

India Between SCO and BRICS: Contrasting Platforms in a Shifting Order

Introduction

India today finds itself at the intersection of multiple geopolitical currents. Its active engagement in both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS group reflects its desire to balance great power politics with the imperatives of economic growth and regional stability. While the SCO and BRICS are often mentioned together as vehicles of the 'non-Western' or 'Global South' agenda, they are distinct in structure, scope, and purpose. For India's foreign policy, this difference is crucial: SCO represents a China-dominated regional security architecture, while BRICS functions as a global economic coalition seeking reform of multilateral governance.

By simultaneously participating in both, India pursues a nuanced strategy: leveraging each platform's strengths while limiting exposure to their structural weaknesses.

SCO: Regional Security, Chinese Leadership, and Limited Room for Maneuver

The SCO was established in 2001, evolving from the 'Shanghai Five,' and today includes China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and several Central Asian republics. Its formal institutional character distinguishes it from BRICS: it is treaty-based, with a secretariat in Beijing and permanent mechanisms for security cooperation.

For India, the SCO offers three strategic opportunities:

1. Engagement with Central Asia: India's membership since 2017 provides a formal channel to strengthen ties with resource-rich Central Asia Republics.
2. Counterterrorism agenda: Through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), India can coordinate on issues of extremism that directly affect its security.
3. Dialogue with rivals: Membership ensures that India shares a table with both China and Pakistan, reducing risks of exclusion from Eurasian security discussions.

However, India also faces structural constraints. The SCO is China-dominated, both in terms

of agenda-setting and institutional leadership. Russian influence, while significant, has declined with Moscow's growing dependence on Beijing since the 2022 War with Ukraine. Moreover, SCO's consensus-based structure makes it difficult for India to push initiatives that contradict Chinese or Pakistani positions. Thus, while SCO provides visibility and access, its regional scope and Chinese dominance limit India's autonomy.

BRICS: A Global Economic Coalition with Diverse Membership

By contrast, BRICS—comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—remains a grouping rather than a treaty-based international organization. Its institutionalization is minimal, limited largely to the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement. Yet its informal structure gives it flexibility: BRICS has become a voice of the Global South, representing over 40% of the world's population and nearly a quarter of global GDP.

For India, BRICS serves several foreign policy goals:

1. Platform for multilateral reform: India uses BRICS to advocate for changes in global financial institutions, giving greater weight to emerging economies.
2. Diversification of partnerships: Unlike SCO, BRICS includes democracies like Brazil and South Africa, which reduces the perception of India aligning exclusively with authoritarian states.
3. Economic cooperation: With trade, development financing, and infrastructure projects at its center, BRICS provides India with tools to advance its growth agenda.

Yet BRICS also has internal contradictions. Brazil and South Africa often pursue policies more aligned with the West, while Russia and China push for systemic alternatives. India walks a middle path, aligning with reformist but not revisionary positions. The ambiguity over Saudi Arabia's membership status—announced in 2023 but not yet institutionalized—further illustrates the fluidity of BRICS expansion.

Comparative Insights for India's Foreign Policy

The main similarity between SCO and BRICS is that both seek to offer alternatives to Western-led structures, whether NATO or the Bretton Woods institutions. Both also give India visibility in multilateral diplomacy and reinforce its status as a major emerging power. Also, being present in both SCO and BRICS is essential for India's aspirations for a leadership role in the Global South.

The differences, however, define India's strategic calculus:

- Institutionalization: SCO is a formal international organization; BRICS is an informal coalition.
- Geographic scope: SCO is Eurasian and security-focused; BRICS is global and economic.
- China's dominance: Overwhelming in SCO; more diluted in BRICS due to the presence of Brazil, South Africa, and potentially new entrants.
- India's maneuverability: Limited in SCO due to Chinese and Pakistani presence; broader in BRICS, where India can build coalitions with diverse partners.

Thus, while India views SCO as a necessary but constrained forum, BRICS is treated as a strategic opportunity to amplify its global voice.

Policy-Oriented Perspective: Why This Matters

India's dual engagement illustrates a core tenet of its foreign policy: multi-alignment rather than bloc politics. For policymakers and analysts, three implications stand out:

1. Regional versus global agendas: SCO ties India into Central Asia and security affairs, but BRICS elevates India to a leading voice on global economic reform.
2. Navigating China: SCO requires India to manage Chinese dominance; BRICS allows India to dilute it through partnerships with other members.
3. Markets and connectivity: Just as markets shape the future of corridors like the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) or the Development Road, India's effectiveness in SCO and BRICS will depend on pragmatic cooperation driven by economic needs, not ideological alignment.

Conclusion

India's simultaneous membership in the SCO and BRICS reveals a careful balancing act. In SCO, India seeks inclusion in Eurasian security frameworks despite limited room for leadership. In BRICS, India plays a more proactive role in shaping debates on global governance and economic reform. Yet BRICS is not yet a formal institutionalized International Organization.

For Türkiye, which also emphasizes connectivity, regional stability, and constructive engagement with both Eurasia and the Global South, India's strategy offers important lessons: influence in the 21st century will be shaped less by rigid alliances and more by flexible, overlapping platforms. Both SCO and BRICS matter for India—but in different ways, and with different implications for the evolving international order. Like India, Türkiye can be balanced in its foreign policy, however, Türkiye, as a NATO member, cannot claim to be entirely neutral. Thus there are limits to how much Türkiye can have similar policies with India, SCO and BRICS states.

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