy 2035** was adopted at the preceding summit. It also observes that **Central Asia is integrating more cohesively** and that **almost all SCO members are now engaging with Kabul**.

Each of these is real, and none of them settles anything. The eight-point consensus is procedural: hotlines in the Eastern and Middle Sectors, additional military meeting points, reopened border trading points, tasking of the Expert Group on Boundary **Delimitation**. It is confidence-building architecture layered over a boundary question that remains exactly where it was. The correct reading is that the relationship has stabilised enough to permit cooperation on files other than the boundary, which is a genuine opening and not a resolution.

The third argument concerns what India should actually propose, and here the editorial is suggestive rather than specific. It recommends that India table ambitious regional projects in **energy, trade and connectivity**, and notes that the Bishkek theme is **peace, development and prosperity**, with the Indian focus expected to be connectivity and security.

The strongest available Indian offers are worth naming precisely, because a good answer needs specifics. **Critical minerals** are the most obvious: Central Asia holds significant uranium, rare earth and lithium potential, and India's requirements under its energy transition are large and growing. **Digital public infrastructure** is India's most transferable export and its most credible soft-power instrument, with a demonstrated record in identity, payments and data exchange. **Pharmaceuticals, higher education and health care** are established Indian strengths in the region. **Development finance**, through a dedicated line of credit window, would convert goodwill into projects.

The fourth point is sequencing, and it is the most sophisticated part of the piece. The editorial notes that a constructive Indian showing at Bishkek would reinforce the **BRICS summit in New Delhi**, deepen engagement with the **Eurasian Economic Union**, and help India navigate the **next SCO presidency, which passes to Pakistan**. That last consideration is the sharpest: a member that has built credit with the Central Asian states and with Russia is better placed to limit an unfriendly presidency's agenda than one that has spent its membership objecting.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

The organisation:

- **Shanghai Five** formed **1996**; **SCO** formalised **2001** with Uzbekistan's accession
- **India and Pakistan** admitted as full members **2017**; **Iran 2023**; **Belarus 2024**
- Secretariat: **Beijing**. **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)**: **Tashkent**
- The **"three evils"**: terrorism, separatism, extremism
- **SCO Development Strategy 2035** adopted at the preceding summit

- **26th SCO Summit: Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, 31 August to 1 September 2026**, theme **peace, development and prosperity**; the SCO marks its 25th anniversary
- Next presidency: **Pakistan**

India's Central Asia policy, in sequence:

- **2012: Connect Central Asia** policy, 12 points
- **2015:** Prime Minister visits **all five Central Asian republics**
- **2017:** India becomes a **full SCO member**
- **2022:** first **India-Central Asia Summit** (virtual)
- **India-Central Asia Dialogue** at foreign-minister level
- Strategic partnerships with **all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan**, which follows permanent neutrality

The current visit:

- **Tashkent, 29 to 30 August 2026:** State Visit at the invitation of President **Shavkat Mirziyoyev**; fourth visit by the Prime Minister to Uzbekistan
- **Bishkek, 31 August to 1 September 2026:** 26th SCO Summit at the invitation of President **Sadyr Zhaparov**
- Stated Indian priorities: **Security, Connectivity, Opportunity**
- Framing: **Viksit Bharat 2047** alongside Uzbekistan's "**Yangi Uzbekistan**" vision

Connectivity instruments:

- **Chabahar port**, Iran: India's access route to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan
- **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC):** multimodal route from Mumbai via Iran to Russia; members include India, Iran, Russia and several Central Asian states
- **Ashgabat Agreement:** transit corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, which India joined in 2018
- **Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline:** long-planned, not operational

Historical anchor:

- **Tashkent Declaration, 10 January 1966**, ending the 1965 India-Pakistan war; Prime Minister **Lal Bahadur Shastri** died in Tashkent on **11 January 1966**, and the **Shastri Memorial** there is a fixture of Indian visits

Government of India position (non-negotiable):

- India does not endorse the **Belt and Road Initiative** in SCO documents because the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor** passes through Indian territory under illegal occupation

- **Aksai Chin**, the areas of Ladakh under illegal Chinese occupation, **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir** and **Arunachal Pradesh** are integral parts of India

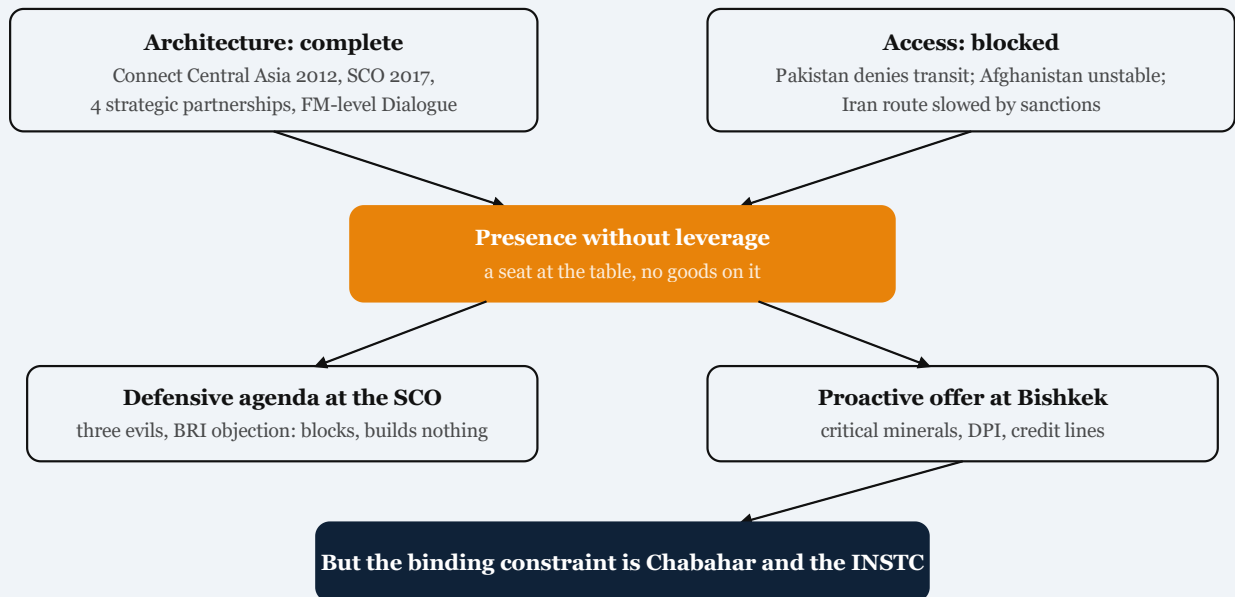
THE DEBATE

The case for deeper SCO investment is that no substitute exists. The SCO is the only forum seating India with all five Central Asian republics, Iran, Russia and China simultaneously. Bilateral tracks cannot replicate that convening power, and absence would leave the region's agenda to be set entirely by Beijing and Moscow. Membership also gives India standing on Afghanistan through the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group at a moment when every regional state is recalibrating.

The case against is that India is investing in a forum it cannot shape. The SCO's centre of gravity is Chinese, its connectivity vision is one India has formally refused to endorse, its consensus rule lets any member block, and the chair passes to Pakistan. On this reading India's participation supplies legitimacy without acquiring **leverage**, and the same diplomatic capital would yield more in the Quad, the I2U2 grouping or bilateral Gulf and Central Asian tracks.

The strongest synthesis is that the SCO's value to India is defensive-plus. It prevents a Eurasian architecture from consolidating without Indian participation, keeps direct channels to Central Asian states open, and provides a venue for India-China contact insulated from bilateral crisis. What it will not do is deliver connectivity. That has to come from **Chabahar and the INSTC**, and the honest conclusion is that India's Central Asia problem is more a **sanctions and logistics problem** than an SCO problem. Diplomacy at Bishkek cannot substitute for a working port and a functioning corridor.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



India's Central Asia shortfall is not a diplomatic deficit; the institutional architecture has been complete since 2017. It is an access deficit. A better agenda at Bishkek raises the ceiling, but only a working port at Chabahar and a functioning INSTC raise the floor.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable frame is the distinction between **membership, presence and influence** in multilateral forums, and the related test of whether a state's contribution to a grouping is **agenda-setting or agenda-blocking**.

Every multilateral body offers three different things. **Membership** is formal admission. **Presence** is showing up, speaking and being counted. **Influence** is the ability to place items on the agenda and have them survive to the outcome document. States routinely convert the first into the second and then stall, because influence requires something other members want.

Ask of any grouping: **what does India bring that others cannot get elsewhere?** In the Quad it is naval reach and a market. In the [International Solar Alliance](#) it is convening authority and a development model. In BRICS it is the largest growth story and a bridge to the West. In the SCO the honest answer has historically been thin, which is why the editorial's push towards concrete offers in energy, minerals and digital public infrastructure is the right instinct.

Second, note the **geography-beats-diplomacy** lesson, which is one of the most reliable in international relations. India's Central Asia policy has been ambitious, well-funded and continuous across governments for three decades, and it has underperformed because there is no road. When a policy fails despite sustained intent, look for a physical or structural constraint rather than a failure of will. The **corollary** for answer-writing: the way forward on Central Asia is a **logistics** recommendation before it is a diplomatic one.

Third, watch the **sequencing of summits** as an analytical habit. Bishkek precedes the BRICS summit in New Delhi. What India secures at the first shapes what it can attempt at the second. Diplomatic calendars are not a list; they are a sequence in which credit earned early is spent later.

WAY FORWARD

Table proposals, not objections. India should arrive at Bishkek with named projects in critical minerals, energy, pharmaceuticals, higher education and digital public infrastructure, so that the Indian contribution to the outcome document is additive.

Treat Chabahar and the INSTC as the core of the policy, not its adjunct. Every ambition in the region is downstream of a functioning corridor. Sanctions-resilient payment and shipping arrangements are the operative problem to solve.

Expand the India-Central Asia Dialogue with a development finance window. Lines of credit, project preparation support and **concessional** finance are what convert strategic partnerships into infrastructure on the ground.

Use the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group deliberately. With every member now engaging Kabul, India's humanitarian and development record in Afghanistan is a genuine asset within the grouping, and it is one Beijing and Islamabad cannot match.

Prepare for the Pakistani presidency now. Credit built with the Central Asian republics and Russia during this summit cycle is the instrument that will limit an unfriendly chair's agenda next year.

Hold the line on the Belt and Road. India's refusal to endorse the BRI in SCO documents is a sovereignty position, not a negotiating chip, and a proactive agenda elsewhere makes that refusal easier to sustain, not harder.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

Connects to standing UPSC themes on **regional groupings involving India, India's extended neighbourhood, connectivity as strategy including Chabahar, INSTC and TAPI, and India-China relations**, and pairs directly with questions on **multi-alignment**.

Practice question: *"India's engagement with Central Asia has never lacked intent; it has lacked access. Critically examine this proposition and assess whether India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has advanced its regional objectives."* (250 words)

Sources: The Indian Express, Ministry of External Affairs

Source: Why the SCO Now Matters More to India Than It Once Did — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS

Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in the Indian Express ahead of the Prime Minister's visits to Tashkent and Bishkek, the author argues that India's Central Asia policy has consistently underperformed its ambitions, and that with several geopolitical resets now under way, India should stop treating the SCO as a venue for defensive point-scoring against China and Pakistan and start proposing substantive regional projects in energy, trade and connectivity.



SUPPORTING

- The structural constraints are well known and have not changed: difficult relations with Pakistan and prolonged instability in Afghanistan have blocked direct overland connectivity, while the Iran route through Chabahar has been repeatedly disrupted by sanctions, leaving India's commercial and energy ambitions in the region largely unrealised.
- India has built the institutional scaffolding, with strategic partnerships with every Central Asian state except Turkmenistan, the 12-point Connect Central Asia policy of 2012, the Prime Minister's visit to all five republics in 2015, full SCO membership in 2017 and the India-Central Asia Dialogue at foreign-minister level, and yet remains a marginal player.
- The SCO is the only multilateral platform that brings together the states of Central and South Asia along with Iran, which gives it a convening value no other forum available to India replicates.
- The context has shifted in India's favour: relations with China have seen several positive developments including the latest eight-point consensus on the boundary question, Central Asia is integrating more cohesively, and almost all SCO members are now engaging with Kabul, which opens space for regional projects that were previously unthinkable.



COUNTER

The SCO's founding equilibrium was built by China, Russia and the Central Asian states without India, its agenda is set by a Chinese-funded connectivity vision India has formally refused to endorse, and the next presidency passes to Pakistan; investing political capital in a forum structurally weighted against Indian preferences may simply lend legitimacy to an agenda India cannot shape.



WAY FORWARD

Use the Bishkek summit to table concrete proposals rather than objections: energy and critical-mineral partnerships, digital public infrastructure exports, an expanded India-Central Asia Dialogue with a development finance window, and a determined revival of Chabahar and the International North-South Transport Corridor as the physical answer to the connectivity problem, while sequencing the SCO engagement to reinforce the BRICS summit in New Delhi and the India-China reset.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

India has been a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation since 2017 yet remains, in the assessment of many analysts, a marginal player in Central Asia. Examine the structural constraints on India's Eurasian engagement and evaluate what a proactive Indian agenda within the SCO would require. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2017, joining the only multilateral platform that seats Central Asia, South Asia and Iran at the same table. Nine years on, the persistent judgment is that India remains a marginal actor in a region it calls its extended neighbourhood, which makes the gap between institutional presence and actual influence the analytical question.

BODY

The constraints are primarily geographic and only secondarily diplomatic. India has no land access to Central Asia: Pakistan denies transit, and Afghanistan's instability has made the alternative corridor unreliable for three decades.

The Iranian workaround through Chabahar and the International North-South Transport Corridor has been slowed by sanctions rather than by engineering. Against this, India has built substantial institutional architecture, including strategic partnerships with four of the five republics, the 12-point Connect Central Asia policy of 2012, the Prime Minister's visit to all five states in 2015, SCO membership in 2017 and the India-Central Asia Dialogue.

The mismatch between architecture and outcome suggests that connectivity, not intent, is the binding constraint. Within the SCO itself, India's engagement has been substantially defensive, centred on the grouping's own three evils formulation of terrorism, separatism and extremism, and on objections to Chinese connectivity projects that traverse territory India claims.

That posture protects Indian positions but generates no Indian agenda, which is why membership has yielded presence without leverage.

CONCLUSION

The case for a shift rests on changed circumstances rather than changed preferences: Central Asian states are integrating regionally, all SCO members are now engaging Kabul, and the India-China relationship has stabilised sufficiently to permit cooperation on non-boundary files. A proactive Indian agenda at Bishkek, offering energy, critical minerals, digital public infrastructure and development finance, would convert membership into influence, provided the physical connectivity problem is solved in parallel through Chabahar and the INSTC.

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