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Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's Civilisational Dialogue: Advancing India's Civilisational Diplomacy

India will host the first Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Civilisational Dialogue Forum on November 20 to 22, 2026, in New Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed the creation of this forum on September 1, 2025 in SCO leaders submit in Tianjin, China. The aim of the forum is to build soft power, shared ideas and people-to-people connections across Eurasia; 25 countries, including member states, observers, and dialogue partners, are going to be part of the gathering. The gathering is expected to feature discussions on civilisational linkages, cultural diplomacy and collaborative initiatives in the fields of heritage, education and traditional knowledge systems. The three-day event will be jointly organised by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

The dialogue is a positive step in India's efforts to expand SCO's role beyond conventional issues like economic and security questions. New Delhi is presenting a different approach that is rooted in shared history, cultural heritage, and mutual respect. It also identifies that shared historical and civilizational experiences can offer a durable foundation for cooperation in the region despite differences too many differences in the region among the states.

The most noticeable political message at the forum is India's official invitation to Aurangzeb Khan Khichi, Minister for National Heritage and Culture, Government of Pakistan. Despite tense relations with Pakistan, by fulfilling its institutional commitments as the host and initiator of the forum, India keeps its regional commitments intact while preserving its unchanging stance that "terror and talk cannot go together."

The dialogue reflects India's strategic autonomy, showing that India can participate US led groupings like the Quad while instantaneously steering Eurasian agenda on its own terms. It also offers India an alternative platform to engage with regional countries and address China's expanding economic influence, particularly through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), by highlighting shared historical experiences, democratic partnerships, and mutually beneficial cooperation. This forum has great potential to redesign the global multilateral architecture. As power balances shift, "the SCO, which encompasses around 40 to 42% of the global population, is uniquely positioned to outline a new model for international cooperation." Beyond safeguarding its immediate national interests, India's leadership in the forum has the potential to promote an inclusive and sustainable developmental model for the broader Global South.

India's Civilisational Diplomacy: Normative and Philosophical Foundations:

It is worth mentioning that India's cultural and civilizational diplomacy is based on its philosophical, cultural and historical experiences. Through these components of civilizational diplomacy India can give new direction to international diplomacy. Its normative foundations are reflected in three interconnected principles:

- Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: The world is one family.
- Sarva Dharma Sambhava: "equal feeling towards all religions" or equal respect for all faiths".
- Ahimsa and peaceful coexistence: For promoting International peace, non-violence and tolerance can become important tools.

The shared historic, cultural and civilizational heritage of Asia is beautifully illuminated through interconnected pillars of historical transmission and living expression. India's historic connections with Eurasia offer a substantial foundation for this approach. In past, Buddhist Monastic trails helped the movement of philosophical and religious ideas between India and East, Central and South Asia.

This deep cross-cultural dialogue is further solidified by Language, Literature, and Manuscripts, which unearth the foundational textual connections encoded across diverse scripts. Ultimately, these historical currents culminate in Living Traditions, preserving and sharing the vibrant, contemporary cultural expressions and traditional stories that continue to unite communities today. India's initiative regarding civilizational dialogue offers an alternative development framework grounded in civilizational and cultural linkages. We can analyse the shared heritage through four interdependent dimensions:

- Monastic networks and historical trade corridors
- Artistic and architectural evolutions
- Linguistic lineages, literary traditions, and manuscript cultures
- Living traditions and contemporary cultural practices

These four dimensions can play a foundational role in building interconnected civilizational spheres; the Civilizational Dialogue Forum can provide the platform for this. The Forum should also recognise the contributions of diverse societies rather than constructing exclusive, competitive civilizational narratives. Such an approach can make cultural and civilizational diplomacy meaningful for India.

Eurasia as a Space of Shared Civilisational Heritage

Eurasia is one of the important regions in world politics not only due to its geopolitical and geostrategic location but also due to a historically interconnected civilizational space. For the centuries this region works as transmits of migration, trade, religious movement and intellectual exchanges. Many civilisations like Indian, Chinese and Persian have interacted across the regions, spawning overlapping cultural and knowledge networks. The Eurasian region also served as the meeting point and a vibrant transmitter of many world religions like Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorian Christianity, blending diverse traditions before diffusing them across Asia and Europe. The civilizational forum will provide an important platform to translate historical and civilizational connections into contemporary cooperation.

Academic collaboration, joint research, scholarly conferences, translation initiatives, cultural programmes and heritage preservation could constitute its principal areas of engagement. Through this initiative, India asserts that contemporary geopolitics is inseparable from historical memory, and that authentic regional stability is rooted in dialogue. The SCO Civilisational Dialogue Forum marks a pivotal shift for India, transitioning from a global power balancer to a central architect of regional frameworks. By anchoring its modern geopolitical strategy in profound historical and cultural ties, New Delhi achieves two fundamental objectives:

- It safeguards its strategic autonomy, shielding national interests from external pressures and global rivalries.
- It offers the Global South an active, community-driven developmental alternative founded on mutual respect and shared progress.

Conclusion

Conspicuously, the SCO civilizational dialogue would offer a platform for India to extend its diplomatic engagement beyond geopolitical, geo-strategic and economic frameworks by incorporating civilisational heritage, cultural interaction and intellectual exchange. The world community can look at international politics beyond realist and liberal binaries. The dialogue further enhances India's cultural and civilizational initiatives on the diplomatic front by projecting its cultural heritage and historical experiences. By hosting this forum, India can actively contribute to the formation of a more representative, multipolar, and culturally inclusive global order.