

SOFT POWER THROUGH EXCLUSION: INDIA'S VETO ON AZERBAIJAN IN THE SCO AND ITS MESSAGE TO CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

On the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Tianjin on September 1–2, 2025, a number of media outlets reported that India had blocked Azerbaijan's bid for full membership. This event sparked active discussions among analysts and experts on international relations. Rather than direct forms of pressure or forceful confrontation, India's decision was perceived as a demonstration of "soft power through exclusion," a way to set red lines, protect its own interests, and simultaneously send a message to regional partners without open confrontation. This text examines how the SCO expansion mechanism works, why New Delhi is resorting to such an instrument now, and what message it sends to Central Asian countries regarding security, infrastructural connectivity, and the balance of power in Eurasia. The expansion of the SCO has always been seen as an important indicator of the changing balance of power in Eurasia. The accession of India and Pakistan in 2017, and Iran and Belarus in 2023–24, showed that the organization is moving beyond its Central Asian core and becoming a platform for great power rivalry. At the same time, the consensus mechanism turns any decision to admit new members into a test of the sustainability of unity. The news that India blocked Azerbaijan's application allows us to consider the phenomenon of "soft power by exception," when a state uses built-in institutional rules to advance its own norms. The question is why India exercised this right in 2025, and what does this mean for Central Asia?

Keywords: soft power, India, SCO, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, consensus, veto, regional security

INTRODUCTION

The SCO has evolved over two decades from a small regional organization focused on Central Asian security to a major international platform uniting the largest Eurasian powers. Established in 2001 as a continuation of the Shanghai Five (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), the organization gradually expanded to include Uzbekistan, and later Iran, India, Pakistan, and Belarus. Each new round of expansion has increased the SCO's heterogeneity. While the organization initially focused on regional security issues, it is now forced to take into account the global ambitions of its largest members. In this context, the principle of consensus enshrined in the charter becomes a key mechanism: any country can stop a process if it contradicts its interests. It was this mechanism, according to media reports, that India used in 2025 when it blocked Azerbaijan's application for membership. Why did New Delhi take this step now? What are the motives behind this decision? And how should it be interpreted within the framework of the concept of "soft power"? These questions are at the center of this article. The theory of "soft power" proposed by Joseph Nye traditionally links influence with the attractiveness of culture, values, and diplomacy. However, subsequent studies have expanded the framework to include institutional behavior as a tool for norm formation (Keohane, Nye). "Soft power by exclusion" is a modified approach: influence is exerted not by attracting new participants, but by restricting access, which serves as a signal to other actors.

Soft power through exclusion

In the traditional sense, soft power is associated with "attraction," when states seek to cooperate with a more attractive partner. However, in international practice, there is also a reverse mechanism: demonstrating norms through refusal to cooperate or blocking membership. This is a form of signaling, in which the state shows: "we are open to partnership, but only under the condition of compliance with certain rules." This tool can be called "soft power through exclusion." It does not imply sanctions or military pressure. Still, at the same time, it transmits clear messages: about the boundaries of what is acceptable, about priorities, and about what order the state considers

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legitimate.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on qualitative analysis:

1. Study of the SCO charter and procedures (especially the consensus principle).
2. Analysis of media reports on the blocking of Azerbaijan's bid.
3. Consideration of Indian strategic interests in three areas: security, the Caucasus, and infrastructure.
4. Interpretation of signals addressed to Central Asian countries.
5. Comparison with similar cases in other organizations (NATO, EU, BRICS).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE SCO ENLARGEMENT:

India and Pakistan (2017)

The accession of India and Pakistan was a major test for the SCO. On the one hand, the organization strengthened its weight by gaining two nuclear powers. On the other hand, new lines of tension emerged, as New Delhi and Islamabad brought their bilateral conflicts. It was then that it became clear that consensus was becoming a key balancing tool. The expansion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017, when it included India and Pakistan, was one of the most significant milestones in the organization's history. Until then, the SCO had functioned as a relatively compact association consisting of China, Russia, and four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan). For a long time, the structure retained a regional character and was seen as a platform for interaction between the post-Soviet Central Asian countries and the two key powers of Eurasia, Russia and China. However, the geopolitical dynamics of the 2010s pushed the organization to expand.

Prerequisites for expansion:

The idea of including new members did not arise immediately. In the early 2000s, the SCO focused on regional security issues: combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism. India and Pakistan initially received observer status (2005), which was the first step towards deeper cooperation. For Moscow and Beijing, this step was of great strategic importance:

1. For Russia, the inclusion of India was a way to strengthen multipolarity and balance China's growing role within the organization.
2. For China, the inclusion of Pakistan was a logical continuation of close economic and strategic ties (including within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project).
3. For Central Asia, expansion was seen as an opportunity to elevate the organization to a higher international level, give it global recognition, and increase its significance in world politics.

Accession of India and Pakistan

The formal admission of the two states to the SCO took place at the summit in Astana (June 2017). This step significantly changed the balance within the organization. Since then, the SCO has united almost half of the world's population and more than 20% of the world's GDP. The organization has transformed from a regional structure into a major Eurasian forum. However, along with new opportunities, challenges have also emerged: Bilateral conflicts. India and Pakistan have traditionally been in a state of confrontation, mainly due to the Kashmir issue. Their rivalry has introduced elements of tension into the activities of the organization, where consensus was previously achieved relatively easily. Different foreign policy priorities. India is focused on a strategic partnership with the United States and seeks to contain China, while Pakistan is closely integrated into Chinese initiatives. This has made coordinating positions within the SCO more difficult. A question of trust. The presence of two nuclear powers in conflict required the SCO to develop a special mechanism of interaction based on the principle of non-interference and consensus. It was during this period that it became clear that consensus was not just a formal decision-making procedure, but a key tool for balancing contradictions within the organization. Each member was given the opportunity to block decisions that affected its interests, which, on the one hand, slowed down the process of developing common positions, but on the other, guaranteed that the SCO would not become an arena for open conflicts between India and Pakistan. Thus, the 2017 expansion transformed the SCO from a regional structure into a globally significant organization, but at the same time complicated its internal dynamics. India and Pakistan brought their own contradictions into the organization's activities, but the very fact of their presence contributed to strengthening the prestige of the SCO and made it one of the largest international platforms in Eurasia.

Iran and Belarus (2023–2024)

The admission of Iran and Belarus was also accompanied by lengthy negotiations. For some members, this meant

deepening antagonism with the West, for others, increasing political heterogeneity. Consensus was reached, but the process showed that SCO enlargement is not an automatic procedure, but the result of difficult compromises. The admission of Iran and Belarus to the SCO was the next important stage in the evolution of the organization, confirming its desire to expand its geopolitical reach and strengthen its global influence. Unlike the accession of India and Pakistan (2017), the process of integration of Iran and Belarus took place in the context of a sharp confrontation between Russia and the West, the aggravation of international sanctions regimes, and the formation of new contours of global multipolarity.

Lengthy negotiations and obstacles

Iran's path to membership was particularly long and difficult. Tehran applied for membership back in 2008, but the process was stalled for many years. There were several reasons: International sanctions. Iran was subject to extensive sanctions from the UN, the US, and the EU, which created political and legal obstacles to its full integration into international organizations. Many SCO members feared that accepting the country under sanctions pressure could complicate cooperation with the West. Disagreements within the SCO itself. Some states, particularly those in Central Asia, were cautious, fearing that Iran's involvement could make the organization too anti-Western and reduce room for maneuver in their own foreign policy. The situation changed after the conclusion of the nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2015, which created a more favorable atmosphere, and then became more complicated again after the US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018. However, the geopolitical dynamics of the 2020s, especially the increasing sanctions pressure on Russia and Iran, pushed the SCO members to accelerate this process. As a result, Iran officially became a full member of the organization in 2023. Belarus, on the other hand, started its journey much later, but moved faster. Minsk was initially seen as a "natural candidate" due to its close ties with Russia and active participation in Eurasian integration initiatives (EAEU, CSTO). However, here too the process was not instantaneous. For some SCO members, the admission of Belarus meant an additional strengthening of pro-Western contradictions, as the country found itself at the center of the Russia-West conflict after 2020. Belarus's entry in 2024 was a logical continuation of its strategic rapprochement with Moscow and Beijing, but raised questions about how prepared the organization is for even greater political heterogeneity.

Challenges for the SCO

The accession of Iran and Belarus has strengthened the role of the SCO as an alternative center of power, but at the same time has revealed a number of challenges: Antagonism with the West. The inclusion of countries under tough sanctions has objectively made the organization less neutral in the eyes of the US and the EU. If the SCO was previously positioned as a regional structure without an obvious antagonistic focus, now it is increasingly perceived as part of an "anti-Western bloc." Political heterogeneity. New fault lines have emerged within the organization. For example, India, which maintains active ties with the US, has found itself in a situation where it needs to balance its participation in the SCO with its own strategic interests. For the Central Asian countries, the accession of Iran and Belarus has also become a challenge, since it has strengthened the role of "hard geopolitics" in the organization. Uneven economic base. Iran has significant energy potential and transport and logistics potential (the International North-South Transport Corridor project), which opens up new prospects for the SCO. Belarus does not have comparable resources, but its strategic position between Russia and the EU makes it an important geopolitical player.

Consensus as a tool for compromise

The accession process itself showed that the expansion of the SCO is not an automatic procedure, but the result of long and complex negotiations. Each member state has a veto, and without the consent of all participants, a new candidate cannot be accepted. In the case of Iran and Belarus, a compromise was reached in the context of a changing world order, when it became beneficial for most members to strengthen the SCO as a counterweight to Western institutions. Thus, the admission of Iran and Belarus secured the SCO's status as the largest regional organization in Eurasia with global ambitions. However, at the same time, the process revealed a major dilemma: the wider the circle of participants, the more difficult it is to reach consensus and maintain organizational integrity.

Azerbaijan (2025)

Against this background, Azerbaijan looked like a potential candidate, given its active participation in the region's energy policy and its geographical proximity to Central Asia. However, India, according to media reports, blocked the bid, marking the first time that the veto had been used in such a clear manner. Following the accession of Iran (2023) and Belarus (2024), the issue of further expansion of the SCO has become an issue. A logical candidate was Azerbaijan, a country with a strategic location between the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, as well as vital energy resources. For many years, Baku has maintained active cooperation with the SCO, although formally it

remained only a dialogue partner.

Geopolitical role of Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan stands out among potential candidates for a number of reasons: Energy factor. Baku is a key supplier of oil and gas to Europe and plays a significant role in shaping the region's energy security. Projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor make the country an important partner for the EU, but at the same time they are of interest to the SCO states seeking to strengthen energy cooperation. Transport potential. Azerbaijan is actively involved in the development of transit routes linking China and Europe. The international transport corridor "Middle Corridor", passing through the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and Turkey, objectively enhances the country's importance in Eurasian logistics. Political and geographical balance. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan is able to act as a kind of bridge between the regions, strengthening the integration capabilities of the SCO.

Prospects and Expectations

Against the backdrop of the deepening conflict between Russia and the West, as well as the increasing role of energy in world politics, Azerbaijan's candidacy looked extremely promising. For Russia and China, the inclusion of Baku would mean:

1. access to additional energy resources and routes;
2. strengthening the SCO's position in the South Caucasus;
3. reducing Western influence on the region's strategic energy.

For the Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan was a natural partner, strengthening their ties with the Caspian region and Turkey.

Blocked by India

However, in 2025, the situation took an unexpected turn. According to media reports, India vetoed Azerbaijan's bid, which was the first such vivid and public example of this mechanism being used in the history of the organization. New Delhi's motives can be viewed on several levels: Relations with Armenia. In recent years, India has been developing close military-technical cooperation with Armenia, including arms supplies. In the context of the Karabakh conflict and tense relations between Yerevan and Baku, support for Azerbaijan seemed politically unacceptable to India. Balance within the SCO. India feared that Azerbaijan's accession would strengthen the positions of Turkey and Pakistan (Baku's allies), which would change the balance of power within the organization to the detriment of New Delhi. Precedent of control. The use of the veto in such an obvious form was a signal: the expansion of the SCO will not happen automatically, and each state is ready to defend its strategic interests.

Consequences for the SCO

This case had several important consequences:

Demonstration of the vulnerability of consensus. If previously the consensus mechanism was perceived as a tool for protecting interests, now it has become a factor of open competition, capable of blocking strategically important decisions. Growth of political heterogeneity. Contradictions within the SCO have become more acute: some members advocated strengthening the energy and transport dimension of the organization through Azerbaijan, while others blocked the process for political reasons. A signal for other candidates. The example of Azerbaijan showed that the process of joining the SCO can be long and difficult, and the outcome depends not only on the economic or geopolitical potential of the country, but also on the fine mesh of bilateral relations within the organization.

Symbolic meaning

The blocking demonstrated that the SCO had entered a new phase of development, when expansion became not so much a matter of technical procedure as an arena of cross-interests of its participants. This once again confirmed that, despite the external demonstration of unity, the SCO remains a complex conglomerate of states with different priorities and strategic guidelines. Thus, the story with Azerbaijan in 2025 became an important reminder that consensus is both the strength and weakness of the SCO: it protects the interests of member states, but makes the expansion process extremely sensitive to any political contradictions.

Signals from Central Asia

1. Kazakhstan: Multi-vectorism is important to Kazakhstan. The Indian veto signals that New Delhi is ready to be an independent player, and not just a "balance" for Russia and China. This opens up new opportunities for Astana, but also complicates diplomatic calculations.
2. Uzbekistan: Tashkent has traditionally been cautious on issues of SCO expansion. The Indian position may coincide with the Uzbek interest in keeping the organization from spreading too far.

3. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: These countries depend on Russia and China, but are interested in diversifying their partners. The Indian veto shows them that New Delhi is ready to defend norms, which increases its attractiveness as a security partner.

4. Turkmenistan (outside the SCO): Although Turkmenistan is not formally a member of the SCO, its interest in transport connectivity projects makes the Indian strategy an important factor.

Scenarios

1. Maintaining the status quo. India will continue to block Azerbaijan's bid, demonstrating a hard line.
2. Compromise. Perhaps in the future, New Delhi will agree to Baku's accession under certain conditions, for example, with guarantees on the anti-terrorist agenda.
3. Escalation. If Azerbaijan strengthens its alliance with Pakistan and Turkey, the contradictions may go beyond the SCO, escalating into a broader confrontation.

DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of “soft power through exclusion” deserves special attention. It demonstrates that a state can increase its influence not only through attraction, but also through restriction of access.

Compare with other organizations:

NATO has repeatedly postponed the membership of Ukraine and Georgia, sending signals to Russia. The EU uses the “veto” mechanism when expanding, as did, for example, Hungary. BRICS also requires consensus, and India has already shown a tendency to be cautious in it. India thus applies the practice typical of international organizations, but does so with a special emphasis on security and infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

India's decision to block Azerbaijan's bid to join the SCO is not a local episode, but a strategic act demonstrating a new form of soft power. New Delhi uses institutional rules to convey its own norms: a tough anti-terrorist line, support for Armenian partners, and protection of its infrastructure projects. For Central Asia, this is a signal that India is becoming an independent center of power in Eurasia. Its position is not limited to the “third pole” between Russia and China; it actively shapes the rules of the game. Thus, “soft power through exclusion” is becoming a new tool of Indian diplomacy. It shows that in the 21st century, influence in international organizations is expressed not only in the ability to expand the circle of allies, but also in the ability to set the boundaries of what is acceptable.

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