

## **Pakistan and the SCO – Aspirations and Challenges!**

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### **Abstract**

Shanghai Cooperation Organization remains a pivot of opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. Earlier this year, SCO's Qingdao declaration reinforced the Shanghai Spirit of mutual respect, mutual cooperation, and peaceful settlement of disputes. Qingdao Summit reinforced SCO's emphasis on the reconfiguration of the geopolitical landscape and shift towards a multipolar world. Parallel with this, shared economic integration and security coordination among the SCO members enveloped the summit mood. All this encapsulates Islamabad's world view and strides on the diplomatic, political, economic, and strategic aspects at the bilateral, multilateral and international level. Pakistan has always stood for the 'Peace within and Peace outside' based on principle of equality and multi-polarity at the regional and global level. In the pursuit of these goals Islamabad joined SCO initially as the observer state and later year was accorded permanent membership. SCO provides Islamabad multiple opportunities of the economic, diplomatic, political and strategic nature in line with its national, regional and global aspirations. The paper analyses the Islamabad's interaction pattern within the SCO in view of its stated goals and aspirations. The study explores the following fundamental queries: Why Pakistan joined SCO? What are the opportunities and challenges that Pakistan faces as an SCO permanent member?

**Keywords:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Pakistan

### **Introduction**

#### **Pakistan's Goals and Aspirations vis-à-vis SCO**

Trilateral strands of the SCO namely: Security coordination; Economic integration; People to people exchange and humanitarianism – resonates with the Islamabad's global vision. Regional connectivity and the peaceful settlement of disputes remains an overarching theme of the Pakistan's interaction with the SCO. According to the experts SCO potential has remarkably enhanced since the GDP of member states amounts to over 15 trillion USD, accounting for 20% of the world's total. According to the IMF, this figure will reach 30-34% by 2020, and 40% in 2025. The countries of the SCO possess one quarter of world's oil, 30% of the world's gas, and 50% of the proven uranium reserves.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the 17th SCO Summit, in June 2107 on Pakistan becoming a permanent member labelled SCO, as a 'sheet anchor' for regional stability - critical link between Asia Pacific, East Asia, West Asia and the Atlantic region in future. To quote Former PM Nawaz Sharif:

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“SCO gives us a powerful platform for partnerships to promote peace, build trust and spur economic development for shared prosperity. Moreover, it helps us all combat terrorism, reduce arms race, eliminate poverty... deal with natural disasters, tackle climate change and assure water security” (Dawn, June 9, 2017).

SCO founded in 2001 was initially a Eurasian construct comprising China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The SCO’s predecessor, “Shanghai Five,” was Russia and China co-initiative, created in 1996 as a forum to discuss Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and the border demarcation issues in the former Soviet-Chinese border region. SCO has always recognized the key role of the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in solving major international problems and pursued a cooperative international security regime. The prime focus has been border stability, counter terror cooperation, mutual economic interactions, military and joint intelligence exchanges. Pakistan, initially an observer at the SCO since 2005 became an applicant for a permanent membership in 2010. The decision to grant Pakistan membership was made by the SCO Heads of States in a meeting held in Ufa, Russia, in 2015. (Dawn, June 9, 2017)

The following table illuminates the present membership profile of the SCO:

**Table 1**

<b>Member States</b>	<b>Observer and Dialogue States</b>
<b>People’s Republic of China</b>	<b>Observers</b>
1. Kazakhstan	1. Iran
2. Kyrgyzstan	2. Mangolia
3. Russia	3. Afghanistan
4. Tajikistan	4. Byelorussia
5. Uzbekistan	
6. Pakistan	<b>Dialogue States</b>
7. India	1. Turkey
	2. Nepal
	3. Armenia
	4. Sri Lanka
	5. Cambodia

SCO remains committed to the Russia and China ‘strategic partnership’ fused to the idea of multi-polar world order wherein the US hegemony and unipolarity is dismissed and discouraged (Iwashita, 2005). The SCO’s extraordinary Foreign Ministers’ meeting in Beijing in January 2002, member states expressed their concern regarding the (US) domination over Afghanistan and the world. One of the main tasks under the SCO Charter is to cooperate against “international terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism” particularly within the member states (Xinhua Online, June 7

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2002). For Pakistan SCO provides an effective platform to share its perspective on, terrorism, regional stability, and multi-polarity at the global scale. Envisioning a peaceful neighborhood policy fosters respect for cultural diversity, proactive resolution of conflicts and disputes – remains hallmark of Islamabad’s engagement with the SCO to date.

Parallel to this, SCO furnishes a benchmark of Pakistan’s effective interaction with the Russia and China on regular basis. Given the convergence of interests between the Russia – Pakistan – China, Islamabad role in the SCO has become more pronounced. Following the US President Trump unveiling of Afghanistan policy (The Washington Post, August 29 2017) both Beijing and Moscow issued strong statements in support of Islamabad. China’s high ranking official Yang Jiechi in telephonic conversation with the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said. “We must value Pakistan’s important role on the Afghanistan issue, and respect Pakistan’s sovereignty and legitimate security concerns”(Dawn, August 25 2017). Russia’s envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov simultaneously stated “pressuring Pakistan may seriously destabilize the region-wide security situation and result in negative consequences for Afghanistan,” further mentioning that Russia perceived Pakistan as “a key regional player to negotiate with” (The Express Tribune, August 24, 2017).

Plus, economic, trade and energy goals vis-à-vis Central Asian states also promises huge gains for Pakistan. Given unique geo-strategic location and being a part of Belt and Road Initiative - BRI (The Guardian, July 30, 2018)) and CPEC (The Express Tribune, October 9 2018) Pakistan is well placed to be a hub of regional economic/strategic connectivity (China Pakistan Economic Corridor, May 24 2018). This fact equalizes SCO professed goal of shared economic interests at large. Here critical question arises, has Islamabad achieved its stated goals vis-à-vis SCO? This leads to the second part of the paper that is opportunities and challenges of being a part of SCO.

### **Opportunities and Challenges for Pakistan as Permanent Member of the SCO**

Employing a cost-benefit analysis framework, Islamabad stands to gain more from being a permanent part of the SCO. Qingdao SCO 18<sup>th</sup> Summit takeaways are mutual respect, shared economic prosperity, and security coordination (China. Org, June 2018).

On the diplomatic front, SCO membership has successfully eliminated the New Delhi’s design to isolate Islamabad internationally. This was result of New Delhi’s misconceived policy of blaming other side for its own misdoings in Indian Occupied Kashmir and trying to malign Islamabad accordingly. Indian policy of portraying Pakistan as ‘state sponsoring terrorism’ nosedived as regional actors particularly Russia and China accepted Pakistan’s commitment and sacrifices against the threat of terrorism within and beyond its periphery.

In the post Qingdao scenario, a unique opportunity exists for Pakistan to build on the spirit of enlarging the humanitarian engagement. Playing a productive role in the

people-to-people exchanges trust building should be pursued. Encouraging dialogue with the adversaries particularly between India and Pakistan within the SCO framework will be a decisive step in molding other side's mindset. There exists an opportunity for Islamabad at the people-to-people level to help create an atmosphere of shared bilateral goals and add to regional stability.

On the diplomatic level, Islamabad has emerged as a responsible and confident member of SCO. What needs to be done is to engage productively with India, Afghanistan and others to keep this spirit alive. There exists a critical challenge of bridging a gap on the issues of shared economic and humanitarian aspects plus the issue of terrorism. As long as India continues to perceive Pakistan as spoiler in the region, SCO goals of regional connectivity cannot be fulfilled.

SCO's framework provides a conducive environment for both long-time arch rivals; India and Pakistan to meet regularly and mend their fractured relationship to the best. There is lot to be learned from the SCO's skillful experience of mending fences and building sustainable bilateral equations specifically China and Russia case. The SCO and the Russo – Chinese "strategic partnership" was brought about as a "gift" of the lengthy border negotiations (Zhurkin, 1997, pp. 151 – 158). Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Central Asian Republics (CARs) the Sino-Russia border dispute became a multilateral issue in 1991. In 1996 Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed the Shanghai Agreement focusing on the borderline (Liselotte, 2009). This epitomizes with the SCO's strengthened mutual trust and good-neighborhood policies among nations.

Another opportunity for Islamabad in the post-Qingdao phase is to work towards the development of effective synergy in the political realm, trade and economy, scientific advancement, culture, education, energy transportation, environmental protection and other fields. All these opportunities points towards regional peace, security and stability anchored in multipolar world order.

Pakistan's Gwadar deep-sea port located offers inexpensive and shortest route to the oil-rich Middle Eastern region. Resultantly, Pakistan can be an effective regional trade partner and transit energy corridor. Another positive development that can benefit Pakistan economically in the decisive way is the Chinese president pledge of 30-billion RMB (4.68 billion US dollars) fund to the SCO for boasting free trade along with the regional interconnectivity. China also committed to set up a special lending facility within the framework of the SCO Inter-bank Consortium. The consortium was established in 2005 with the aim of providing financing and banking services to SCO member states investment project. (CGTN, October 6, 2108)

The CPEC, flagship project of China's BRI is critical to Pakistan's economic pursuits. The CPEC is being hailed as one of the largest investment Pakistan has ever attracted since independence and simultaneously largest foreign investment project undertaken by China. Internationally Pakistan perceives CPEC as economic life line for sustainable economic growth. The corridor is of 2,000 kilometer transport link

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between Kashgar in northwestern China to Pakistan's Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea near the border with Iran via roads, railways and pipelines. CPEC comes under the umbrella of larger Chinese OBOR "One Belt One Road" initiative that cater the population of 4.4 billion with a total monetary value of US\$ 21 trillion (CGTN, October 6 2018).

In this context, OBOR is the name of regional cooperation, humanizing economic growth, trade diversifications, investing in transportation, mining and energy sectors and creating political flexibility. The OBOR is an unfolding plan that would interlace Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania and the Middle East through the vehicles of diplomacy, new infrastructure and free trade zones. In this context, CPEC has world-changing implications, not only China Pakistan specific but will give an opportunity to Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asian Republics, India, and the region of moving towards a sustainable peace and prosperity. CPEC requires a vision for enhancement between all of the stakeholders on improving geographical linkages through improved road, rail and air transportation network, in addition to people contact and cultural integration. Also CPEC aims to enhance integration via academic, cultural and regional knowledge coupled by an increase in trade and enterprises, producing and moving energy for greater economic output and development of co-operation that will result in integrated region of shared destiny, peace and development.

However, things are not as smooth and friction free as it looks on the surface. Credible security threats of both traditional and non-traditional in nature linked to the CPEC. And to mitigate and address such challenges a state (that is, Pakistan) needs to adopt more integrative approach on sustainable basis. Political obstacles also exist internationally, with India approaching a diplomatic channel to stop the construction of the CPEC in Gilgit-Baltistan, which it perceives to be an essential part of its borderland. The US has shown apprehension to Chinese strategic access to the Indian Ocean. At several occasions the US has tried to discourage Pakistan from involving China in the development, including backing Singapore as a potential option for a suitable operator for Gwadar.

India's opposition and reservations vis-à-vis BRI including CPEC remain a matter of concern for all the stakeholders. India perceives that CPEC cut across the disputed Kashmir on the Pakistan's side and thus go against its so-called territorial sovereignty and integrity. This was reflected in the Qingdao Declaration, where mentioning member's commitment to BRI project India's name was not listed. Indian Prime Minister Modi asserted, "Connectivity with the neighbouring countries is India's priority. We welcome the connectivity projects which are sustainable and efficient and which respect territorial integrity and sovereignty of the countries". (Press Trust of India, June 10 2018). However, there exists window of opportunity under SCO context to convince India through dialogue that BRI and CPEC projects promise regional economic and human vibrancy and should be seen as engine of regional connectivity and not regional hegemony mold.

The biggest challenge to the SCO aim of regional peace and stability hinges on the peaceful resolution of the Afghanistan conundrum. The Chinese investment is greatly dependent on the regional peace and stability in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Western parts of China. In particular a stable Afghanistan is of greatest importance while ensuring stability in South Asia. As an unstable Afghanistan can create security issues for regional projects namely TAPI and CPEC. Pakistan has been supportive of the SCO's Afghanistan Contact Group formation and pursuance of peace and stability in Afghanistan. SCO member states are convinced that the SCO – Afghan contact group can positively contribute towards the stability and peace objectives in Afghanistan. The stipulation of a legal charter for the formulation of an inclusive security guideline to battle threats originating from the tense socio-politico-economic environment is the organization's main task (Balbaeva, IPRI 2011). At Qingdao's summit the Afghanistan participated as an observer state and expressed its desire to be land a bridge of the BRI's project and hub of regional peace for the foreseeable future.

Another critical challenge towards the materialization of the SCO goal of eliminating the threat of Terrorism is the germination of the ISIS within this bloc. Political instability in Afghanistan presents itself as an ideal opportunity for the ISIS to exploit – making it a safe haven to materialize, functionalize and expand their operations for their larger goal of establishing a global caliphate. Pakistan enjoys strong military forces making it difficult for the ISIS to take control. The Pakistani military has successfully carried out operations against Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and TTP linked terrorist groups in tribal areas. Making it a difficult task for the IS to establish a safe haven in FATA or in any other region of Pakistan. However, it must be highlighted there are many sleeper cells present which are showing allegiance to ISIS. Whereas, Afghanistan can be a potential soft target for the IS as compared to Pakistan due to the lack of firm control of the Afghan government.

Qingdao SCO Summit this year expressed its resolve and commitment to fight the tri-lateral security challenge of 'Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism'. Joint counter-terrorism efforts and measures to further synergize the Regional Anti-Terrorism Mechanism (RATS) was highlighted.

Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, is a permanent organ of the SCO which serves to foster cooperation within member states against the terrorism, separatism and extremism (SCO Charter, 2003). At its creation, six member states expressed their satisfaction at the SCO's major role in anti-terrorist activities (Xinhua Online (Chinese) June 7 2002). RATS purview includes the discussion, and drafting of counter-terrorism resolutions, agenda items and treaties required by the SCO member states in interaction within and with other regional and international organizations. Preparation and holding of scientific conferences and workshops, assistance in sharing experience in the field of fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism – also falls within the RATS ambit.

SCO's RATS is an ideal forum exchange of views and best practices on countering terrorism and extremism, where all member states can benefit from Pakistan's

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experience in countering terrorism and extremism. In May this year, a three –day meeting of Legal Experts Group of SCO was held in Islamabad. The member states deliberated on various policies for improving regional cooperation in countering terrorism and extremism. The meeting deliberated upon the agenda of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of the Council of SCO-RATS held in Bishkek in October, 2018. Legal experts from eight member states; namely China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan, in addition to representative of the SCO-RATS Executive Committee participated in the meeting. All the recommendations of this meeting were endorsed in the Qingdao Declaration. This promises Pakistan an opportunity to play a meaningful role in the SCO’s counter-terrorism initiatives.

Another stride on the SCO front is the successful holding of joint counter-terror military exercise known as Peace Mission, in the Ural mountains of Russia this year. Earlier, joint military exercises were confined to the Central Asian states, since India and Pakistan becoming permanent members in 2017 this year it expanded its horizons to South Asia as well (Daily Pakistan, October 9, 2018). The ultimate aim of Peace Mission is to synergize the intelligence sharing expertise, and tactical maneuvers of the counter-terror personnel of all the permanent members of the SCO. In the recent Peace Mission, it was the first time since independence when two arch rivals India and Pakistan together participated in anti-terror military drill apart from UN peacekeeping missions. This was a unique opportunity to interact, and move towards building confidence between longtime adversaries in the multilateral forum of SCO.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, Pakistan is well placed to reap the benefits from the SCO membership. The diplomatic, political, economic, and strategic avenues for Pakistan point in the positive direction. However, it needs steadfastness and proactive assessment of the challenges that are the product of due responsibilities as being a permanent member of SCO. The collaborative initiatives with the other SCO members in the anti-smuggling, anti-drug and anti-terrorism fields will add to the sustainable peace and prosperity for all the concerned member states. To conclude the following takeaways from the overleaf discussion is:

- Multipolarity not hegemony is the trend of present and future.
- Geo-economics defines the contemporary landscape.
- Resolution of disputes through dialogue and engagement is the way forward.

These points are well registered by the SCO platform and thus promises a productive and sustainable interaction module for Pakistan in the foreseeable future. SCO provides Pakistan an opportunity to further strengthen its relations with China, expand bilateral relations with Russia and open invigorated channels of communication with CARS (Central Asian Republics). It opens new avenue of interaction with India and an opportunity to break the cycle of ‘blame game’ that has plagued Indo-Pak equation for a long time.

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