



## The KoreaTimes

### WHAT INDIA'S ATTENDANCE AT SCO SUMMIT MEANS

**Pankaj Saran**, former Deputy National Security Adviser of India; former Ambassador of India to Russia, and former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh

24 September 2025

The 2025 Tianjin Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit may have been the largest gathering of world leaders under the SCO umbrella, but that was not why it received attention from the West.

The mere image of the leaders of Russia, India and China in one frame triggered not just headlines in the Western media but found their way to the social media account of U.S. President Donald Trump, who immediately declared that “India is lost!”

The general punditry was quick to conclude that the downturn in U.S.-India relations in the preceding weeks had pushed India into the arms of China and — even more worryingly from a Western point of view — Russia.

These simplistic reactions are symptomatic of a deeper problem. The world is on edge about what tomorrow will bring. Actions of certain countries and their leaders have rarely been under closer scrutiny, reflecting nervousness among established powers about their ability to preserve the status quo and suspicion of others' intentions.

The fact is that India has been a member of the SCO since 2017 and has been attending the summit since then, along with Russia and China. India is located in Asia. Attendance at the SCO summit by the Indian prime minister is not a deviation from the norm. Such, however, is the current state of geopolitical fragility that what is par for the course is given exaggerated meaning.

India has its own agency. It has zealously guarded the independence of its foreign policy. Despite the passage of time and several global crises, not least the war in Ukraine, this is not fully understood in the West. It is also underestimated in Russia and China. The presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Tianjin was not a sign that India has or will

jettison ties with the United States, but a sign that India will pursue relationships with major powers on its own terms. The recent sledgehammer approach by the United States towards India has reinforced India's belief that it has to spread its foreign policy bets.

The real significance of Tianjin is that it represented a visit by Modi to China after a gap of seven years. The bilateral meeting between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping built upon the process of normalization that began in Kazan, Russia, in October 2024. The two sides have agreed on the "Early Harvest" proposal in boundary delimitation and resumption of border trade through three points, along with other concrete measures.

This is no small achievement. Given the history of the 2020 Galwan border clashes and backstopping provided by China to Pakistan during India's strikes following the Pahalgam terrorist attacks in May 2025, India will keep a close watch on how much of the professed Chinese good faith is reflected in its actions.

The impulse for resetting the relationship has come from both sides. China realizes that its 2020 adventure was a strategic miscalculation, and that Pakistan, while being a military client, has remained an economic liability prone to political opportunism. In its move to reduce tensions with India, China is also cooling one front in a potential confrontation with the United States.

India, for its part, is attuned to the opening up of the geopolitical playing field, in light of fissures between the United States and its European allies, Trump's outreach to Russia, and his recurring talk of a possible "deal" with China, as exemplified in his comments after his recent call with Xi. India senses both the opportunity and the necessity of keeping all options open. Of course, it also needs breathing space.

The other story to come out of China was the parade to commemorate Japan's defeat in the World War II. This is a new China, willing to bare its fangs and flaunt its military might. This display reinforces the conviction that an inclusive, balanced and open security architecture is a fundamental requirement to prevent the emergence of a new hegemony and era of domination in the region and the world.

It is not without significance that Modi chose to go to China via Japan or that he did not attend the parade itself. India is also significantly upgrading its relations with Europe. The Western world will be driven to accelerate its military and technological build-up.

Even as the shape, form and timeline of a multipolar world remains a subject of debate, the emergence of a bipolar one is undeniable. The battle for global domination is on. In the midst of this, the expansion of the SCO and BRICS (a group of emerging economies) represents a real undercurrent. In these shifting sands, India will play its cards carefully.

*The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.*

*This commentary was originally published in the [Korea Times](#), and on the [APLN website](#).*

## **ABOUT APLN**

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



@APLNofficial



@APLNofficial



apln.network