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Executive Summary

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The 2025 Tianjin SCO Summit: China's Intentions and Limits

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The 25th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit was held in Tianjin, China, from 31 August to 1 September 2025. Not only was the SCO Summit the largest ever, with 26 heads of state and government, but it also attracted significant international attention due to the participation of India's Prime Minister, Narendra Damodardas Modi, whose relations with China have been strained by border disputes.

China's Intentions

1. To Demonstrate Anti-US Solidarity and Express Its Will to Reform the International Order

The "Tianjin Declaration" adopted at the SCO Summit strongly condemned the Israeli and U.S. military strikes on Iran in June 2025 and opposed unilateral coercive measures that violate the UN Charter and other norms of international law, as well as the rules and principles of the World Trade Organization, to indirectly criticize the Trump administration's unilateralism and tariff policies. By bringing together heads of state who are at odds with the United States and the West, including Russia, India, and Iran, China created a show of anti-U.S. solidarity and flaunted its presence and influence in the international community.

In his speech at the SCO Summit on 1 September, Xi Jinping announced the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), signaling his commitment to reforming the international order. In light of Donald Trump's America First and tariff policies, which have led to widespread distrust and discontent with the United States, China's proposal of reform directions and principles for global governance through the GGI can be seen as an expression of its intention to take the lead in reforming the international order in the future. By emphasizing the role of international organisations such as the United Nations and the responsibilities of each country, China is attempting to differentiate itself from the United

States and secure the support of the international community. It is well known that China has been continuously expanding its influence in international organisations. China is expected to use its influence over international organisations to promote its positions and norms.

2. To Transform the SCO into an Economic Partnership and Seek to Take the Lead in the SCO

China has been pushing for the establishment of an SCO Development Bank since 2010, but Russia's opposition has prevented the organization from reaching a consensus. However, at the 2025 SCO Summit, member states approved the establishment of the SCO Development Bank. This is likely a result of Russia's increased economic dependence on China as a result of the prolonged Russia-Ukraine war. Russia seems to need to seek economic breakthroughs through cooperation with China.

China has shown its intention to transform the SCO into an economic partnership by approving the establishment of the SCO Development Bank, which will allow it to take the lead in the SCO. In addition, China has pointed out governance gaps in new areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), cyberspace, and outer space, and emphasized the need to strengthen cooperation in several areas, including energy, green industry, the digital economy, and AI. Given the technological gap and economic size of China and other SCO members, such cooperation is bound to be Chinese-led. The massive injection of Chinese capital into these sectors will naturally expand China's influence over SCO member states and increase its dominance over the SCO.

3. To Lead Cooperation with the Global South Based on Chinese Economic and Technical Assistance

In the GGI concept paper, China identified the serious underrepresentation of the Global South as one of the deficiencies in global governance and pledged to improve global governance to serve the interests of all countries, especially developing ones. China has pledged large-scale economic support to SCO member states through the establishment of the SCO Development Bank and emphasized strengthening cooperation in new tech areas. This means that China is committed to expanding SCO economic cooperation based on its own economic strength and technological capabilities and to promoting cooperation with the Global South. In particular, given that China is competing with India for the leadership of the Global South, China's pledge to create an international order that benefits the Global South and developing countries at the 2025 SCO Summit, along with its large-scale economic support, can be seen as an attempt to gain an advantage in the competition for leadership of the Global South.

Limits Facing China

1. Disagreements and Internal Unrest among SCO Member States

Through the Tianjin Declaration, the SCO member states all expressed their consensus on the U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran. As Iran is also a member of the SCO, it should have been relatively easy for member states to reach a consensus on this issue, as the U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran could be interpreted as a violation of its sovereignty and interference in its internal affairs. However, the joint statement did not address the Ukraine war or the North Korean nuclear issue. Considering that the

2017 Qingdao SCO Joint Declaration included a section on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it can be assumed that there were disagreements among SCO members on the North Korean nuclear issue.

India's behavior at the SCO Summit can be a testament to this. Although Indian Prime Minister Modi visited China for the first time in seven years, attended the SCO, and participated in the Tianjin Declaration condemning the United States, he did not include India's name in the part supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the declaration. Furthermore, Modi travelled to Japan before his visit to China and did not attend the 80th anniversary of China's Victory Day event, which took place immediately after the SCO Summit. In doing so, Modi subtly signaled that his purpose for attending the SCO Summit was not to support China but to push back against the United States. At the SCO Summit, Xi Jinping sought to showcase the cohesion and unity among member states by highlighting the development and role of the SCO, but the seeds of conflict among member states remain, including over geopolitical conflicts, relations with the United States, and the SCO's development direction. This internal unrest will be a challenge for China in expanding economic cooperation within the SCO and building anti-U.S. solidarity in the future. Given the disagreements among member states on sensitive international issues, North Korea's participation in the SCO seems unlikely.

2. Lack of Concrete Action Plans

Despite China's proposals for the establishment of an SCO Development Bank, the establishment of a security strategy center, the development of a digital trade cooperation programme, and the launch of six cooperation platforms, including green industry, energy, digital economy, science and technology innovation, higher education, and vocational training to institutionalize SCO cooperation, there were no concrete action plans. This can be seen as a result of China's inability to overcome the disagreements and differences among member states. Although China has pledged to lead SCO economic cooperation through active economic support, for the symbolic declarations made at the summit to be translated into real results, China will have to go through a long process of reconciling differences and reaching consensus among member states. It is unclear to what extent China will be able to do this in the face of U.S. pressure.

Policy Implications for South Korea

Through the SCO Summit, China sought to create a favorable environment for itself in the international community in the long term while avoiding an all-out war with the United States. This has the following policy implications for South Korea.

First, South Korea should be vigilant against the spread of Chinese-style discourse based on cooperation with like-minded countries. South Korea supports multilateralism and adherence to the UN Charter. However, China distorts these in its favor. There are also signs of anti-American sentiment in South Korea due to recent U.S. unilateralism in South Korea-U.S. negotiations. Concerned about the growing influence of the United States in the region, China will try to distance South Korea and the United States by emphasizing the principles of the UN Charter and multilateralism and by condemning U.S. unilateralist behavior at both the bilateral and multilateral levels, as seen at the SCO Summit. South Korea should recognize this, strengthen communication

with allies and partners, and develop a concept of response based on the liberal international order. It should be wary of the spread of Chinese-style discourse, pointing out that adherence to UN Charter principles and multilateralism is not exclusive to China.

Second, it should recognize China's growing economic influence in SCO member states and strengthen cooperation with like-minded countries in supply chains and finance. China will seek to transform the SCO into an economic cooperation organization by expanding its own cooperation platforms in the green industry, energy, and the digital economy to SCO members while reducing its dependence on the dollar-centric international financial system through the establishment of the SCO Development Bank. In pursuing economic cooperation with SCO members, South Korea should be cognizant of the risk that China-led economic cooperation in the SCO will expand and be used as a China-led supply chain or anti-Western cooperation mechanism, depending on China's intentions. China-led supply chains could be formed in areas such as energy and mineral resources, or economic cooperation among SCO members, or the SCO Development Bank could be used as a means of circumventing international sanctions. In this regard, South Korea should promote economic cooperation with SCO member states and, at the same time, strengthen global supply chain cooperation with countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. Participation in the SCO Development Bank should be cautious, as there is a high risk that the bank will be linked to future sanctions against Russia, Iran, and other countries.

About the Author

Dr. LEE Dong-gyu is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Lee received his B.A. and M.A. from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and Ph.D. in politics from Tsinghua University in China. His research focuses on Chinese politics and foreign policy, South Korea-China relations, and Northeast Asia security. His recent publications include "The Belt and Road Initiative after COVID-19: Implications of Expanding Health and Digital Silkroads," "Is Political Reform of the Chinese Communist Party Going Back: Changes and Durability of Intra-democracy in the Xi Jinping Era," "Xi Jinping Thought from the Perspective of the Chinese Communist Party's Ideological Strategy," "Development Factors and Specificity of Korea-China Relations in the Cold War Era: 1972-1992," "A Study on the Sinicization of Marxism after Reform and Opening Up," etc.

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