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Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

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Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

In April 1996 five leaders met in Shanghai. They did not want a bloc. They wanted to stop quarrelling over borders. Thirty years later that meeting has become a ten-nation group. India and its rival Pakistan sit at the same table.

Think of three questions as you read. How did a border treaty become the SCO? Who are the ten members? And what happened at Bishkek in 2026?

> **1996.** Shanghai Five formed
> **2001.** SCO founded, 15 June
> **2017.** India and Pakistan join
> **10.** Full members in 2026

Shanghai Five: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan.

RATS: Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, based in Tashkent.

Three evils: Terrorism, separatism and extremism.

Council of Heads of State: The top body. It meets once a year.

1 How did a border treaty become the SCO?

After the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, China had long borders with new states. On 26 April 1996 the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Shanghai. They signed a pact to build trust along the border. The group was called the Shanghai Five. (Source: CFR)

On 15 June 2001 Uzbekistan joined, and the group was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The SCO Charter was signed in Saint Petersburg in 2002. The Secretariat is in Beijing. Russian and Chinese are the official languages.

The Council of Heads of State is the top body. It meets once a year.

- Shanghai Five: **26 April 1996**.
- + Uzbekistan = SCO: **15 June 2001**.
- Secretariat: **Beijing**. RATS: **Tashkent**.

> **Quick check 1.** Uzbekistan was the sixth country to join and turned the Shanghai Five into the SCO. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 How did it grow to ten members?

India and Pakistan became full members together at the Astana Summit in 2017. Rivals are often admitted as a pair, so neither gains an edge. Iran joined in 2023, while India held the chair. Belarus became the tenth full member in 2024. (Source: CFR)

Today the ten are China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The SCO also has observers and dialogue partners. They are not full members.

- Members: **10**, not 13.
- India and Pakistan: **2017**.
- Iran **2023**; Belarus **2024**.

> **Quick check 2.** The SCO has 13 full members. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 What does the SCO actually do?

The SCO fights what it calls the “three evils”: terrorism, separatism and extremism. Its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, RATS, sits in Tashkent. RATS shares intelligence and plans joint anti-terror drills. It is a different body from the Secretariat in Beijing.

BRICS focuses on money and development. The SCO leans toward regional security. China and Russia are in both. The SCO has held UN General Assembly observer status since 2005.

> **Think it through:** Why would India sit with Pakistan and China in a security club?
>
> Staying out would leave the field to China and Russia. Inside, India can speak on terrorism in front of Pakistan. It also keeps its Central Asian links alive.

- Three evils: **terrorism, separatism, extremism**.
- RATS: **Tashkent**.
- UN observer since **2005**.

4 What happened at Bishkek in 2026?

The 26th SCO summit met in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on 31 August–1 September 2026. Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov chaired it. Xi Jinping, Putin, Modi and Pakistan's PM Shehbaz Sharif signed the Bishkek Declaration. (Source: SCO Secretariat)

- Documents approved at Bishkek: **28**.
- One is a protocol amending the **SCO Charter**.
- Another is an MoU with the **African Union Commission**.

Modi asked members to end the whole ecosystem of terror: money, recruitment and safe havens. India offered to host an SCO Civilisation Dialogue Forum. (Source: Foreign Policy)

Pakistan took over the chair for 2026–27 and will host the next leaders' summit in 2027. (Source: Al Jazeera)

The 2025 summit was in Tianjin, China, on 31 August–1 September. Modi attended it too.

> **Quick check 3.** India and Pakistan became SCO members together in 2017. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 Pakistan's chairmanship 2026–27: the Islamabad meeting and the road to the 2027 summit

Pakistan took over the SCO chair on 1 September 2026. Its first big event was a three-day meeting in Islamabad. The Council of National Coordinators met on 28–30 September 2026. Pakistan's own national coordinator chaired it. (Source: Outlook India)

The Council of National Coordinators is a working-level body. Each member names one senior official as its coordinator. They plan the chair's calendar and prepare the leaders' summit.

India sent its SCO National Coordinator, Alok Dimri, from the Ministry of External Affairs. (Source: Gulf News)

- Venue and dates: **Islamabad, 28–30 September 2026**.
- Body: **Council of National Coordinators**, not the leaders' summit.
- Next big event: **Heads of State summit, Islamabad, August 2027**.

Modi's travel is not decided. An MEA secretary said the appropriate authority will decide at the appropriate time. (Source: Deccan Chronicle)

India–Pakistan inside the SCO

Why does an Indian official sit in Islamabad when bilateral ties are frozen? The answer is that the SCO is a multilateral club. Members attend its meetings as members. They do not attend them as bilateral guests.

Pakistan's Foreign Office made this point after the meeting. It called the visit a welcome step. It said the visit was not bilateral and was part of the SCO's multilateral framework. (Source: ThePrint)

There is a precedent. In October 2024, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar went to Islamabad for the SCO Council of Heads of Government. He said he was going only as a good SCO member. (Source: Gulf News)

- Rule of thumb: **SCO attendance is not a bilateral thaw**.
- Both capitals describe such visits as **multilateral**.

6 What are the exam traps?

- **10** full members, not 13.
- Shanghai Five began on **26 April 1996**.
- Official languages: **Russian and Chinese**.
- RATS is in **Tashkent**; the Secretariat in **Beijing**.
- Chair for 2026–27 is **Pakistan**, not Kyrgyzstan.
- The 2026 Islamabad meeting was the **National Coordinators**, not the leaders.
- Leaders' summit in Islamabad: **August 2027**.

Practice MCQs

1. The 'Shanghai Five,' the SCO's forerunner, was formed on 26 April 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and which other country?

A. Tajikistan

B. Turkmenistan

C. Mongolia

D. Uzbekistan

See answer ↓

2. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was formally founded on 15 June 2001, when which country joined the Shanghai Five?

A. Iran

B. India

C. Pakistan

D. Uzbekistan

See answer ↓

3. India and Pakistan became full SCO members together, at which summit?

A. Samarkand Summit, 2022

B. Tashkent Summit, 2016

C. Astana Summit, 2017

D. Ufa Summit, 2015

See answer ↓

4. SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) targets what it calls the 'three evils.' Which of these is NOT one of them?

A. Terrorism

B. Extremism

C. Separatism

D. Corruption

See answer ↓

5. Consider the following:
1. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
2. Missile Technology Control Regime
3. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
India is a member of which of the above?

A. 3 only

B. 2 and 3 only

C. 1 and 2 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

See answer ↓

6. Which country chairs the SCO for 2026–27 and will host the leaders' summit in August 2027?

A. Kyrgyzstan

B. Kazakhstan

C. Uzbekistan

D. Pakistan

See answer ↓

7. Which SCO body met in Islamabad on 28–30 September 2026, the first meeting under Pakistan's chair?

A. Council of Foreign Ministers

B. Council of National Coordinators

C. Council of RATS

D. Council of Heads of State

See answer ↓

8. In October 2024, an Indian foreign minister visited Islamabad for which SCO meeting, the first such visit in about nine years?

A. Council of Defence Ministers

B. Council of Heads of Government

C. Council of National Coordinators

D. Council of Heads of State

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The Shanghai Five was formed on 26 April 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, to settle border disputes. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** Uzbekistan joined on 15 June 2001, and the group was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** India and Pakistan became full SCO members together at the Astana Summit in 2017. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** RATS targets terrorism, separatism, and extremism, the 'three evils' — not corruption. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The correct answer is **1, 2 and 3**. India is a founding member of AIIB (2016), joined MTCR as its 35th member (2016), and joined SCO as a full member (2017). Read more. ↑ Q5
6. **D.** Pakistan took over the SCO chair from Kyrgyzstan on 1 September 2026. It will host the Council of Heads of State summit in Islamabad in August 2027. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** The Council of National Coordinators plans the chair's year of events. India sent its SCO National Coordinator from the Ministry of External Affairs. The leaders' summit is a different body and meets in 2027. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar attended the SCO Council of Heads of Government in Islamabad on 16 October 2024. He said the trip was for the multilateral forum, not for bilateral talks. It was the first visit by an Indian foreign minister since Sushma Swaraj in December 2015 (The Wire). ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **True.** ↑ 3

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