

India and the SCO – Rethinking Regional Strategy

Introduction – India's Refusal at the SCO

In April 2025, India made headlines when it refused to sign the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) joint statement at the Defence Ministers' meeting in Qingdao, China. The reason – the omission of the April 22 Pahalgam terror attack in the statement, a move perceived by India as a clear dismissal of its security concerns. To make matters worse, the statement included references to insurgent activity in Balochistan, aligning more closely with Pakistan's narrative. India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh sought to include a reference to Pahalgam but Pakistan vetoed it – leading to India's firm refusal to endorse the final document. This incident, while minor in formality, is symbolically significant. It reflects the limitations of relying on multilateral platforms like the SCO for support on sensitive security issues such as terrorism. It is also a signal for India to recalibrate its regional diplomacy and adapt to evolving strategic dynamics in South Asia.

Background – What is the SCO?

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Over time, it expanded to include India and Pakistan in 2017, and most recently Iran in 2023. The SCO aims to enhance regional cooperation, particularly in the fields of security, counter-terrorism, economic collaboration, and cultural exchange. For India, joining the SCO was initially viewed as an opportunity to –

1. Gain leverage in regional geopolitics,
2. Counter Chinese influence,
3. Push back against Pakistan's terrorism narrative in multilateral forums.

But events like the recent Defence Ministers' meeting prove that SCO's structure – where each member has veto power – makes genuine consensus difficult, especially when national interests collide.

The Pahalgam Incident and What It Reveals

India's proposal to mention the terror attack in Pahalgam (J&K) was blocked by Pakistan. Simultaneously, the inclusion of Balochistan – where Pakistan accuses India of supporting separatism – showed a clear diplomatic bias. The outcome underscores three key realities –

1. **China's Deep Alliance with Pakistan** – China, the dominant force in SCO, continues to act as Pakistan's strategic protector.
2. **Russia's Strategic Drift** – With Russia increasingly dependent on China post-Ukraine war, Moscow is unlikely to challenge Beijing or back India in forums like the SCO.
3. **Pakistan's Resilience in Diplomacy** – Despite domestic economic woes, Pakistan effectively uses forums like SCO to neutralize India's diplomatic narrative.

Key Lessons for India

This episode is a wake-up call for Indian foreign policy. It exposes two illusions that have long shaped India's regional posture –

Illusion 1 – That India can diplomatically isolate Pakistan in global and regional forums.

Illusion 2 – That India can unilaterally dictate terms to its smaller neighbours, like Bangladesh.

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Rethinking India's Regional Strategy

In light of emerging geopolitical complexities, India must recalibrate its regional strategy, moving beyond notions of diplomatic isolation and reactive posture. The need of the hour is strategic pragmatism

– a forward-looking, multi-dimensional engagement with neighbours that ensures India's regional leadership while safeguarding national interests.

1. Forward Posture Towards Pakistan – India must adopt a proactive strategy towards Pakistan, especially in dealing with cross-border terrorism. While retaliatory action remains essential as deterrence, India should simultaneously develop mechanisms for measured diplomatic engagement, focusing on maintaining regional stability, exploring back-channel dialogues, and engaging with civil society and international partners to expose Pakistan's duplicity on terrorism.

2. Robust Posture with Bangladesh – India's relationship with Bangladesh must be rooted in mutual respect and strategic clarity. Dhaka is a critical partner, and India should actively strengthen economic and security ties through trade liberalisation, infrastructure connectivity, and people-to-people initiatives. At the same time, India must firmly uphold its security red lines, especially in countering anti-India narratives and cross-border provocations.

3. Balancing China's South Asia Strategy – With China expanding its strategic footprint in South Asia, India must respond with regional coalition-building and assertive diplomacy. This includes strengthening multi-lateral platforms such as ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Moreover, forming counter-strategic partnerships with countries like the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam will reinforce India's presence in the Indo-Pacific and limit China's regional hegemony.

4. Reinvesting in South-South Diplomacy – India's historical leadership in South-South cooperation must be revitalised. With its rich civilizational legacy, democratic credentials, and development model, India must leverage soft power, cultural exchange, education diplomacy, and development assistance to rebuild trust and goodwill across the neighbourhood and the Global South.

Conclusion – Strategic Clarity over Sentimentalism

India's refusal to sign the SCO joint statement was a principled stand, but it also reflects the practical limitations of multilateral diplomacy when national interests diverge. The incident is a timely reminder that New Delhi must rely on smart, bilateral diplomacy, backed by hard power and consistent regional engagement – rather than expecting multilateral forums dominated by adversaries to reflect its strategic concerns. As China's South Asian footprint grows, and as Pakistan and Bangladesh recalibrate their foreign policy, India's best path forward lies in building resilient relationships, strengthening regional cooperation, and avoiding the strategic trap of over-reliance on flawed institutions like the SCO.

Main practice Question (GS Paper II – International Relations) –

1. "In light of India's refusal to sign the 2025 SCO Defence Ministers' Joint Statement, critically evaluate the limitations of multilateral platforms in addressing India's core security concerns. How should India recalibrate its regional strategy in response?"

Answer Guidelines –

Your answer should cover the following key points in a structured manner –

1. Introduction –

1. Briefly explain the context of India's refusal at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' meeting in Qingdao (2025).
2. Mention the omission of the Pahalgam terror attack and inclusion of Balochistan references, leading to India's principled dissent.

2. Body

1. Limitations of Multilateral Platforms like SCO –

1. Explain SCO's structure and consensus model (veto by any member blocks collective decisions).
2. Show how China and Pakistan manipulate the forum to suit their narratives.
3. Highlight Russia's strategic drift towards China, limiting its support to India.
4. Conclude that SCO's utility in counterterrorism cooperation for India is minimal.

2. Implications for India's Security and Diplomacy –

1. Underscore how such exclusions undermine India's counter-terror diplomacy.

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2. Talk about the geopolitical isolation risks in a multilateral setting dominated by adversaries.
3. Impact on India's image, strategic autonomy, and regional leverage.

3. Rethinking India's Regional Strategy (from your earlier reformulated strategy) -

1. Forward posture with Pakistan (balanced deterrence + cautious diplomacy).
2. Robust engagement with Bangladesh (security + development cooperation).
3. Countering China in South Asia through regional coalitions (ASEAN, BIMSTEC, IORA).
4. Reinvesting in South-South and cultural diplomacy for long-term goodwill.

3. Conclusion - Reiterate that India must not rely solely on multilateral statements for its core concerns. India's regional strategy should be rooted in realism, strategic depth, and inclusive leadership.

