

Pakistan's official social-media account was also reported to have cropped Modi out of a video showing the SCO leaders at the roundtable.

These moments, together with his attempts to engage Putin and his distinctive choice of attire, added to the perception that Sharif was consciously seeking visibility and attention at the summit.

These optics may seem minor, but they matter for understanding how Pakistan uses major international gatherings for diplomatic grandstanding and image-building. In many ways, this episode also explains an important feature of Pakistan's foreign policy: a strong emphasis on optics, visibility, and diplomatic grandstanding rather than sustained and substantive diplomatic engagement.

India's diplomatic gains and the changing SCO dynamics

The SCO summit was good for India for several reasons. India put strong language on terrorism and pushed for language addressing the entire terrorism ecosystem, from financing to recruitment and radicalization. This is an im-

portant diplomatic success for India because New Delhi has consistently argued that terrorism must be eliminated in its entirety rather than being selectively condemned.

The summit was also important for India because Prime Minister Modi met Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. This sent a message that India-Iran ties remain steadfast despite the ongoing tensions between Iran and the United States.

Importantly, Pezeshkian also asked Modi to play a greater role in resolving the existing crisis between Iran and the United States. This shows Iran's confidence in India's diplomatic role and its ability to engage with different sides.

The summit was also different because Modi, Xi, and Putin appeared much more comfortable with each other. Modi and Xi, in particular, appeared more at ease than in previous years, especially after the 2020 Galwan crisis, which had engulfed India-China relations.

This improved atmosphere is also linked to recent agreements between India and China aimed at

reducing tensions and stabilizing the relationship.

China has also recently removed or changed some of its senior military leadership. Importantly, General Zhao Zongqi, who headed the PLA's Western Theatre Command during the Doklam standoff and the period of the 2020 Galwan crisis, was recently removed from China's top political advisory body. While the exact reasons for these changes remain unclear and could be related to China's internal politics or other factors, they have nevertheless sent a message to India about possible changes within China's military establishment. Another important feature of this summit was its focus on development and the problems faced by member countries, rather than simply serving as a platform for anti-Western rhetoric. This matters because the SCO needs to remain relevant by addressing the practical challenges its members face, including terrorism, economic vulnerabilities, energy security, food security, connectivity, and regional instability.

Next challenge for India

Now, the next SCO summit will

take place in Pakistan. Pakistan will do its best to promote and use the summit for its own grandstanding as it tends to use such international platforms for optics and image-building. It may also try to use the forum against India and push its own narrative.

However, the SCO's mechanisms, which are not supposed to let bilateral issues dominate the organization's agenda, provide some limitations. Moreover, with Russia, China, and other countries present, Pakistan will not have complete freedom to use the organization for its own objectives. For India, the SCO remains both a challenge and an opportunity. China's growing influence and Russia's declining strategic space create challenges, but India's growing engagement with Central Asia, its relationship with Russia, its ties with Iran, and its improving engagement with China also provide opportunities.

The Bishkek summit showed that the SCO remains an important platform at a time when the global geopolitical landscape is becoming increasingly uncertain. For India, the key will be to use this platform to strengthen its



India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar (front-left) meets Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on the sidelines of the SCO Summit 2026 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on September 1, 2026. Jaishankar described the meeting as a "quick catch-up" with his counterpart.

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strategic interests while ensuring that terrorism, regional stability, connectivity, energy security, and resilience remain at the center of the agenda.

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Rebalancing global order India's BRICS strategy



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OPINION

India will host the 18th BRICS Summit in New Delhi late this month as part of its presidency of a grouping that has become increasingly central to the contest over the future of the international order. This will be India's fourth BRICS presidency, after 2012, 2016, and 2021, and comes two decades after the idea of BRICS first emerged as a platform for the major emerging economies.

India's approach has been shaped by a familiar balancing act: strengthening the voice of the Global South without allowing BRICS to become an explicitly anti-Western coalition. The theme of the presidency — "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability" — captures this ambition. The emphasis on a "humanity-first" and people-centric agenda is intended to make BRICS an instrument of practical economic cooperation rather than another arena for geopolitical polarization.

Resilience will be central to this effort. The disruptions of recent years, from the pandemic and supply-chain shocks to sanctions and geopolitical conflicts, have underscored the vulnerabilities of emerging economies. India is therefore likely to push for more diversified and shock-resistant supply chains, particularly in critical minerals, agriculture, energy, and manufacturing.

Innovation and digital integration provide another area where India has considerable diplomatic capital to deploy. Its experience with Digital Public Infrastructure offers a model for cooperation among developing economies. Cross-border digital payments, greater interoperability of central bank



Preparations are underway ahead of the BRICS Summit 2026 at the Kushabhau Thackeray International Convention Centre, in Bhopal, India, on August 4, 2026.

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digital currencies, and common approaches to responsible artificial intelligence could help translate India's technological experience into a broader BRICS agenda.

The third pillar, cooperation, is inseparable from India's longstanding advocacy of reformed multilateralism. New Delhi has consistently argued that institutions such as the United Nations, IMF, and World Bank no longer adequately reflect the distribution of global economic and political power. BRICS provides India with a platform to press for greater representation and agency for the Global South. Yet India's conception of reform is not about creating a parallel institutional order. Rather, BRICS can be used to rebalance the existing order from within. India seeks a more representative and responsive system while retaining an open, rules-based international framework.

This distinguishes New Delhi's approach from those members that may view BRICS primarily as an instrument for challenging Western dominance. The challenge for India will be to maintain this reformist orientation amid the divergent political preferences of an increasingly heterogeneous membership. Sustainability will similarly have to be approached through the lens of development. India's emphasis on "Energy for All" reflects the continuing tension between climate ambitions and the developmental needs of emerging economies. Expanding clean-energy deployment, climate resilience, and access to green technologies will therefore be as important as setting ambitious targets.

Several practical outcomes could give this agenda greater credibility. BRICS members could seek to expand local-currency trade and payment mechanisms, reducing transaction costs and excessive dependence on third-country financial infrastructure. The New Development Bank could play a larger role through increased local-currency lending for infrastructure and sustainable



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development projects across the Global South. A broader framework for digital public infrastructure, encompassing AI governance, data sovereignty, and cross-border interoperability, could also provide BRICS with a more concrete institutional legacy.

Supply-chain cooperation may prove particularly consequential. Coordination on critical minerals, food production, energy security, and manufacturing could move BRICS beyond declaratory diplomacy towards economic statecraft. Yet translating these ambitions into common policy will be difficult. The principal challenge is that BRICS is not a strategically coherent bloc. Its members differ sharply in their perceptions of the West, their economic interests, and their preferred conception of the international order. Russia and Iran, for instance, have a far more adversarial relationship with the West than India does. New Delhi will therefore have to resist pressures to turn BRICS into an explicitly anti-Western platform while preserving its credibility within the grouping.

The China question will be even more complicated. India and China can cooperate on questions of Global South representation and economic reform while simultaneously remaining strategic competitors. The durability of India's BRICS diplomacy will depend, in part, on its ability to compartmentalize these competing interests. The expansion of BRICS adds another layer of complexity. A larger membership enhances the grouping's representational weight but makes consensus harder. The recent tensions between Iran and the UAE, both relatively new members, illustrate the problem. Their opposing positions during the escalating regional confrontation contributed to divisions at the May 2026 BRICS foreign

ministers' meeting in New Delhi, which ended without a joint communiqué. India instead issued a chair's statement acknowledging differences. For New Delhi, the episode underlines the difficulty of maintaining BRICS cohesion when members are themselves divided by acute regional conflicts.

This presents a particular challenge for India because it has important strategic and economic interests in maintaining productive relations with both Tehran and Abu Dhabi. More broadly, it reinforces the reality that greater representational diversity does not automatically produce greater strategic cohesion. India will have to ensure that intra-member conflicts do not turn BRICS into an arena for the projection of regional rivalries.

India's fourth BRICS presidency, therefore, should not be viewed simply through the prism of summit declarations. Its larger significance lies in whether New Delhi can demonstrate that strategic autonomy remains compatible with effective multilateralism. India's objective is neither to reproduce the Western-led order unchanged nor to construct a competing geopolitical bloc. It is to reshape the rules and institutions of global governance while retaining room for manoeuvre across competing power centres.

That is a difficult proposition, but it is also precisely where India's growing diplomatic influence gives it an opportunity. The success of the 2026 presidency will ultimately depend on whether New Delhi can convert BRICS from a forum of divergent geopolitical interests into a platform for concrete cooperation — and, in doing so, give substance to its claim to speak for a more representative Global South.

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