

As the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) prepares for its 2025 summit in Tianjin, China, on August 31–September 1, member states will gather against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting global order. The agenda spans pressing issues, from climate resilience and biodiversity protection to digital connectivity, trade facilitation, and regional security cooperation.

The previous summit, hosted by Pakistan — the first since it became a full member in 2017 — was hailed as a milestone in regional diplomacy. Islamabad used the platform to position itself as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and the wider Eurasian region. Despite India's downgraded participation, with Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar representing New Delhi in place of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the meeting was widely viewed as a success.

Expansion and integration

Since then, the bloc has undergone notable changes. Belarus joined as the SCO's 10th full member, extending its reach into Europe. Under China's presidency, the organisation has advanced initiatives for deeper economic integration, including proposals for an SCO Development Bank and local currency clearance systems.

Energy cooperation has also gained momentum. SCO energy ministers adopted a 2030 roadmap emphasising renewables, climate resilience, and sustainable growth. Yet, enduring instability in Afghanistan, resurgent terrorism, and widening trust deficits have compelled the bloc to double down on security, with the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) reaffirmed as its top operational priority.

The largest SCO summit to date

China, as host, has billed the Tianjin summit as the SCO's largest gathering since its founding. More than 20 world leaders — including Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif — are expected to attend, alongside representatives from 10 international organisations such as UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

Chinese officials have framed the summit as a counterweight to “hegemonism and power politics.” At a press briefing, Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Bin said the event aims to “stimulate momentum for cooperation” and leverage the SCO’s resilience to respond to “uncertain and unpredictable factors in the international environment.”

President Xi Jinping is set to deliver keynote speeches, underscoring China’s message that the SCO offers an alternative model of regional cooperation. In his words, the bloc has “successfully explored a path of cooperation that aligns with the trends of the times and meets the needs of all parties, setting a model for a new type of international relations.”

The Shanghai Spirit and multipolar aspirations

The SCO remains a pivotal platform for member states seeking a multipolar order rooted in the “Shanghai Spirit” — a framework of mutual trust, sovereign equality, and shared development. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has described the Tianjin meeting as a turning point, marking the SCO’s entry into a “new stage of high-quality development” defined by solidarity and productivity.

This year’s agenda prioritises “high-quality cooperation” in the digital and green economy — two pillars seen as essential for long-term regional growth. Analysts argue the summit could serve as a counterbalance to Western-led blocs at a time when the U.S. and its allies are intensifying Indo-Pacific containment strategies. In contrast, SCO states — including China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics — are positioning themselves as advocates of multipolarity and regional solutions to regional problems.

Growing trade and Pakistan’s stakes

Economic ties within the SCO are expanding rapidly. In the first half of 2025, China’s trade with member states reached \$247.7 billion, a 4.8 per cent increase year-on-year, underscoring deepening interdependence across energy, minerals, agriculture, and manufacturing.

For Pakistan, the Tianjin summit holds particular importance. Officials in Islamabad see the SCO as a platform to expand exports, attract investment, and integrate into emerging digital-economic corridors linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Proposals are being

tabled to facilitate SMEs through cross-border e-commerce and SCO-wide digital trade initiatives. The meeting will also offer a rare face-to-face encounter between Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Digital integration and green cooperation

China is pushing regional digital integration, offering expertise in AI, blockchain, cybersecurity, and data governance. For Pakistan — with its youthful workforce and growing IT sector — SCO-led capacity-building and technology transfers could accelerate its “Digital Pakistan” vision.

Climate resilience will be another headline theme. Central and South Asia are highly vulnerable to rising temperatures, water scarcity, and extreme weather. China has showcased low-carbon development models, including renewable grids, smart cities, and green-finance tools. Proposals under discussion include climate-resilient agriculture, disaster preparedness, and carbon-footprint reduction.

Biodiversity cooperation is also emerging as a priority. Beijing is expected to expand the “SCO Biodiversity Cooperation Initiative” to conserve cross-border ecosystems and protect endangered species. For Pakistan, which faces rapid biodiversity loss from deforestation and urbanisation, participation in such efforts could bring much-needed technical and financial support.

Security at the core

Yet despite this widening agenda, security remains the SCO’s central pillar. With instability in Afghanistan, militancy in Central Asia, and new threats in cyberspace, RATS will brief leaders on updated frameworks for intelligence-sharing, tackling terror financing, and curbing cross-border militancy.

For Pakistan, the SCO’s collective security mechanisms offer a vital arena for coordination with China, Russia, and other partners. Diplomats say Islamabad will use the summit to push for eased trade and transit, expanded counterterrorism cooperation, greater access to digital innovation hubs, and inclusion in climate and biodiversity initiatives.

Charting a shared Future

According to Pakistan's Foreign Office, the country's active engagement in the SCO aligns with its wider strategy of regional integration and economic diplomacy. Chinese officials have framed the summit's broader aim as building a "community of shared future."

At a time when global institutions appear increasingly strained, Tianjin offers the SCO an opportunity to present a roadmap for resilience — one rooted not in confrontation but in cooperation.