

What India's Attendance at the Tianjin SCO Summit Means

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The Tianjin SCO Summit may have been the largest gathering of world leaders under the SCO umbrella, but that was not why it received attention in the West. The mere images, not much else, of the leaders of Russia, India and China in one frame triggered not just headlines in western media but found their way to the Truth Social account of the US president, who immediately declared that “India is lost!” The general punditry was quick to conclude that the downturn in US – India relations in the preceding weeks had pushed India into Chinese arms. Even more worryingly from a western point of view, into the arms of 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 Summits since then along with Russia and China. Eurasia is where India lives. Attendance at a 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 a larger than life image.

India has its own agency. It has zealously guarded the independence of its foreign policy making. Despite the passage of time and several global crises, not least the Ukraine conflict, this is not fully understood in the West. It is also underestimated in Russia and China. The presence of Prime Minister Modi in Tianjin is 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 sledge hammer 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 Prime Minister Modi to China after a gap of seven years. The bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi built upon the process of normalisation that began in Kazan in October 2024. The two sides have agreed to ‘early harvest’ in boundary delimitation and resumption of border trade through three points, besides 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 on its part is alive to the opening up of the geopolitical playing field in the light of fissures between the United States and its European allies, President 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 President 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 second World War. 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 hegemon and era of domination in the region and the world. It is not without significance that Prime Minister 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 US-led 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 represents an undercurrent that is real. In these shifting sands, India will play its cards carefully.

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Cover image: President of Russia Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping, at the 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Summit in Tianjin, China. [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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