



From China to West Asia: The SCO's Expanding Influence and Strategic Realignment

by Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas

On 31 August and 1 September 2025, the 35th Annual Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was held in the port city of Tianjin. China's President Xi Jinping welcomed leaders from nine other member states – Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India, Belarus, and Iran – alongside two observer states and fourteen dialogue partners from various regions, as well as the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres. The Tianjin summit marked the largest gathering in the history of the SCO. By including Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, the summit reinforces its role as a platform for Global South dialogue and reflects the GCC's strategic shift toward partnership diversification in a multipolar world.

Why does it matter?

The significance of the summit was underscored by the Victory Day military parade held on 3 September, which featured the participation of heads of state attending the SCO summit. Many observers interpreted China's display of military strength in the presence of global leaders as a strategic message directed at the United States. The largest military parade in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was designed to showcase China's multi-forces and its power assets like the Dong Feng and Julang Intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). It demonstrated China's capability to establish strategic deterrence and to safeguard its defined national interests.

The predecessor of the SCO, known as the "Shanghai Five," was established in 1996 with the aim of managing territorial disputes among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Over time, as membership expanded, the organization shifted its focus toward combating extremism, separatism, and terrorism. Today, the SCO member states encompass more than half of the world's population, and nearly one-quarter of the global economy, positioning it as the largest regional cooperation organization with significant potential for development.

Amid sweeping global transformations and turmoil, China viewed the Tianjin summit as an opportunity to once again advocate for a new model of international relations by criticizing US hegemony, promoting multilateralism through a Chinese lens, and by offering alternative visions of international order led by China – an order which, according to Xi, should support peaceful coexistence and win-win cooperation. In this context, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) was introduced during the SCO Plus session. This initiative builds upon China's three previous proposals: the Global

Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. The GGI's aim is to collaborate with all nations in pursuit of a more just and equitable global governance system. Although no formal document has yet been released outlining the specifics of this new initiative, Xi emphasized several foundational principles: the commitment to sovereign equality among nations regardless of size, power, or wealth; the promotion of "greater democracy in international relations"; and the rejection of double standards in the application of international law. Xi also called on member states to take a leading role in advancing the GGI and to become a catalyst for development and reform of the global governance system. The Tianjin summit thus provided China with a platform to demonstrate that the governance model it champions is gaining traction globally – particularly across the Global South.

What is the big picture?

Among West Asian countries, Iran is a permanent member of the Shanghai CO, while Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Bahrain are dialogue partners. For Iran, the SCO holds strategic significance as a transregional body that includes global powers relevant for Iran: China and Russia. In a statement issued in June, the SCO strongly condemned Israel's attack on Iran, describing it as a violation of international law and an infringement upon the sovereignty of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Tianjin summit's emphasis on proposing a new model of global governance, centered on the principle of equality among nations and positioned in contrast to the Western-led global order, resonated particularly well with Iran's

interests. On the sidelines of the SCO summit, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian held a bilateral meeting with Xi, as well as a private session with Wang Huning, a prominent and strategic figure within the Chinese Communist Party, having served alongside three Chinese presidents. Iran and China's positions regarding the US role in West Asia have converged more closely than ever before.

The accession of four GCC member states to the SCO as additional dialogue partners further reflects the growing trade and economic ties between these countries and China. In recent years, a wave of "Asianization" has swept across the GCC, prompting increased engagement with East-oriented organizations such as the SCO, in pursuit of institutional balance and strategic hedging. The participation of GCC states in the summit underscores their deepening commitment to multi-alignment and partnership diversification. With China as the primary trade partner for most GCC states and Russia playing a key role through OPEC+, the SCO has gained strategic relevance within their omni-balancing strategies. Improved Iran-GCC relations further reflect this shift. Since the China-brokered restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023, bilateral engagement has advanced significantly, marked by high-level visits and Saudi expressions of support following the Israeli attacks against Iran. The SCO thus provides an additional multilateral platform to sustain this dialogue. As a consequence, enhanced coordination with non-Western partners – particularly China – has become central for Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to advance regional interconnectivity, maintain geoeconomic leverage, and consolidate alternative strategic partnerships.

In this regard, participants agreed at the Tianjin summit to establish the SCO Development Bank and outlined six platforms aimed at enhancing economic

cooperation, particularly in the fields of clean energy and digital technologies. These economic and financial initiatives could further incentivize GCC countries to deepen their relations with the SCO and integrate the organization more fully into the region's economic and political landscape. In particular, closer cooperation in energy and digitalization remains a key area of mutual interest. As all GCC countries pursue energy diversification and seek to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, they are also positioning themselves as regional hubs for digital innovation, with a strong focus on artificial intelligence and advanced technologies.

What comes next?

In the future, the wealthy GCC countries will constitute a significant part of China's Digital Silk Road initiative. Over the past two years, they have signed a range of agreements with major Chinese companies such as Alibaba, Huawei, China Telecom, and Dahua, underscoring their growing role in the evolving digital and technological partnership with China.

Contrary to claims that portray the SCO as an "Eastern NATO" or a counterbalance to NATO, the SCO is founded on the principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third parties. Accordingly, the SCO is not expected to engage in military interventions in support of its members or partners in bilateral disputes. Nevertheless, the expansion of bilateral ties among participating states and potentially inter-organizational cooperation between the GCC and the SCO could further accelerate the West Asian shift toward an Asia-centered strategic framework.

About the Author

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