

A Message from Shanghai to the West

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. The phrase fits perfectly with the snapshot taken on September 1st in Tianjin, China, where the distinguished guests of Chinese President Xi exchanged words, handshakes, and warm smiles. Naturally, this widely discussed moment also conveys a particularly serious message to the West, which is searching for its new place in the world and attempting to adapt itself to the new *status quo* shaped by the new U.S. administration under the leadership of Donald Trump. Reality itself indicates that Trump's second term will be very different even from his first presidency and appears tantamount to a promise of overturning the global order, at least as we knew it until the first quarter of the 21st century.



Figure 1. The snapshot of the powerful men of Russia, India, and China during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Tianjin, China, on September 1st, 2025. The smiles and the positive atmosphere among Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, and Xi Jinping send a serious message to the West. Source: CNBC.

Directed by Ridley Scott, starring Donald Trump

The spotlights on the protagonists of the photograph. The guests of the ambitious Chinese President Xi Jinping were the “pariah” of the international community, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, and the until recently sworn rival of China, India's Prime Minister

Narendra Modi. In their meeting, the three leaders besides appearing cheerful presented themselves as supporters of an alternative model of international stability, openly rejecting the behaviour and political decisions of Donald Trump, whom they portray as a troublemaker on the global political stage (Srivastava S., 2025). The comparison may resemble a Ridley Scott film script, but unfortunately, it reflects the reality of the world in 2025. All constants are collapsing, and the global order we once knew is disintegrating faster than we realize. It is evident that the U.S. administration (and of course Trump himself) treats allies and competitors in the same way: through an overuse of hard power. Since January 2025, this approach has increasingly become the new global norm, as Washington announces and imposes waves of crippling tariffs on allies and adversaries alike. This development reveals the emergence of a new political strategy, a hypothesis that offers ample ground for further discussion and potential analysis. Under this lens, India and its leader Narendra Modi present several peculiarities, mainly because the world's most populous country has traditionally fallen within the American sphere of influence. This alignment can be explained by a variety of reasons, economic and geopolitical among others. However, just hours before the release of the now-famous photo, it was Trump who pulled the tariff trigger, likely sending Modi's prime ministerial jet "directly" to Tianjin for the SCO Summit. The announced 50% tariffs on Indian imports as punishment for India's purchase of Russian oil and hydrocarbons caused great dissatisfaction within India's government and planted seeds of doubt as to whether the United States and the West more broadly can still claim superiority in shaping the global order (Inamdar N., 2025).

India's "Warning" Alignment

Benefitting from this new reality, especially at the narrative level (concerning the model upon which the new global order should be built) are the protagonists of the Shanghai summit, particularly Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. The realignment of power dynamics is so profound that traditional and chaotic differences among SCO members appear softened, as a new common threat emerges and a rare window of opportunity opens for them to practically challenge the global *status quo*, formerly (or currently) expressed through U.S. and Western dominance. Indicative of this new reality is the fact that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, although initially unwilling to compromise, ultimately signed the SCO joint

communiqué despite strong initial objections (mostly from the side of India) over the April 2025 Pahalgam incident (Li N., 2025). The communiqué condemned the deadly terrorist attack in the Indian region that left twenty-six people dead. The attack had nearly pushed the two countries to the brink of a full-scale war. Although Pakistan and India (two countries that together account for one-fifth of the global population) temporarily “buried” the hatchet, they resolved none of their long-standing disputes (Hussain A., 2025). Symbolic though it may be, the communiqué functioned as a warning shot toward Washington. It was presented alongside the photograph of the leaders and the commitments for the creation of a joint development bank (with Russia’s consent this time) (Levin H., 2025), aimed at undermining the dollar’s dominant role as the global currency—a major achievement for Xi’s China (Li N., 2025).

Shanghai Cooperation Organization: From Yesterday to Today

Before proceeding further, it is worth noting that few people are familiar with the SCO’s origins. The organization was founded at a time when the collapse of the Soviet Union produced new, fragile states seeking an exit from decades of isolation onto the international stage. These states attempted to resist centrifugal forces and construct autonomous political structures modelled after the Western world a model that had triumphed after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Levin H., 2025). The original “Group of Five” (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) formalized their cooperation in 2001, with the primary aim of addressing border disputes. The organization sought to enhance mutual trust, promote good-neighbourly relations, and combat terrorism. Its founding documents emphasized confronting the “three evils”: terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Li N., 2025). Fast-forward to the present. The SCO has doubled in size since 2001, now including India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, and Iran. Several other regional countries (such as Turkey) are widely expressing interest in initiatives aiming to reshape the global landscape, projecting a sense of “exceptionalism” increasingly valued in contemporary international politics. At the recent Tianjin meeting (the largest since 2001) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was also present. He held talks with President Putin about the ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as with Iran’s Prime Minister Masoud Pezeshkian regarding the country’s nuclear program in the aftermath of U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities (FRANCE 24, 2025). It would be excessive to argue that the SCO is an institution aiming to provide collective security

or that it constitutes a military structure in Asia akin to NATO in Europe. Such prospects remain difficult though not entirely impossible. Previous Russian initiatives within the SCO were not warmly welcomed by other member states, as power rivalries remain evident (Aydıntaşbaş A., et al., 2022). For the time being, the SCO appears to function primarily as a platform that facilitates communication and convergence among major and middle powers (often competitors) seeking regional dominance and a more prominent role in a turbulent “Trumpian” world. Economic cooperation and integration seem to be a top priority, with the organization positioning itself as an attractive alternative for countries struggling to maintain economic ties with the West (Li N., 2025).

A Powerful Anti-Western Axis

This interpretation is not at all simplistic. In Tianjin, the leaders of three nuclear-armed states (China, Russia, and Pakistan) stood together. Collectively, these nations represent nearly half of the world’s population, making them powerful not only militarily but also demographically. Furthermore, SCO countries control a significant proportion of the world’s energy resources. Russia, for example, possesses an exceptionally rich hydrocarbon base, while China extracts and distributes nearly 90% of global rare earth elements (Campbell C., 2025). Combined with Iran and the energy-rich countries of Central Asia, the SCO has the capacity to influence the global political agenda. The organization invites unlikely partnerships, fosters opportunities for convergence, and shapes an axis with pronounced anti-Western elements. Yet this axis still seeks cohesion, as member states hold divergent and often conflicting interests. This, in a sense, highlights the uniqueness of the Western world that recognizes the benefits and advantages offered by democracy, even if many political actors in the contemporary world increasingly question it. A key driver of SCO convergence appears to be the U.S. tariffs, which threaten supply chains and revenue channels across those states. These countries recognize the risks and increasingly search for mutual compromises (Srivastava S., 2025).

The Expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

SCO member states in numbers

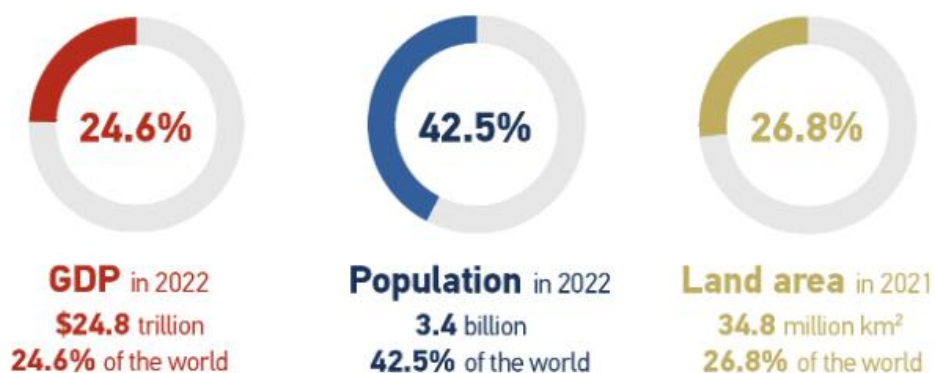


Figure 2. The strength of SCO member states is reflected in key statistical indicators. Their combined GDP reached 24.8 trillion USD—representing 24.6% of the global total. Meanwhile, the population of the ten member states reached 3.4 billion people, accounting for 42.5% of the global population. Additionally, SCO countries occupy 26.8% of global land area. Data from 2022, with the first two categories (GDP and population) likely to have increased since then. Source: news.cgtv.

Russia's New Role

The Tianjin reality conveys a message about Russia's position in today's geopolitical ecosystem. Although Russia and Vladimir Putin feel comfortable attending such summits (given that the Russian leader faces arrest warrants from the International Criminal Court in most Western countries) the balance of power between Moscow and Beijing has shifted decisively in China's favour (Srivastava S., 2025). China's rise as a global superpower coincides with Russia's weakened position, as Moscow has been engaged in an exhausting war for over three years, increasingly relying on China to meet its military and economic needs. The Asian market, and China in particular, has become Russia's only viable outlet. In this context, Russia is making further concessions to Beijing, confirming that within this alliance it accepts the role of the strong, yet smaller, partner (Levin H., 2025).

Conclusions

Despite the differences and rivalries among the states that make up the “Shanghai mosaic,” we must not overlook the fact that they have established their own platform for dialogue and developed a distinct code of communication that challenges the Western model of global governance. There is no need to panic yet. The real concern lies in the fact that countries like China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey (which increasingly engages with the Shanghai group) promote and openly adopt nondemocratic systems of governance. In these systems, the rule of law, free elections, individual liberties, and peaceful dispute resolution are far from popular choices among their leaders. Moreover, the contradictory signals sent from across the Atlantic (at a time when the West faces existential threats) do little to help. In fact, they may accelerate SCO convergence. Donald Trump shares one key characteristic with most SCO leaders: a deep suspicion towards the democratic institutions. This trend exacerbates the global crisis of democracy. His handling of global affairs gives strategic advantage to the SCO leaders, who now enjoy rare prospects for cooperation and convergence. Although the SCO does not yet have military capabilities and its economic integration remains an ambitious plan on paper, it is crucial to recognize the threat posed by ongoing and effective coordination among its member states. The smiles in the photograph may be staged and insincere, but they should not be ignored.

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