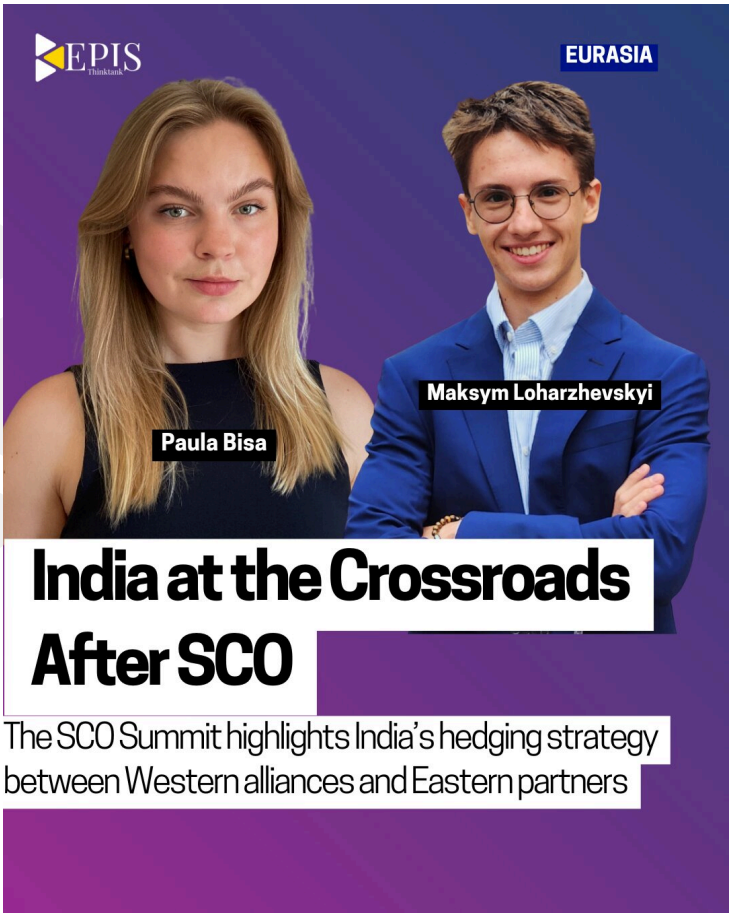
India at the Crossroads After SCO

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India at the Crossroads: Hedging Between Eurasia and the West After the SCO Summit

India's Stance Toward West and East Before the Summit

India has long walked a fine line between rival power centers. Its deep economic and security ties with the West coexist with active participation in groupings such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which position themselves as alternatives to the U.S.-led interna-

tional order. Relations with China illustrate this balancing act: both countries have made impressive economic strides, yet their partnership remains clouded by recurring border clashes and a competitive security posture. Beyond their rivalry, Beijing and New Delhi are also competing for influence in the Global South—China through large-scale infrastructure projects, India through diplomacy and its democratic credibility. The United States, meanwhile, has viewed India as a key partner in countering China's rise, but Washington's tariff policies and India's insistence on strategic autonomy have strained ties. In this context, the SCO Summit in Tianjin in September 2025 may signal a potential turning point, with China announcing that the two countries are partners rather than rivals.

This brief first examines how the summit can be understood as such a turning point, then explores its possible consequences, and finally assesses the advantages and disadvantages of this eastward shift from India's perspective.

The SCO Summit as the Turning Point

In early September 2025, Tianjin became the center of attention as leaders met for the 25th SCO Summit to discuss the future of Eurasian cooperation. The meeting was an important step in the organization's transformation from a primarily discussion platform to a more pragmatic format with concrete solutions. For example, leaders endorsed the "Tianjin Declaration" and a package of development programs for 2030–2035, including initiatives on energy, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and the creation of cooperation centers. Ideas for funding joint projects were also discussed.

India engaged actively in the summit. Namely, the official translation of Prime Minister Modi's speech notes that Delhi insists on three "pillars" of cooperation: security, connectivity, and development opportunities. It also emphasized its readiness for practical cooperation, particularly in infrastructure matters (e.g., Chabahar Port and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)). In interviews and press releases, the Foreign Ministry framed this as a call for concrete, practical steps within the SCO, but without abandoning existing ties with the West.

Still, this speech falls short of marking a full pivot toward the East for India: many experts see it more as a symbolic confirmation of Delhi's "hedging" strategy, which means a demonstration of its readiness for dialogue with Eurasia while simultaneously maintaining relations with the United States and partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

In essence, the summit highlighted long-standing contradictions in Indian policy. In practice, Delhi continues to diversify its partnerships: on the one hand, deepening cooperation with the United States in technology and defense on the other, continuing significant defense and energy ties with Russia, as well as unresolved border disputes with China and complex relations with Pakistan. The SCO merely emphasized that India is trying to play

"between worlds," benefiting from Eurasian channels without abandoning Western alliances.

Hence, India's ultimate position appears to be more a deliberate balancing act rather than docking to one of the poles: using the SCO for practical projects, while remaining outside of overt blocs and maintaining freedom of foreign policy maneuver.

Consequences of the Summit and India's Next Steps

In addition to the aforementioned consequences, the summit gave India an opportunity to reframe its domestic policy, which will likely translate into foreign policy shifts. For example, the government can now demonstrate that diversifying energy supplies and trade partnerships is not a whim, but a matter of national security in light of its dependence on Russia and the US tariff policies. Thus, the rhetoric of "strategic autonomy" has become more prominent, and new cooperation centers and mechanisms through the SCO have become instruments of domestic influence. Adding fuel to this fire is the growing domestic support for sovereignty and technological independence. Based on Putnam's two-level game theory, these changes in the international arena could strengthen India's foreign policy position. At the same time, security issues are once again taking center stage: India refused to sign a joint statement of defense ministers unless it mentioned the terrorist attacks in Kashmir.

Other important factors for India remain its economic diplomacy and energy security. India has increased its purchases of Russian oil, reducing costs. Under close Western scrutiny, it is simultaneously pursuing new routes: the aforementioned INSTC, Chabahar, and corridors within the SCO. This expands trade opportunities and strengthens ties with Eurasia. Overall, trade and investment opportunities are growing, but the balance remains fragile: cheap energy and new markets must be balanced with maintaining relations with the US and EU within the framework of India's rebalancing policy. However, in the future, India will likely deepen its participation in Eurasian transport projects to reduce its dependence on maritime routes. It may also more actively propose energy transition initiatives within the SCO, such as renewable energy projects. All this will allow Delhi to both strengthen its own economy and secure its status as a key intermediary between Eurasia and the West.

Lastly, India has become more confident on the international stage: Delhi now operates simultaneously in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. Experience confirms this: a few weeks ago, India sent 65 troops from the Kumaon Battalion to the Zapad 2025 exercises in Belarus. While this is not a large contingent, it is a strong signal of its willingness to participate in various security formats. More importantly, participation in Eurasian initiatives intensifies competition with China. Beijing uses the SCO as a platform to advance its interests in Central Asia, including infrastructure projects. This

poses a challenge for India, as China's projects, through the Belt and Road Initiative, affect its geopolitical space. At the same time, tensions remain with Pakistan, which is also an SCO member and uses the platform for diplomatic pressure. India is thus forced to strike a balance: strengthen military cooperation with Russia (particularly through engagement in Belarus), while at the same time avoiding opportunities for Chinese dominance and not leaving the field to Pakistan. In the future, this triple dynamic —India versus China, India versus Pakistan, and India as Russia's partner —will determine Delhi's military and diplomatic weight in Eurasia. For the West, however, such flexibility presents a challenge: India is increasingly perceived as an independent player, not definitively aligned with any one camp.

Pros and Cons for India

India's shift toward the East after the latest SCO Summit 2025 is often analyzed from the perspective of either Western or Eastern allies. However, to understand its true implications, it is crucial to look at the move from India's own standpoint. For New Delhi, the recalibration offers a mix of opportunities and challenges that will shape its strategic position in the years ahead.

Pros for India One of the clearest advantages lies in energy and resource security. By deepening ties with SCO members such as Russia, China, Central Asia, and potentially Iran, India gains more reliable access to oil, gas, and critical minerals. This reduces dependence on Western-controlled markets and vulnerable maritime routes. The SCO also provides new avenues for regional connectivity and trade, from infrastructure corridors to digital platforms, offering India alternatives to Western-dominated supply chains.

Engaging more actively in the SCO also strengthens India's ability to act as a counterbalance in the U.S.–China rivalry, positioning itself as a swing power capable of extracting concessions from both sides. At the same time, India enhances its multipolar credibility, reinforcing its long-standing narrative of supporting a pluralistic global order.

Security considerations also weigh heavily. Participation in SCO counterterrorism and regional stability initiatives offers India strategic depth in its near neighborhood. Beyond geopolitics, closer alignment may allow for easier mobility and exchanges across member states, strengthening people-to-people ties. For the Global South, India's active participation adds democratic legitimacy to the bloc, countering perceptions that it is dominated solely by authoritarian regimes. Moreover, by stepping away from the unpredictability of Western trade tensions, such as Trump's tariff wars, India seeks a measure of economic stability and a chance to consolidate its role as a superpower with greater autonomy on the global stage.

Cons for India India's engagement with the SCO carries significant risks. China's dominance within the bloc leaves New Delhi vulnerable to

being overshadowed, particularly amid unresolved border disputes and competing influence across South Asia. Closer ties with authoritarian-leaning states could also dilute India's democratic identity, weakening its soft power.

Strategically, leaning eastward may alienate diaspora communities in the U.S., U.K., and EU—key sources of remittances and political influence. Economically, deeper reliance on volatile partners such as Russia and Iran exposes India to sanctions, instability, and limited access to advanced technologies still supplied mainly by the West.

Border disputes in areas such as Doklam and Tawang illustrate these contradictions. China's infrastructure push in frontier villages directly competes with India's limited development in remote regions, raising fears that local populations may shift allegiance across the border—further heightening New Delhi's security vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, India's recalibration reflects a pragmatic effort to navigate between competing power centers. Yet this balancing act carries a paradox: by seeking greater strategic depth and multipolar leverage in the East, New Delhi risks eroding trust and vital partnerships in the West. At the same time, India projects itself as a pivotal global player— the world's most populous nation, the fourth-largest economy, and the largest democracy —positioning itself not merely as a bridge between blocs but as a power capable of shaping the international order itself.

Conclusion

Taken together, the SCO summit did not show a clear shift; instead, it was just another move in India's lengthy game of balancing its interests. Delhi is drawing practical benefits from Eurasian cooperation but keeps one foot firmly in Western partnerships. This hedging may look messy, but it is also the essence of India's foreign policy—avoiding permanent alignment and instead carving out space to act as a power in its own right. Hence, whether this balancing act proves sustainable will depend less on declarations in Tianjin and more on how India manages the competing pulls of China, the U.S., and its own ambitions in the years ahead.