

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (SCO) BISHKEK SUMMIT

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Marking the 25th anniversary of its establishment, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit took place in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, on 31 August-1 September 2026. Held under the theme 25 Years of the SCO: Together for Sustainable Peace, Development and Prosperity, the 26th Summit of Heads of State brought together leaders from 21 countries in Bishkek this year. The summit addressed the organizations 25-year history and future priorities, focusing on regional security, counter-terrorism, alternative financial mechanisms, and the development of transport corridors.

The Transformation of the SCO Over 25 Years

The foundations of the organization were laid following the dissolution of the Soviet Union to ensure border security and mutual trust between China and the newly independent Central Asian states. Formed in 1996 by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan, the Shanghai Five focused on issues such as military confidence-building measures and the reduction of armed forces in border regions. With Uzbekistan joining the structure in 2001, the Shanghai Five was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Focusing on combating the three evils of terrorism, separatism and extremism in its early years, the SCOs agenda expanded and evolved over time. Economic cooperation, energy, transport, trade, investment, environment, technology and cultural relations were integrated into the organizations fields of activity. With India and Pakistan becoming full

members in 2017, Iran in 2023 and Belarus in 2024, the organization transformed from a five-member security mechanism into a broader Eurasian platform with 10 members. Today, the SCO members comprise China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus. These countries represent over 40% of the worlds population. The organization also has two observer states, Afghanistan and Mongolia, and 15 dialogue partners, including Türkiye.

Initially functioning as a Central Asia-centered security organization, the structure today brings together the worlds most populous countries such as China and India, a key global actor like Russia and energy-rich countries such as Iran and the Gulf states within the same framework of cooperation. Therefore, the 25-year transformation of the SCO stands out not merely as an expansion from 5 to 10 countries, but also through its surrounding network of partnerships.

2026 Bishkek Summit

At the SCO Summit held in Bishkek on 1 September 2026, issues aimed at strengthening the organizations cooperation in security, the economy, and politics were discussed. Coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the SCOs establishment, regional security matters took center stage, particularly the fight against terrorism, separatism, extremism, and drug trafficking. In addition, increasing trade and investment, improving energy and transport connectivity and deepening cooperation in industry, environment, tourism, and new technologies were brought to the agenda. Meanwhile, at the SCO+ (SCO Plus) meeting held under the theme The UN as a Key Element of a Just World Order: The Contribution of the SCO Plus States to the Formation of a Multipolar World, discussions focused on strengthening the UNs central role in the international system, forming a multipolar and more equitable world order, and increasing the representation of developing nations in global governance.

At the summit, common positions regarding international and regional developments were outlined. SCO members emphasized the need to preserve the organizations peaceful and non-aligned character, respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, and resolve international issues through political and diplomatic means. Supporting stability in Afghanistan and maintaining the joint fight against terrorism and the drug threat were also among the prominent topics. In the economic sphere, an agreement was reached to continue cooperation on advancing trade and investment relations among member countries, strengthening energy security, and enhancing regional connectivity.

28 documents were signed at the conclusion of the summit. Chief among these was the Bishkek Declaration, marking the 25th anniversary of the SCO. In addition, a protocol amending the SCO Charter and new regulations regarding assistance to states in emergencies, combating security threats, and the fight against drugs were also adopted. Furthermore, a decision was reached to sign a memorandum to enhance cooperation between the SCO and the African Union Commission. Following Kyrgyzstans chairmanship, Pakistan has assumed the SCO chairmanship for the 2026-2027 term.

Türkiyes Relations with the SCO

Within the expanding structure of the SCO, Türkiye obtained the status of dialogue partner in 2012. Thus, Türkiye became one of the countries closely following key issues on the SCO agenda, such as security, energy and regional connectivity. Furthermore, by assuming the chairmanship of the SCO Energy Club in 2017, Türkiye became the first non-member country to hold such a position within the organization.

One of the most significant steps in Türkiyes relations with the SCO came in 2022. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended the Samarkand Summit as a special guest at the invitation of Uzbekistan and Türkiye was represented at the highest level at an SCO meeting for the first time. President Erdoğan also attended the summit held in Tianjin, China, in 2025 as a guest of honor and delivered a speech at the SCO+ session.

At the 2026 Bishkek Summit, President Erdoğan sent a clear message regarding Türkiyes intention to advance its relations with the SCO to a higher level and evaluate full membership. However, Erdoğan specifically emphasized that Türkiye developing its relations with Russia and China does not mean moving away from NATO and the West. This approach holds strategic importance for Türkiyes foreign policy choices. Interpreting Türkiyes interest in the SCO as a move away from the West is inconsistent with Türkiyes multifaceted foreign policy approach. For Türkiye, the SCO serves as a distinct platform for deepening political and economic relations with Central Asia, China, Russia, and South Asia. Transport and connectivity stand out as key priorities, particularly given Türkiyes position within the Middle Corridor initiative. Diversifying trade routes between China and Europe, improving economic relations with Central Asian countries and strengthening regional transport networks are areas that simultaneously concern Türkiyes relations with both SCO countries and Europe, owing to its geographical position at the easternmost edge of the West and the westernmost edge of the East.

Therefore, Türkiye advancing its relations with the SCO can be evaluated less as a matter of choice and more as a natural component of its geopolitical position across different regional platforms.

The SCOs Place in the New World Order

In recent years, it has been observed that the centers of economic and political gravity in the international system have diversified, with the influence of different actors increasing in global politics. The rise of Asia, the growing political clout of the Global South and the emergence of alternative trade and financial instruments are among the key indicators of this transformation. A current example of this shift is visible when comparing the combined weight of SCO and G7 countries in the global economy. According to data based on the IMFs April 2026 projections, the SCO economies share of the global GDP is expected to reach 34.3% in 2026, while the G7s share is projected to remain at 28%.

Based on this comparison, the SCOs share of the global economy surpassed that of the G7 for the first time in 2021.[1]

The two organizations differ in terms of their objectives, institutional structures and forms of cooperation, and these figures do not imply that the SCO is an alternative to the G7. However, the comparison is noteworthy in that it demonstrates that global economic weight is increasingly shifting toward Eurasia and Asia-centered powers.

The core challenge facing the SCO is translating its existing potential into the capacity for collective action. Major powers like China, India, and Russia provide the organization with significant economic and political weight through cooperation and coordination. On the other hand, the differing priorities of these countries can also make it difficult for the SCO to generate common policies. Tensions between India and Pakistan, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the conflict involving Iran demonstrate that SCO members struggle to develop a unified and effective stance in the face of regional crises. Indeed, at the summit, despite the SCOs ambition to strengthen security and regional stability, members exhibited a limited posture toward these crises. While its expanding structure and growing economic weight bring distinct advantages, the ultimate impact of the SCO will be determined by the extent to which it can act together on shared issues despite internal differences, as well as by the concrete steps to be taken.

The Bishkek Summit was an important meeting demonstrating the point reached in the SCOs 25-year transformation. On the other hand, the summit has not eliminated the question marks facing the organization in the face of the challenges confronting todays world. The SCO has transformed from a five-country border security mechanism into a broad structure with significant political weight, bringing together China, Russia, India, Iran, and Central Asian countries. The continuity and impact of this weight can only be achieved if differences among members foreign policy priorities, security approaches, and mutual rivalries are effectively managed and if they can act together. Therefore, the future trajectory of the SCO holds strategic importance not only for its member states but also for Türkiye, which forms an integral part of the shifting dynamics in Eurasia.

*Picture: *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*

[1] Samrat Sharma, SCO vs G7: How The Emerging Bloc Is Challenging Decades Of Western Dominance, *NDTV World*, September 2, 2026, https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/sco-vs-g7-how-the-emerging-bloc-is-challenging-decades-of-western-dominance-11990164

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