

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO): What UPSC Aspirants Need to Know

The **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** is an important Eurasian multilateral organisation dealing with **security, economic cooperation, connectivity and regional cooperation**.

For India, the SCO is particularly important because it provides a platform for engagement with **China, Russia, Central Asian countries, Iran and Pakistan**.

The SCO is therefore highly relevant for **UPSC Prelims, GS Paper 2, Essay and the Interview**.

1. What is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation?

The **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)** was established on **15 June 2001** in Shanghai, China.

It emerged from the earlier **Shanghai Five** grouping, which consisted of:

- China
- Kazakhstan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Russia
- Tajikistan

Uzbekistan joined in 2001, leading to the creation of the SCO.

The organisation initially focused strongly on **regional security and combating terrorism, separatism and extremism**, but its agenda has expanded to include economic, cultural, technological and humanitarian cooperation.

2. Who Are the Members of SCO?

As of 2026, the SCO has **10 member states**:

1. India
2. China
3. Russia
4. Kazakhstan
5. Kyrgyzstan
6. Tajikistan
7. Uzbekistan
8. Pakistan
9. Iran
10. Belarus

Iran became a full member in 2023, while **Belarus joined in 2024**.

Remember:

India joined as a full member in 2017.

3. SCO: Observer States and Dialogue Partners

Apart from full members, the SCO also has **observer states and dialogue partners**.

As of 2026:

Observer States

- Afghanistan
- Mongolia

Dialogue Partners

The group includes countries such as:

- Saudi Arabia

- UAE
- Türkiye
- Egypt
- Qatar
- Bahrain
- Nepal
- Sri Lanka
- Maldives
- Myanmar
- Azerbaijan
- Armenia
- Kuwait
- Cambodia

The exact categories are important for UPSC because **member, observer and dialogue-partner status are different.**

4. What Are the Main Objectives of SCO?

The SCO focuses on cooperation in several areas.

Security

- Counter-terrorism
- Countering extremism
- Combating separatism
- Counter-narcotics
- Regional security

Economic Cooperation

- Trade
- Investment
- Energy
- Transport
- Connectivity

Other Areas

- Digitalisation
- Science and technology
- Culture
- Education
- Tourism
- Healthcare
- Environmental cooperation

The organisation's agenda has therefore expanded beyond traditional security concerns.

5. The “Three Evils”

One of the most important concepts associated with the SCO is its fight against the **“Three Evils”**:

Terrorism

Use or threat of violence for political or ideological objectives.

Separatism

Movements seeking separation or territorial independence.

Extremism

Radical ideologies or activities considered threats to regional security.

For UPSC Prelims, remember:

SCO → Three Evils → Terrorism + Separatism + Extremism

6. Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)

The SCO has a specialised mechanism called the **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)**.

Its headquarters is located in:

Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

RATS focuses on cooperation against:

- Terrorism
- Separatism
- Extremism

It is one of the important institutional mechanisms of the SCO.

7. How Does the SCO Work?

The **Council of Heads of State** is the highest decision-making body of the organisation.

It meets annually and provides overall political direction.

Other important mechanisms include:

- Council of Heads of Government
- Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs
- Council of National Coordinators

- SCO Secretariat
- Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure

The **SCO Secretariat is located in Beijing, China.**

8. Why Is SCO Important for India?

India's membership provides an important platform for engaging with the wider Eurasian region.

India's key interests include:

Security

Cooperation against terrorism and extremism.

Central Asia

Greater engagement with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Afghanistan

The security situation in Afghanistan has implications for India and the wider region.

Energy

Central Asia, Russia and Iran are important energy and resource partners.

Connectivity

India seeks improved connectivity with Central Asia and Eurasia.

Multilateral Diplomacy

SCO provides a platform where India engages simultaneously with countries such as China, Russia and Pakistan.

9. India's "SECURE" Approach

India has promoted the concept of a "**SECURE SCO**".

SECURE stands for:

S - Security
E - Economic Development
C - Connectivity
U - Unity
R - Respect for Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity
E - Environmental Protection

This framework reflects India's priorities within the organisation.

10. India's Role in the SCO

India became a full member in **2017**.

India hosted the SCO Summit in **2023** during its first SCO presidency.

During India's chairmanship, India promoted areas such as:

- Startups and innovation
- Traditional medicine
- Digital inclusion
- Youth empowerment
- Shared Buddhist heritage

India also emphasised counter-terrorism, connectivity, digital public infrastructure and sustainable development.

11. Why Is SCO Strategically Important?

The SCO covers a large part of **Eurasia** and brings together major powers and important regional states.

Its members include:

- Major energy producers
- Major economies
- Nuclear powers

- Central Asian states
- Important transport corridors

This gives the organisation significance in:

Security + Energy + Connectivity + Trade + Eurasian geopolitics

12. SCO and India's Strategic Autonomy

India simultaneously participates in several major international groupings.

For example:

SCO + BRICS + QUAD + G20 + ASEAN-related mechanisms

These groupings have different memberships and objectives.

India's participation in SCO allows it to engage with countries such as **Russia, China and Central Asian states**, while its participation in other forums provides engagement with different strategic partners.

This reflects India's broader approach of maintaining **strategic autonomy and issue-based partnerships**.

13. SCO and Connectivity

Connectivity is an important area of cooperation.

India's geographical challenge is that it does not have direct land access to Central Asia because of Pakistan's geography.

Therefore, alternative connectivity routes are important.

Important example:

International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

India → Iran → Caspian region → Russia → Europe

Other connectivity discussions involve Central Asia, Afghanistan and wider Eurasian transport networks.

UPSC Concept

Connectivity = Trade + Energy + Strategic Access

14. SCO and Afghanistan

Afghanistan is important to SCO discussions because of:

- Terrorism
- Extremism
- Drug trafficking
- Regional security
- Humanitarian concerns
- Connectivity

Although Afghanistan is not currently a full SCO member, it has **observer status**.

For India, developments in Afghanistan are important because of their implications for **national security and regional stability**.

15. SCO and India's Challenges

India's participation in the SCO also presents challenges.

China-Pakistan Factor

India has significant differences with both China and Pakistan.

Connectivity Constraints

India's land connectivity with Central Asia remains limited.

Diverging Interests

SCO members do not always have identical strategic or economic interests.

Russia-China Relationship

The growing strategic relationship between Russia and China is another factor India must navigate.

Therefore, India uses the SCO primarily as a **platform for engagement and cooperation**, while managing bilateral differences separately.

16. SCO vs QUAD

A common UPSC mistake is to treat every international grouping as an alliance.

SCO	QUAD
Eurasian organisation	Indo-Pacific strategic grouping
Founded in 2001	Revived at leaders' level in 2017
Strong focus on regional security and cooperation	Focus on a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific
Includes China and Russia	Includes India, USA, Japan and Australia
Has a broad Eurasian membership	Four-member grouping

Remember:

SCO ≠ Military Alliance

It is a multilateral organisation with broad areas of cooperation.

17. SCO in the Changing World Order

The SCO has become increasingly relevant amid discussions about:

- Multipolarity
- Global South
- Eurasian connectivity
- Regional security
- Reform of global institutions

At its 2026 meetings, the organisation emphasised a more representative and multipolar international order and continued cooperation in politics, security, economy and humanitarian affairs.

In September 2026, the SCO held its 26th Council of Heads of State meeting in **Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan**, marking the organisation's 25th anniversary year. The chairmanship for

2026-27 passed to Pakistan.

UPSC Prelims Quick Facts

Founded:

15 June 2001

Headquarters:

Beijing, China

India became full member:

2017

Iran became full member:

2023

Belarus became full member:

2024

Current full members:

10

Observer states:

Afghanistan and Mongolia

Important security body:

RATS

RATS Headquarters:

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Key security concept:

Three Evils - Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Consider the following statements regarding the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation:

1. India became a full member of the SCO in 2017.
2. Iran became a full member in 2023.
3. The SCO Secretariat is located in Beijing.
4. The SCO is a military alliance similar to NATO.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

Answer: 1, 2 and 3 only.

UPSC Mains Question GS Paper 2

“The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation provides India with an important platform for engagement with Eurasia, but also presents significant strategic challenges.” Discuss.

Points to cover:

Introduction:

Briefly define the SCO and its significance.

Body:

- India's security interests
- Central Asia
- Counter-terrorism
- Energy security

- Connectivity
- Afghanistan
- Engagement with Russia and China
- Strategic autonomy

Challenges:

- China-Pakistan dynamics
- Connectivity limitations
- Divergent interests among members

Conclusion:

India can use the SCO as a platform for **regional dialogue, connectivity and security cooperation while pursuing its independent national interests.**

Quick Revision

Remember SCO through this chain:

SCO

↓

Eurasia

↓

Security

↓

Three Evils

↓

Central Asia

↓

Energy & Connectivity



India's Strategic Autonomy

Final Takeaway

The **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation** is important for UPSC because it connects several major themes of international relations:

Security + Central Asia + China + Russia + Iran + Pakistan + Afghanistan + Connectivity + Energy + Multipolarity

For Prelims, remember the **members, headquarters, RATS and Three Evils**.

For Mains, focus on **India's interests, strategic autonomy, connectivity, counter-terrorism and the opportunities and challenges of engaging with the Eurasian region**.

UPSC Tip: Don't study SCO merely as a list of countries. Study it as India's gateway to Eurasian geopolitics.

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