

India at SCO: Optics Without Anchors

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Modi's SCO Showcase: High Optics, Limited Substance

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit offered more spectacle than substance. PM Modi's most replayed moments were with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. President Putin [waited](#) for PM Modi after the leaders' session and the two then rode together, speaking privately for roughly 45-50 minutes before the bilateral—an unmistakable visual of India–Russia bonhomie. This suggests that India is unlikely to make significant cuts to its oil imports from Russia in the near future. That context makes Donald Trump's [recent remark](#) pointed; he complained that “India buys most of its oil and military products from Russia, very little from the U.S.,” calling the economic relationship a “totally one sided disaster” and pressing Delhi to scale back its energy ties with Moscow if it wants progress with Washington.

Modi's visit to China after a seven-year gap was framed in conciliatory tones: Xi called for India and China to be

[“partners, not rivals,”](#) while Modi responded by noting an emerging “atmosphere of peace and stability” between the two sides.

In Tianjin, the SCO statement [explicitly condemned](#) both the Pahalgam and Jaffar Express attacks—marking a contrast with the earlier Defence Ministers’ meeting, where India withheld its signature from the joint declaration because the Pahalgam attack had been omitted.

By contrast, the summit itself delivered little that could be called a breakthrough. Most substance with China had been pre-cooked in earlier Wang Yi engagements. The signals were made to ease curbs on critical minerals and fertilizers supply, as well as to manage tensions along the border, tentative and potentially reversible.

The real deliverables for India in recent weeks came not at the SCO but in [Japan](#): a rare earths partnership, a USD 68 billion investment package, bullet train projects, defense cooperation, and ship repair facilities. Alongside this, the Indo-Japan joint statement indirectly pointed at China’s activities in the South China Sea, underlining that substantive gains and sharper alignment came in Tokyo, not in Tianjin.

Two developments further shaped the optics. The US Embassy still [described](#) India-US ties as a “defining relationship of the 21st century” and echoed Senator Marco Rubio’s view that their “enduring friendship” was the “bedrock” of cooperation. Previously, in an interview, Peter Navarro was [sharply critical](#) of India’s position on Russian oil imports. Meanwhile, Donald Trump weighed in publicly—as he has been escalating pressure on Delhi over its Russian energy ties. He [warned](#) India could face further penalties and additional phases of sanctions (“phase-2” and “phase-3”) if it continues oil purchases from Russia. Taken together, these messages are being read in Delhi as signs of nervousness within

Washington.

Balancing Act Targets Washington and Domestic Audiences

The SCO summit was above all a test of how far India and China could go to cool tensions after years of hostility. Modi's meeting with Xi, his first in China in seven years, was conducted in a notably conciliatory tone. It also tested how much Russia and China were prepared to embrace India at a moment when its ties with Washington are under strain. Putin's decision to wait for Modi and then share an extended car ride was a public demonstration that Moscow continues to see value in showcasing its closeness to India. Against this backdrop, India's strategy at the SCO was showing that it retains options, and that it can engage Moscow and Beijing on its own terms despite U.S. pressure.

For New Delhi, this summit was about projecting images that could serve two critical audiences: policymakers in Washington and the Indian domestic public.

The US strategic establishment is deeply absorbed in Ukraine and the transatlantic relationship. Quiet Indian demarches rarely trigger urgency in Washington. But public images of Modi engaging Xi and Putin directly are difficult to ignore. These photos function as deliberate nudges, drawing US attention to the possibility of a drift and prompting Washington to do more to anchor India in its strategic fold. Manifestations of this are visible when Jake Sullivan called the tariff shock "[huge strategic harm](#)" and argued it pushes India closer to China, and the US Embassy's quick reiteration that the partnership is a "defining relationship of the 21st century." Yet such gestures signal plausible recognition, but not resolution, yet.

Domestically, images of Modi standing comfortably with Xi and Putin feed into the story that India can balance among great powers, avoiding dependence on any one pole, and by

maneuvering flexibly. The symbolism of Putin waiting for Modi, or riding alongside him, offers an easy visual shorthand for parity and respect. China's symbolic courtesies help reinforce Modi's domestic image as a leader of stature on the global stage.

Yet beneath these dividends lies a more fragile reality. Despite the projection of a great diplomatic visit by Indian media, analysts as well as public sentiments are more guarded. As Brahma Chellaney has [argued](#), this is the fourth reset that this government has attempted and every time India has been left negatively surprised. The SCO reinforced that perception. China's concessions do not signal a structural thaw while it continues to treat its partnership with Pakistan as evergreen, and India's willingness to look past Sino-Pak collusion during Operation Sindoor risks making the bilateral dialogue appear unequal.

The domestic political reaction underscores this tension. Even among supporters of the ruling party, unease has grown that India is appearing pliable toward China. The contrast between Xi's displayed warmth with Putin and formality towards Modi is also not missed in some circles.

Given these constraints, Jaishankar has [stressed](#) that an India-China thaw and India-US frictions are unrelated.

Three Critical Tests Will Determine Real Impact

The SCO showed that India can still choreograph moments with both Putin and Xi, even amid tariffs from Washington. These pictures generated dividends: reassurance at home and attention abroad. But without substance, they risk aging poorly. Three tests will decide whether SCO's optics become anchors.

First, the US track. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has said Delhi hopes to clinch a trade deal with Washington by November. If that trade deal happens, the test will be if

India's new found warmth with China dissipates or continues. Hence this will demonstrate to what degree it is autonomous or to what degree this is driven by immediate exigencies related to India-US relations .

Second, the China track. The cordial tone was useful, but the test is whether it is short-lived. Xi's courtesies and Modi's emphasis on "peace and stability" may help reduce tension in the short term, yet the underlying issues—border management and trade in critical minerals and fertilizers—remain structurally vulnerable. As this is fourth reset attempted by the government in its dealings with China, and each previous effort has ended with India left negatively surprised.

Third, the Russia track. If India actually is part of the trade agreement with US, and also includes an element of scaling back or purchase of Russian oil, it would highlight the limits of the current SCO bonhomie. India still retains the option of tilting more toward the US, even if that comes at the expense of its closeness with Russia, should ties with Washington improve.