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Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges

Abstract

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is completing 20 years of its existence in 2021. Established in 2001, SCO has emerged as a regional organisation focusing on addressing three evils separatism, terrorism and extremism. For the two decades, SCO has transformed from remaining only a security-centric organisation to promoting business and cultural linkages across the member countries with various initiatives. End of the Cold War and post 9/11 world has enhanced the significance of multilateralism and regional organizations to not only balance power but also better regional cooperation. Pakistan joined SCO as an observer member in 2004 and continued to remain in the organisation after becoming its full member in 2017. Pakistan's presence in SCO as an observer and later permanent membership of Pakistan has opened new avenues for cooperation and opportunities for Pakistan.

Introduction

After the end of the Cold war era, the world has passed through a significant shift from a bipolar world to a multipolar world whereas the global power axis has shifted from the west towards the east. There was a steady rise of multilateral institutions in the world creating a balance at regional and global power structures to counter global hegemony in the international political system. In June 2001, when Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five¹, SCO emerged out of the multilateral foreign policy of China.² "Shanghai Spirit" became the reason for setting the values of "shared future" based on mutual trust, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilization and pursuit of the common development for the region³. The Shanghai Spirit became a binding force for the member countries to collaborate on this forum. Since 9/11, over the years SCO has evolved from having a primary goal of building regional confidence through demilitarized borders, cooperation to combat three evils i.e. separatism, terrorism and extremism to business, cultural exchanges and others. For the past twenty years of its existence, SCO has evolved and transformed itself through various initiatives and adjustments in its structures.⁴ Scholars from the west have most of the time portrayed and analyzed this as NATO of the East and argued about the challenge that this organization may pose to US interests in the region.⁵ The evolution of the SCO has also led to the addition of Pakistan and India as new permanent members in the organization resulting in the increase in the geographical, socio-economic, security and strategic outreach of the organization. With the steady and peaceful rise of Asian Century⁶ SCO has potential to build regional cooperation hence providing opportunities and challenges for Pakistan to deal with its regional security and economic difficulties. For Pakistan's involvement in the War on Terror and subsequent impacts on its security paradigm has resulted into Pakistan choosing and exploring the possibilities of alliances in the region wherein SCO was an obvious inclination. In this entire framework of the organization, Pakistan is utilizing its presence by building closer partnership with the member countries. With China, Pakistan has joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁷ as one of the largest investment and development program where China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the seven corridors. On the other hand, with Russia, Central Asian countries, Pakistan is building its relationship through various policy initiatives in diverse sectors. The paper examines twenty years of the progress and transformation of SCO, its achievements in its goals and objectives set forth at the very inception in 2001. The paper is exploring and analyzing the challenges and opportunities that SCO has offered to Pakistan while Pakistan was an observer member and later joined as a permanent member in 2017. The paper will conclude with recommendations and foreign policy options for Pakistan to make the maximum of the presence in the organization.

SCO: 2001-2021:

Shanghai Process: SCO also known as the Shanghai Pact,⁸ is a Eurasian security, economic as well as political alliance established in 15 June 2001 by six countries i.e. China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in Shanghai. Later in June

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¹ Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions was signed in April 26, 1996 by five countries Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan and Shanghai Five was formed. Read analysis here Bates Gill, "Shanghai Five: An Attempt to Counter U.S. Influence in Asia?", *Brookings*, May 4, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/shanghai-five-an-attempt-to-counter-u-s-influence-in-asia/>

² "Main Characteristics of China's Foreign Policy, accessed on 21 October 2020, *Embassy of People's Republic of China in the United States*, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgx/zgwjzc/t35077.htm>

³ "Commentary: The 'Shanghai Spirit' shows its strength," *Xinhua*, 5 May 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/30/c_137217942.htm

⁴ Rashid Alimov, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 2, 2018, 114-124, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.00>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366518300216>

⁵ Although the SCO has repeatedly stressed it is not a military alliance with treaty obligations, concerns persist: Is the SCO a NATO of the East, disguised under a veil labeled "cooperation"? Xin, Liu. 2018. "SCO Trilog: Is The SCO The NATO Of The East?". *News.Cgtn.Com*. Accessed November 1, 2020. https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414e334d544f77457a6333566d54/share_p.html.

⁶ This phrase was reported to be coined during the meeting between Deng Xiaoping and Rajiv Gandhi when both countries established contact in the 1962 conflict. This concept was arisen as a result of the increasing potential of China and India with their technological, scientific and economic advancements. For more on this read Parag Khanna, *The Future Is Asian* (Simon & Schuster, 2019)

⁷ Belt and Road Portal, This is official portal of Chinese government on the project., https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?cat_id=10076&cur_page=1

⁸ James A. Millward, (2007). *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*. Columbia University Press. p. 336. Accessed October 27, 2020.

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

2017, after remaining closed for 16 years for new members, Pakistan⁹ and India¹⁰ were confirmed as permanent members in the 17th Meeting of the Heads of State Council of SCO in Astana, Kazakhstan.¹¹ Currently the SCO comprises eight member states, namely India, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The SCO counts four observer states, namely Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia. The SCO has six dialogue partners are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka. In terms of population and geography SCO is one of the largest organizations in the world representing nearly 40 % of the world covering the entire Eurasian landmass and counts around 20 % of the world's GDP.¹² The SCO member states hold 25 % of the global oil reserves, 50 % gas, 35 % coal and half of the world's uranium reserves are located in this region.¹³ With the presence of four nuclear powers and covering the region with geopolitical and geostrategic significance, SCO is an organization that has significant regional security and stability influence.

The "Shanghai Spirit," features mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity and pursuit of common development, thus became the founding values of the SCO and continued promoting the development of the organization not only for the benefit of its members, but also for regional peace and stability. SCO has emerged as an intergovernmental organization as a continuum of Shanghai Process¹⁴. As a result of the Shanghai Process, SCO has made organic growth and shift of the organization's overall approach and perspective towards regional and international political systems, seemingly according to the contemporary challenges. The Shanghai process is an outcome of the 30 years long Chinese-Soviet bilateral dialogue on border issues and security in their region.¹⁵ Through this process, SCO over the years for the past two decades has achieved not only its set goals in building peace and stability through multilateral mechanisms amongst countries but has opened new avenues of cooperation including business and cultural linkages. As the process¹⁶ is a gradual shift along with a series of steps taken in order to accomplish set goals, SCO has made adjustments in its structures and engagement according to the changing international and regional circumstances.

Organizational Structure : The Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization¹⁷ was signed in June 2002 during the SCO Heads of State meeting in St. Petersburg and was later enforced on September 19, 2003. This Charter is a fundamental and significant statutory document outlining the principles, goals of the organization, core activities, functions and, the structure of SCO.¹⁸ Adhering to the principles of openness, SCO pursues dialogue, exchanges and cooperation, and stands for strict observance of the purposes and principles inscribed in the Charter of the United Nations.¹⁹ The entire structure of the organization is designed to generate multilateral partnerships to assist sovereign members in coordinating strategies and approaches to solve pressing international issues and meeting regional needs.²⁰ The organization has two permanent bodies — the SCO Secretariat based in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent. The SCO Secretary-General resides in Beijing and the Director of the Executive Committee of the SCO RATS are appointed by the Council of Heads of State for a term of three years.²¹ Joint military exercises between states held regularly since 2001 till date in order to promote intelligence sharing, joint military and antiterrorist operations.²² The Head of State Council is the supreme body in SCO that meets once in a year to decide on guidelines for the important matters of the organization. SCO Council of Heads of Government is the second highest body that approves the budget of the organization and looks after economic spheres within the organization. Another important structure is the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs deals with the day to day activities, consultations and meetings. There are also "off charter" bodies initiated by SCO which are not mandated in the SCO charter but they are not official bodies but are civilian or semiofficial organizations established according to the national laws of the SCO member states. These include SCO Bank Consortium, SCO Business Council, SCO Youth Council, SCO Development Fund and SCO Development Bank, SCO Press

⁹ Pakistan applied for full membership in SCO in 2010 and the decision to grant Pakistan and India as permanent members was concluded through consensus in the SCO Heads of States meeting held in 2015 in Ufa.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pakistan's Membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan, 2017

¹² Le Tian, Jia Jieqiong, "Infographic: A quick guide to SCO and its military cooperation", *CGTN*, 5 June 2018.

¹³ "SCO Energy Club: structure ready for international interaction, not Shanghai Six's elite club" 26 March, 2015, *Official Website of Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation*.

¹⁴ David Suter, 2015. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation A Chinese Practice Of International Law". *Papers.Ssrn.Com*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3125330, 75-130.

¹⁵ Alyson J.K. Bailes and Pal Dunay, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a regional security institution", *International Peace Research Institute* (2007), 15-22.

¹⁶ Process- Merriam Webster- <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/process>.

¹⁷ For complete list of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) official documents and press communiqués, <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Alimov, Rashid. 2020. "The Role Of The Shanghai Cooperation Organization In Counteracting Threats To Peace And Security | United Nations". *United Nations*. Accessed October 28, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-shanghai-cooperation-organization-counteracting-threats-peace-and-security#:~:text=Between%202011%20and%202015%2C%20under.members%20of%20international%20terrorist%20organizations>.

²⁰ Alimov, Rashid. 2018. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its Role And Place In The Development Of Eurasia". *Journal Of Eurasian Studies* 9 (2): 114-124. Accessed October 30, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.001>

²¹ Albert, Eleanor. 2015. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization" *Council On Foreign Relations*. Accessed October 27, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/shanghai-cooperation-organization>.

²² Marcel de Haas (2016) War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29:3, 378-406, DOI: 10.1080/13518046.2016.1200383

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

Club, SCO Good Neighborliness Cooperation Committee, SCO Public Diplomacy Centre and SCO Cultural Centre are few of the off charter initiatives. These are mostly either civil or semiofficial or led by according to the laws of the national governments.

Outcomes of Summit of Heads of States 2001-2020: Since 2001, Council of Heads of States meetings have been organized on a regular basis since inception. This is the main decision making body finalizing all the matters related to the organizational and operational matters. First one initiating discussion on building consensus to draft and approve organizational charter. It was also the time when the War on Terror was unleashed in the region where the US military took its strong foothold in neighboring Afghanistan, shifting the balance of power in the region. Pakistan opted to join the US and coalition forces in the War on Terror. In 2002 a second Heads of States meeting was held in Russia where SCO Charter was signed hence the organizational missions, objectives, institutional methods of cooperation apart from other important development goals including anti-terrorism²³ were finalized. In 2003, the *third SCO Summit*²⁴ was held in Moscow where institutional matters including improvement of the first Secretary General of SCO was made apart from consensus on the institutionalization of SCO. SCO Secretariat was approved to establish in Beijing along with a regional anti-terrorism center in 2004. *Fourth Summit* was hosted by Uzbekistan in 2004²⁵ where Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) was formally launched to develop coordination on regions security threats. Regulations for the observer member states were also finalized and Mongolia was granted an observer status in SCO. This was also the time when Pakistan submitted application for joining the organization as an observer member. In 2005, SCO Summit was held in Kazakhstan²⁶. This was an important summit where Pakistan, along with India and Iran were granted observer status. As the SCO-Afghanistan contact group was established, SCO summit issued a statement calling antiterrorist coalition forces based in Central Asia to draw timelines for withdrawal. In 2006, sixth SCO Heads of States summit²⁷ was held in Shanghai. SCO celebrated five years and a long term SCO development plan was finalized.²⁸ In this Summit, the states came out stronger against the US hegemonic designs in the region especially calling for noninterference and "social development cannot be exported"²⁹ criticizing the coalition forces for Afghan invasion and the chaos created as a result.

In 2007, the seventh SCO Summit was held in Bishkek where SCO Energy Club³⁰ was established. In continuum to discussion on developing rapid response mechanisms against the threats to peace and conflict prevention, further progress was made. Good-neighbor relations, friendship and cooperation agreement was signed along with discussion on Afghanistan issue. To further cooperation, discussion was made on developing collaboration of SCO with Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).³¹ Eighth Summit was held in 2008³² issuing a joint communique where the mechanism on hosting anti-terror drills was finalized. There was also a document signed on interbank cooperation and the Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation was approved. In 2009, the ninth SCO Summit³³ was held in Russia with calls for dialogue to enhance cooperation to address regional and international issues. The focus was on Afghanistan. For the first time observer states were invited to the Summit. With tumultuous events in Kyrgyzstan, the tenth summit³⁴ was held in Tashkent in 2010 calling for peace and stability in the country asking for the United Nations to play an important role in Afghanistan. This was also the summit where Pakistan submitted its full membership application keeping in view the need to build new alliances and put on burner the old ones.

Eleventh meeting was held in 2011 in Kazakhstan. This was also a decade long anniversary meeting where member states finalized further direction for SCO. The 12th Summit³⁵ was held in China where approval for establishing SCO Development Fund (Special Account) and the SCO Development Bank for enhancing development cooperation was finalized. Observer status was granted to Afghanistan while Turkey was given the status of the dialogue partner. The 13th Summit³⁶ was held in Kyrgyzstan. Agreement on

²³ "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Seeks to Strengthen Anti-Terrorism Component," *EurasiaNet*, Jan 8, 2002, <https://eurasianet.org/shanghai-cooperation-organization-seeks-to-strengthen-anti-terrorism-component>

²⁴ "Third SCO Summit Meeting Held in Moscow", 29th May 2003, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/hjtcf_665940/t23117.shtml

²⁵ Valentinas Mite, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Signs Agreement in Bishkek," *EurasiaNet*, Sep 25, 2004, <https://eurasianet.org/shanghai-cooperation-organization-signs-agreement-in-bishkek>

²⁶ "Hu Jintao Attends the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit and Delivers an Important Speech", July 5, 2005, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzj_663340/dozys_664276/dqzzywt_664402/t202787.shtml

²⁷ "SCO Members Issue Joint Communique", *Xinhua News Agency* June 15, 2006, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/meeting/171592.htm>

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ "SCO Energy Club: structure ready for international interaction, not Shanghai Six's elite club" 26 March, 2015, *InfoSCO portal*, <http://infoshos.ru/en/?idn=13913>

³¹ To know more about CSTO, read here at the official website <https://en.odkb-csto.org/>

³² Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Shanghai Cooperation Organization Leaders Confront Global Economic Crisis", *EurasiaNet*, Oct 31, 2008, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-confront-global-economic-crisis>

³³ Meena Singh Roy, "The 9th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit: An Assessment," *IDS Comment*, June 24, 2009, https://idsa.in/strategiccomments/The9thShanghaiCooperationOrganisationSummit_MSROY_240609

³⁴ "SCO Tashkent summit concludes" *Xinhua News Agency*, 11 June 2010, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010sco/2010-06/11/content_9968146.htm

³⁵ Official Website of the 12th SCO Summit, 5th June 2012, <http://www.scosummit2012.org/english/>

³⁶ Roman Muzalevsky, "SCO Attempts to Deepen Cooperation at Head-of-State Summit in Kyrgyzstan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume 10 Issue: 165, September 18, 2013,

<https://jamestown.org/program/sco-attempts-to-deepen-cooperation-at-head-of-state-summit-in-kyrgyzstan/>

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

scientific cooperation was signed. As Pakistan and India had applied for full membership, there were discussions and deliberations on the status of the new member states. Later in 2014, 14th SCO Summit³⁷ was held in Tajikistan where a series of documents were signed on the SCO expansion.

It was at the 15th SCO Summit held in Ufa, Russia in 2015³⁸ that was a breakthrough summit³⁹ where it was decided to increase the number of members and the official process to accept Pakistan and India as full members in SCO began. SCO development strategy for the year 2016-2018 was adopted. Belarus became an observer state while Azerbaijan, Armenia, Nepal and Cambodia became new dialogue partners. The 16th Summit was held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 2016.⁴⁰ During this meeting action plan for the 2016-2020 SCO development strategy⁴¹ was adopted along with the Memorandum of Obligations on the entry of India and Pakistan. In the 17th Summit of Heads of States meeting in Astana⁴² held in 2017, Pakistan and India joined the SCO as permanent members for the first time. This was a historic day for Pakistan⁴³ and India to join the SCO as a full member. As a result SCO has increased its geographical outreach and increased the number with not only opportunities and challenges for the organization. In the 18th Summit of the Heads of State⁴⁴ meeting held in Qingdao in 2018 where China was presiding. Apart from issuing a declaration at the end of the summit, that has remained a usual ritual since the beginning of the summit, there was a joint document signed on simplifying trade procedures. There were also agreements on railways and digital economy options for the SCO members. A delayed 19th Heads of State Summit⁴⁵ was hosted by Kyrgyzstan in 2019. During this meeting 13 different important documents were signed especially on the latest information and communication technologies, sub-national cooperation and drug control. The 20th SCO Summit⁴⁶ will be hosted by Russian Federation virtually after it was delayed for the rise of the "once in a century pathogen" COVID-19 virus. There was a joint call on the forum to fight the disease together through collaboration and health initiatives. The 21st SCO summit will be held in Tajikistan in November 2021.

The regular meetings of SCO Heads of State reflect the commitment from the member states towards SCO. These summits are meant to decide important structural advancement in the organisation hence to make the organization ready to address the contemporary regional traditional and nontraditional threats. These high level summits also provide leaders a chance to meet on the sidelines to discuss bilateral issues and resolve any disputes. Through these interactions, Pakistan has continuously built its engagement with permanent members, observer states and dialogue partners.

Three Evils: Primary focus of SCO is to jointly fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism. SCO is complimenting the work of United Nations on peace and stability⁴⁷ in implementing various joint resolutions⁴⁸ and events⁴⁹ to address traditional and nontraditional security threats since inception. With the presence of four nuclear powers, active conflicts and home to 44 percent of the world, there is a strong need for a collective approach towards security. Terrorism with its transnational nature is not new phenomenon for the regional countries. There are active Islamic Terrorist organisations including Al-Qaida, Hizbu-Tahrir, Islamic

³⁷ "14th SCO summit held in Dushanbe", *China Daily*, 12 September 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014xisco/2014-09/12/content_18589262.htm

³⁸ "Pakistan, India join Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", *Dawn*, 12 July 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1193717>

³⁹ Stephen Balank, "Was the SCO summit in Ufa a breakthrough?", *CACI Analyst*, 19 August 2015, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13261-was-the-sco-summit-in-ufa-a-breakthrough?.html>

⁴⁰ "Xi Jinping Attends 16th Meeting of Heads of State Council of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Delivers Important Speech, Stressing to Carry Forward the Shanghai Spirit, Consolidate Solidarity and Mutual Trust, and Comprehensively Deepen SCO Cooperation", 24 June 2016, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of People's Republic of China*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpdswyblwzbstjxgsfwbcxshzccyyslshdschyt/1375782.shtml

⁴¹ Shanghai Cooperation Organization. 2020. "Development Strategy Of The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Until 2025". *Eng.Sectscsco.Org*. Accessed October 29, 2020. <http://eng.sectscsco.org/news/20200928/679886.html>

⁴² "Prime Minister to Participate in the 17th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit at Astana, Kazakhstan," *Office of Prime Minister of Pakistan*, 8-9 June 2017, https://pmo.gov.pk/news_details.php?news_id=681, "Xi Jinping Attends 17th Meeting of SCO Council of Heads of State and Delivers Important Speech, Stressing to Jointly Build a Common Home of Security, Stability, Development and Prosperity and Announcing China to Host the 2018 SCO Summit," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of People's Republic of China*, June 2017, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2017zt/xjpdhxxgsfwbcxshzccyyslshdsqchyhastnzsxbhkmst/1469850.shtml

⁴³ "It is a historic day: Pakistan becomes full member of SCO at Astana summit", *Dawn*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1338471>

⁴⁴ Official Website by Xinhua News Agency covering the 18th Heads of State Summit in Qingdao city, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/cnleaders/2018SCOSummit/index.htm>

⁴⁵ "Xi Jinping Attends the 19th Meeting of the Council of Heads of States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Delivers an Important Speech", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of People's Republic of China* June 14, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjwb_663304/zjzg_663340/dozys_664276/dqzzywt_664402/t1673206.shtml

⁴⁶ "Information Report on the Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States", *SCO Secretariat*, 10 November 2020, <http://eng.sectscsco.org/news/20201110/689235.html>

⁴⁷ The United Nations and SCO established formal cooperation in 2004, there was a joint document of cooperation that was signed in Tashkent on 5 April 2010 to collaborate with the SCO Secretariat and UN. Another document was signed in 2011 when SCO signed cooperation with the UN office on Drugs and Crime in 2011. See also Regional Treaties, Agreements, Declarations and Related, *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism*, 15 June 2001, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49f5d9f92.html> [accessed 10 April 2021]; *EurasiaNet*, Shanghai Cooperation Organization seeks to strengthen anti-terrorism component, 8 January 2002, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/46c58ed623.html> [accessed 10 April 2021]

⁴⁸ Ban Ki Moon, "Remarks at High-level Special Event on "The United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Jointly Countering Challenges and Threats", *United Nations*, 22 November 2016, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2016-11-22-0>

⁴⁹ SCO Secretary-General: "Over 3 million people have overcome drug addiction in SCO countries". [The UN and the SCO have held a joint event in Vienna on combating drug addiction", 13 March 2017, *SCO Secretariat*, <http://eng.sectscsco.org/news/20170313/231902.html>

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Taliban in Afghanistan and Uygur terrorist groups in Xinjiang are operating and complimenting through connections, operations and geographical outreach. To address these challenges, there are permanent organs and initiative at SCO level. Pakistan has remained an active member of these discussions in order to build support for its own challenges.

*Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)*⁵⁰ was established in 2002 through RATS agreement as a separate permanent body within SCO to coordinate joint efforts of the countries on antiterrorism derive. RATS consists of the Council and Executive Committee with secretariat in Uzbekistan. RATS Council is the highest body to make decisions related to RATS. Regular meetings are held to coordinate and implement the important mandate of RATS. Apart from coordinating functions, RATS is a forum where countries share intelligence, counter drugs, narcotics and exchange updates on the threats in terms of personals and organizations blacklisted in the SCO member states. Over the years, there has been concerted efforts by the RATS to take effective measures in eradicating and thwarting any terrorist activities in the region. Along with RATS there is SCO Convention on Countering Extremism, which again strengthens the framework of SCO. After inclusion of India and Pakistan, although the organisation has strengthened in terms of its outreach and size, there has also been overall increase in the counter violent extremism experience with Pakistan having an experience of fighting the menace on the soil in the past. Presence of India and Pakistan has also posed a challenge and opportunity for both states to cooperate in the counter terrorist drive in SCO.⁵¹

There is another component to the RATS is the joint military exercises⁵². Since 2002, several joint multilateral military exercises have been organised under the RATS framework to build coordination amongst the security establishment of the countries. With the presence of Central Asian States and powerful regional players like China and Russia, Pakistan and India also joined these military exercises for the first time after becoming full members.⁵³ Since 2018, both countries participated in the military exercises, this year in 2021, Pakistan will host these for the first time. As a permanent member India also needs to participate⁵⁴ in the historic joint military exercises on Pakistani soil. SCO has made the two nuclear antagonist states come together for the first time in their seven decades of bloody history to participate in these drills.

SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established in 2005 on the initiative of President Putin to formally coordinate proposals for peace in Afghanistan at the institutional levels. Meetings of this group are held regularly either at the SCO Secretariat or Afghan Embassy in Beijing till 2009⁵⁵. In March 2009, there was a regional conference organised by SCO⁵⁶ calling for the regional countries to develop a roadmap for peace in Afghanistan. In 2009, this was disabled and later began its regular meetings in 2017. The contact group helped to create a space for stronger SCO response towards building regional consensus on Afghanistan. Initiatives at the level of SCO for Afghanistan are complimenting the regional other steps to restore peace in Afghanistan. With the ongoing intra Afghan dialogue, deli delaying of the US forces withdrawal from the country, talks with Taliban, regional peace summits hosted by countries, all are meant to bring peace in the country. Pakistan as an important member of this regional structure has important stakes and role in Afghan peace process recognized and realized by Afghanistan, regional and international community. Since the inception of the US led War on Terror in Afghanistan, peace remained a distant dream for the country with ever rising vulnerability to terrorist threats and civil war. Afghanistan has also remained the hot bed for regional terrorist organisations with rise in threats for the neighborhood. This war has caused terrorists to find breeding grounds in the tribal regions of Pakistan and supply fighters to conflicts in the Middle East. The Contact group has not made any substantial advancement except that to develop a common ground and consensus amongst members that there should be Afghan led and owned solutions. In the 18th SCO Summit held in Qingdao, President Xi Jinping called for an actively engaged SCO Afghanistan Contact Group⁵⁷ for peace in Afghanistan along with implementing the 2019-2021 program of cooperation to combat three evils.

SCO Trade and Business: In the framework of SCO, interdependence grew resulting in the options and opportunities for regional cooperation in economic and trade. Regionalism has led countries in the world to develop systems and mechanisms to not only

⁵⁰ Official Website of Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), <http://ecrats.org/en/>

⁵¹ Catherine Putz, How Is the SCO's 'Shanghai Spirit' Faring in 2020?, *The Diplomat*, 11 September, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/how-is-the-scos-shanghai-spirit-faring-in-2020/>

⁵² "A quick guide to SCO and its military cooperation", *CGTN*, June 5, 2018, http://english.scio.gov.cn/infographics/2018-06/05/content_51673238.htm

⁵³ "India and Pakistan take part for the first time in SCO military drill", *Economic Times*, 23 August, 2018, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-and-pakistan-take-part-for-the-first-time-in-sco-military-drill/articleshow/65514176.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

⁵⁴ Snehes Alex Philip, "In a historic first, India could participate in military exercises in Pakistan later this year," 22 March 2021, <https://theprint.in/defence/in-a-historic-first-india-could-participate-in-military-exercises-in-pakistan-later-this-year/626387/>

⁵⁵ The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established in 2005 but its activity was suspended in 2009. The function resumed functioning in 2017. Based on the established practice the meeting is held at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers of the SCO member states and Afghanistan.

⁵⁶ "Special Conference on Afghanistan convened under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *UNODC*, Moscow, 27 March 2009, <https://www.unodc.org/afghanistan/en/Events/sco-special-conference-on-afghanistan-march-2009.html>

⁵⁷ "Full text of Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the 18th SCO Qingdao summit", *Xinhua*, 10 June 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/10/c_137244587.htm

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

enhance their own potential but also to help resolve the regional issues and challenges.⁵⁸ The regionalization is either in classical regional integration format or either these mechanisms are shaped by the regional pressing challenges that require states to address through joint efforts similar to the SCO. Apart from security challenges, the SCO region is marred with conflicts and economic disparity. The organisation has nearly 122 documents related to mechanisms and frameworks on building trade and economic potential amongst the SCO member countries.⁵⁹ These arrangements are meant to provide assistance to the members on trade, financial transactions, investment mechanisms, transport, telecommunications, banking, tourism development, cargo and services. Even having such importance on paper documents and having a potential to grow in trade and business, sadly there are sluggish developments in building trade. To build further financial cooperation, in 2005, Inter Bank Consortium was established. Another important initiative is SCO Development Bank⁶⁰ proposed in to support countries in their development pursuits⁶¹. As the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is growing globally and except India, most of the SCO member countries are part of the BRI. Currently there are 138 countries part of the initiative and investment ranges from \$1 trillion to \$8 trillion.⁶² Pakistan is part of BRI with CPEC as one of the most active corridors of BRI. Apart from BRI, Eurasian Economic Union and several other economic and trade projects are ongoing making the region as a hub for trade however there is still need to have a robust economic cooperation among the SCO members.

SCO Culture Exchange and People to People Initiatives: Cultural, educational and people to people ties are important factors to create synergy to compliment the "Shanghai Spirit." SCO is home to rich cultural heritage, people, ethnic group, religions, nations, languages, cultural diversity with ancient Silk Road having centuries old tradition of people to people contacts for many centuries. SCO has also made emphasis on enriching this cultural diversity further through various initiatives. Cultural exhibitions, exchanges, celebrations of the UN days.⁶³ The SCO Charter proposed the mechanism for coordinating within the not only eight member countries but the entire 18 states in the SCO including observers and dialogue partners to collaborate not only cultural linkages but also humanitarian communications. In the SCO framework, there are regular meetings of the Ministers of Cultures from the SCO Member States. In the 2007 meeting of Heads of State, a formal agreement on cultural cooperation in the SCO was also signed⁶⁴. Similarly in 2017, this framework was further outlined and highlighted. Apart from expanding its membership after years of substantial contribution towards building consensus on mutual interests and building security paradigm among member states, SCO formally opened its first Centre for Public Diplomacy inaugurated in Uzbekistan on 7 January 2019.⁶⁵ This initiative was intended to develop deep rooted linkages among member states to build relationships beyond the perceived divides through people to people contacts. This dedicated body for public diplomacy was originally proposed by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoye in June 2017 at the meeting of the Council of Heads of State of SCO in Astana, Kazakhstan.⁶⁶ The Public Diplomacy Centre is meant to enhance mutual trust and promote communication among member states. There is an urge among the representatives of SCO Public Diplomacy Centre to use the effective tools of public diplomacy to bring the nations closer together and reinforce the Shanghai Spirit.⁶⁷ Another important initiative within the SCO is a proposition forwarded by Kyrgyzstan to establish SCO Cultural and Integration Center in 2019⁶⁸ which was approved in the 19th meeting of Heads of States where other leaders supported Kyrgyzstan's initiative to establish an SCO Cultural and Integration Centre in Bishkek.⁶⁹ As SCO is completing its 20 years in 2021, the year has been given the title of "Yes of the SCO Culture".⁷⁰ Another important recent initiative is the action plan for the implementation of the SCO intergovernmental Agreement on Cultural Cooperation in 2018-2020.

⁵⁸ Rashid Alimov, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia" *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 2, 2018, 114-124, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2018.08.00>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366518300216>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ "SCO Development Bank: Prospects of the SCO development bank", *CGTN*, 6 June 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/7a517a4d32454464776c6d636a4e6e62684a4856/share_p.html

⁶¹ "PM urges SCO member states to set up Fund & Development Bank to catalyze trans-regional development agenda", *Radio Pakistan*, 14 June 2019, http://www.radio.gov.pk/14-06-2019/pakistan-condemns-terrorism-in-all-its-forms-manifestations-pm?__

⁶² Jonathan E. Hillman, "How big is China's Belt and Road Initiative", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-big-chinas-belt-and-road>

⁶³ Vladimir Norov, World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, " *Daily Islamabad Post*, 21 May 2021, <http://eng.sectesco.org/news/20200521/647899.html>

⁶⁴ "The agreement between the governments of state members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on cooperation in the field of culture," 16 August 2007, <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=18147>

⁶⁵ "The SCO Centre for Public Diplomacy must become a civilization bridge in the region," 29 January, 2019, <http://eng.sectesco.org/news/20190129/508261.html>.

⁶⁶ "Press release on the results of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Heads of State Council Meeting," *Sectesco*, June 9, 2017, <http://eng.sectesco.org/news/20170609/289274.html>.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Senator and Head of the Public Diplomacy Centre Rakhmatulla Nazarov made the statement on the occasion of the formal launch of the Centre describing in detail about the Centre and its objectives.

⁶⁸ Kyrgyzstan suggests creation of SCO Cultural and Integration Center, 19 June 2019, *AKIPress*, https://akipress.com/news:620664:Kyrgyzstan_suggests_creation_of_SCO_Cultural_and_Integration_Center/

⁶⁹ SCO Leaders Sign Moscow Declaration, Consolidate Efforts to Overcome COVID-19 Consequences, 11 November, 2020, *Astana Times*, <https://astanatimes.com/2020/11/sco-leaders-sign-moscow-declaration-consolidate-efforts-to-overcome-covid-19-consequences/>

⁷⁰ "The 17th Meeting of the Ministers of Culture of SCO Member States," 27th November, 2020, http://eng.sectesco.org/for_media/20200910/676452_676115.html

Pakistan and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2001-2020

When Shanghai Five was transformed into SCO in June 2001, Pakistan was passing through a challenging year when General Pervez Musharraf took over as President of the country⁷¹ after a military coup causing another dent in Pakistan's chequered democratic history. After formidable 9/11 events in 2001, Pakistan joined US launched Operation Enduring Freedom⁷² widely known as the global coalition on War on Terror against Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan in October 2001⁷³. As Pakistan joined the western coalition, tension between India and Pakistan increased after terrorist attacks on Indian Parliament⁷⁴ that led to an escalating military standoff between the two nuclear armed South Asian countries. Global community mediated to reduce the tension however pressure built on Pakistan to start operation against the terror outfits operating in the country. As a result Pakistan military initiated, with the cooperation from the US coalition partners, Operation al-Mizan, the border regions of Pakistan closer to Afghanistan that continued from 2002 till 2006. Later there were five major and numerous smaller operations conducted by the Pakistan military in the tribal regions especially in the border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. These were Operation Zalzala (2008), Sher Dil, Rah e Haq, Rah e Rast (2007-2009) and finally operation Rah e Nijat.⁷⁵ Pakistan's sacrifices and contributions towards uprooting terrorism and eradicate military hideouts were recognized globally. Pakistan assisted the US in its war in Afghanistan and in return received aid. Pakistan faced the spillover effect of this war in Afghanistan with rise in militancy in border regions, huge influx of Afghan refugees in Pakistan creating socio economic burden on Pakistan. The mistrust between Pakistan and the US continued to grow. Pakistan has been continuously blamed for providing the safe heavens to the terrorist groups and their leaders and "not doing enough" to support the coalition forces. The lowest dent arrived when US strike a civilian nuclear agreement in 2005⁷⁶ that has shifted the balance of power in the South Asian region.

As a result of the domestic and regional compulsion along with the sense of mistrust with the US and allies, Pakistan began seeking regional alliance and searching for more credible options for security and stability. Pakistan's quest was also to build an alliance to counter balance India in the region. For multilateral relations, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was an obvious choice because of its emphasis on security and joint efforts towards eradicating terrorism, separatism and extremism. These three evils that Pakistan was facing at the home too as a result of the spillover effect of the Afghan war causing the economic and social challenges to Pakistan with the rise of militancy in Swat and other border areas of Pakistan with Afghanistan. Another important reason was the mistrust of the US led Pakistan to come further closer to China, however there was still a difficult relationship with Russia owing to historic reasons.⁷⁷ China supported Pakistan membership in SCO while Russia supported India's application to be part of this important multilateral organization.

Pakistan as an observer Member: With the rise of SCO and due to strong friendship with China, Pakistan opted to begin pursuing its presence in the organisation in 2004 and later in July 2005 China hinted that Pakistan will soon join as an observer and China supported Pakistan's presence in the organisation.⁷⁸ In the Heads of the State Summit held in 2005 in Astana, it was formally confirmed that Pakistan will join the organisation as an observer state.⁷⁹ Although Pakistan has applied for the permanent membership of the SCO earlier but due to the evolution of the processes and organisational procedure within SCO, it was considered appropriate to offer any country applying for the membership may join as an observer. This was breather for the nascent organization to settle its major operations and then accept the new members.

In SCO, observer states are accepted with certain obligations and responsibilities as passed by the Observer Regulations in 2004.⁸⁰ First they need to agree fully with the SCO Charter. The countries can be from any geographical region and not necessarily from the region of its inception. Observers can be international organizations. For instance Mongolia is an example here as an observer member accepted in 2004 when Observer Regulations was adopted. Observer states are giving privileges less than the permanent member states. SCO charter completely defines and explains the Observer States in its Article 14 (2).⁸¹ Any state when applying for the observer status in the organisation has to go through certain procedures that include an application signed by the Head of State addressing the Secretary General who then forwards these documents to the National Coordinators Council (NCC) in the Secretariat. NCC forward this application to the Foreign Minister Council (FMC). FMC invites the representatives from the countries and later

⁷¹ "Pakistani coup leader declares himself president" June 20, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jun/20/pakistan>

⁷² Benjamin S. Lambeth, "America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom," *RAND*, October 7, 2001, https://www.rand.org/pubs/RAND_MG166-1

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "2001: Suicide attack on Indian parliament", December 2001, *BBC* http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/december/13/newsid_3695000/3695057.stm

⁷⁵ Zahid Ali Khan. "Military Operations in FATA and PATA: Implications for Pakistan." *Strategic Studies* 31/32 (2011): 129-46. Accessed April 12, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48527641>.

⁷⁶ Joint Statement Between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, US State Department, July 18, 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/07/20050718-6.html>, and for analysis see Maria Sultan and Mian Behzad Adil, "The Henry J. Hyde Act and 123 Agreement: An Assessment," *SASSI Issue Brief*, September 2008, http://www.sassu.org.uk/pdfs/The_123_Agreement_and_Hyde_Act.pdf

⁷⁷ Referring to Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's support to Taliban and end of the Soviet rule in 1979.

⁷⁸ "Pakistan's observer status in SCO soon", *Dawn*, May 27, 2005, <https://www.dawn.com/news/140984/pakistan-s-observer-status-in-sco-soon>;

⁷⁹ "Pakistan joins SCO as observer", *Dawn*, July 6, 2005, <https://www.dawn.com/news/146634>

⁸⁰ "REGULATION on the Status of Observer to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", 2004, <http://eng.sectsc.org/load/197725/>,

⁸¹ David Suter, 2015. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation A Chinese Practice Of International Law". *Papers.Ssrn.Com*.

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3125330, 275-277.

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

the final decision and approval making body Heads of State Council approve the application for giving observer status to any country or an international organisation.⁸²

Once given the observer status, they can participate in the meetings HoS or HoG based on invitation while the plenary meetings are open to send representatives. Later in 2009, HoS meetings were opened for the observer states too. As to prior consent to the chairs of the various organs in SCO, the observer state may attend the discussion and they can submit written statements in the working languages of the SCO i.e. Russian or Chinese. Observer has no right to draft or sign many SCO document. The urge to have more engagement of the SCO members was visible in the HoS summit in 2007 and later in 2009, a formal decision was made to formally engage with the observer states and giving them further opportunities to engage in the organisational contributions.

Pakistan from 2005 till its acceptance as full member, continued performing its role as an observer state with the organization. Pakistan navigated through building close partnership with Russia, Central Asia and China while being in the SCO mechanism. Pakistan participated in the discussion, submission of suggestion and fully remained engaged in the activities of SCO. During this time, Pakistan has not only built its bilateral partnership with Central Asian States but also engaged with China and Russia. With China, after the end of the reform period and opening including the inception of BRI, CPEC was launched in 2015 in full swing. Pakistan remained engaged in the RATS framework and Afghanistan Contact Group.

Pakistan as a Permanent Member: In 2010 Pakistan, finally after staying in the organisation as an observer for eight long years, submitted its application for full membership in SCO. Pakistan was also waiting since 2004 to become part of the organisation to avail the full opportunities and address its regional and global challenges through the forum. The procedure followed the same path as mentioned above however this took longer. In 2015, the SCO at the summit of Ufa, Russia, reached and announced its important decision to incorporate India and Pakistan as member states of SCO⁸³. In the 2016 Summit of Heads of States, Pakistan and India signed a memorandum of responsibility, commitment and obligation and later in the 17th summit of the organisation in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, SCO formally welcomed India and Pakistan as the member-states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Russia supported India's bid for the membership of SCO while China supported Pakistan's bid. As earlier stated, this was a historic event for the country and its foreign policy by becoming part of an important regional organisation which is better than the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) that has become redundant as a result of the hegemonic ambitions of India. This was also the moment when Pakistan's regional alliance bid has been strengthened in order to refute the propaganda of isolation by India. The bid was considered as a welcome development for Pakistan to strengthen its regional ambitions especially its relations towards the other SCO member countries.

Opportunities and Challenges for Pakistan:

Pakistan's membership in SCO has opened new opportunities and challenges for Pakistan at the same time. SCO as a multilateral institution with its diverse economic, security, strategic and cultural significance is offering multiple levels of opportunities ranging to Pakistan from its own position at the regional and global implications.⁸⁴ Through SCO membership, Pakistan has been able to refute all the negative propaganda by India about Pakistan's isolation globally. Due to Pakistan's membership in SCO and support from Russia and China, Indian campaign of projecting Pakistan as a terrorist sponsoring and supporting state has also been 'nosedived'.⁸⁵ SCO is providing opportunity to Pakistan to raise its perspective and experience on its fight against the terrorism and extremism. This forum is providing Pakistan a multilateral regional platform where Pakistan has the options to look out for regional stability especially in its neighbourhood.⁸⁶ This has remained Pakistan's desire over the past many years to look out for the cooperation in these areas and foster better cooperation with countries in the region. While this probability/prospect does provide enormous opportunities for all the members of the SCO, at the same time, it also designates and specifies a major challenge for Pakistan. SCO is a regional alliance where Pakistan is facing the challenge to balance its relations with Russia and China. With all weather friendship with China and engagement at deep rooted levels at the strategic levels, Pakistan is looking to balance its relations with Russian Federation. On several occasions at the sidelines of the meetings in SCO, Pakistani high representatives had close interactions with the counterparts in the meetings. This gives a chance to dialogue and explore cooperation patterns and remove any misconceptions.⁸⁷ Afghanistan will remain a challenge for Pakistan especially after the recent announcement by the Biden administration of the troop's withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021 on the eve of the two decades of the Afghan war.

⁸⁸ All the member states of SCO are concerned for the peace in Afghanistan. The country is a linchpin for regional prosperity. The concerns are growing as recent announcements of the US troop's withdrawal from Afghanistan, ongoing intra Afghan dialogue,

⁸² Ibid, 276

⁸³ Official Website of Ufa Summit 2015, <http://en.sco-russia.ru/>

⁸⁴ The Embassy of the People's Republic of China. 2017. "Xi Jinping Attends 17th Meeting Of SCO Council Of Heads Of State And Delivers Important Speech, Stressing To Jointly Build A Common Home Of Security, Stability, Development And Prosperity And Announcing China To Host The 2018 SCO Summit". *Nz.Chinese Embassy.Org*. Accessed November 3, 2020 <http://nz.chineseembassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1469850.htm>.

⁸⁵ Shabana Fayyaz, Pakistan and the SCO – Aspirations and Challenges, *Journal of Political Studies*, Vol. 26, Issue - 1, 2019, 95:102

⁸⁶ Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, "One Belt One Road Summit 2017 and its implications for CPEC: An overview", *A Research Journal of South Asian Studies*, (HEC Category X) Vol. 32, No. 2, July – December, 2017, pp.277 – 284.

⁸⁷ Ghauri, Irfan. 2017. "SCO Summit: Pakistan Is Adamant To Fight Terrorism, Says PM Abbasi". *The Express Tribune*. Accessed November 1, 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1573635/pm-abbasi-meets-russian-counterpart-sco-summit>.

⁸⁸ Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "Biden will withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2021

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan/2021/04/13/918c3cae-9beb-11eb-8a83-3bc1fa69c2e8_story.html

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

Peace dialogue in Doha, regional peace summits by countries are few of the initiatives that are important where Pakistan is hopeful for the Afghan challenge to be resolved. Pakistan suffered from homegrown extremists and terrorism. Pakistan has lost more than 70,000 individuals in the war against this menace. Both India and Pakistan utilized Afghanistan to fight their proxies for former to make Pakistan suffer and later to find so-called "strategic depth" in Afghanistan. World has recognized Pakistan's efforts.⁸⁹ Regional countries are realizing Pakistan's dilemma and security vows.⁹⁰ Now as the Afghan Contact Group in SCO is also active with regular meeting and consensus building, there is expectation that apart from founding members Pakistan and India can also build a rapport on Afghanistan. Since, all the member states of the SCO to have significant interests in the region of Afghanistan and do support various groups in the state, it's quite imperative and crucial that utilizing the platform of the SCO, these countries formulate a joint and collective strategy for the sake of addressing the issue of Afghanistan as well as the threat of regional terrorist groups including Taliban and ISIS. Despite massive potential, the economic, trade and commerce relations of Pakistan with most of the members of the SCO are quite meagre, apart from China. The membership of the SCO offers Pakistan an essential opportunity for the sake of initiating as well as receiving numerous economic collaborative projects utilizing the platform of the SCO. Pakistan offers the crucial overland connectivity and routes for collectively beneficial energy and trade transactions both at the inter-regional as well as intra-regional level.⁹¹ The Port of Gwadar is offering significant, effective and beneficial outlets of trade for the states of Central Asia and all the member states of SCO. Under the umbrella of the SCO Pakistan can provide the member-states of the SCO with preferential and special access to the Port of Gwadar.

The mounting energy crisis of Pakistan requires immediate concern causing lack of economic development and progress. The membership of the SCO does provide Pakistan with an avenue for the sake of exploring various opportunities for importing gas as well as oil from several Central Asian countries, mainly Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. SCO Energy Club is an important opportunity within the forum to develop close linkages with the energy ecosystem in the regional countries. There are multiple gas pipelines projects are ongoing in the region creating opportunities for Pakistan and India to deepen cooperation and ensure their energy security. The problem regarding energy scarcities or deficiencies for Pakistan and India is quite comparative. While India is building its resources of energy through various means including nuclear and renewable energy resources, Pakistan energy needs have been supported by CPEC especially its first phase wherein huge mega energy projects were installed. Pakistan through SCO membership may improve its energy related collaboration with the countries in SCO.

Both India and Pakistan tried their best to bring the other down by referring to each other at the forum. But due to the SCO's organisational structure and its entire essence of not bringing to the table the bilateral relations, hence leaving no point where India and Pakistan will be able to bring their conflicts and disputes on the table.⁹² Another important factor that will not let both Pakistan and India raise their bilateral matters on the forum is that SCO has been functioning and in essence has invited multilateral issues and challenges to the regional countries. There has not been any practice or room for bringing any issue that is of bilateral nature. This also rules out any issue that Pakistan and India will bring forth on the SCO table. Both states need to abide by the rules and principles of the SCO that have been signed at the time of submitting an application and later during the institutional process. These documents and promises are from both Pakistan and India that both nuclear South Asian States will uphold the Shanghai Spirit, explained earlier. For such reasons, the membership of India and Pakistan in the organization will not lead to any conflict at this multilateral level.⁹³ SCO is acting as an organization helping two arch rival states from South Asia to build synergies through constant engagement in the organizational activities. Even if both are not willing to have a dialogue, SCO is the forum where both can converge on important regional issues.⁹⁴ A significant question arises whether the long-established rivalry between India and Pakistan will look for another venue in the SCO or will Pakistan and India be capable to act sophisticatedly and adopt the spirit of regionalism and regional integration of the SCO?⁹⁵ Before being accepted as a member of SCO, there was skepticism amongst the founding members that India and Pakistan would bring their regional or bilateral issues on the table. For both countries, this will be a bigger challenge to engage in a meaningful manner to various activities and initiatives by the SCO Frameworks including RATS, Afghan Contact Group, Military Exercises. Both countries are adjusting themselves in the engagements except few glitches here and there.⁹⁶ Another important opportunity for Pakistan is to build its soft image and develop people to people ties through the SCO

⁸⁹ This is reference to several press briefings and various high level visits from regional countries and international community issued statements on several occasions recognizing Pakistan's importance in the War on Terror and also its significant support. At the same time there are questions and concerns on the "double" role that has been played by Pakistan in the war on terror causing the US to ask for "do more".

⁹⁰ Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, Iram Khalid, "China's BRI: Regional Prospects and Implications" *Psychology and Education*, 2021 (58)1, 4229-42-35

⁹¹ Dawn. 2017. "It Is A Historic Day: Pakistan Becomes Full Member Of SCO At Astana Summit". *Dawn.Com*. Accessed November 3, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1338471>.

⁹² David Suter, 2015. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation A Chinese Practice Of International Law". *Papers.Ssrn.Com*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3125330, 75-130.

⁹³ Siddiqui, Sabena. 2018. "How Pakistan Joined The SCO". *China.Org.Cn*. Accessed November 1, 2020. http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2018-06/10/content_51829236.htm.

⁹⁴ Rakisits, Claude. 2015. "A Path To The Sea: China's Pakistan Plan". *Sage Publications, Inc.* 178 (3): 67-74. Accessed November 4, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24888117>.

⁹⁵ Colakoglu, Selcuk. 2016. "SCO After The Admission Of India And Pakistan". *www.Asianpacificcenter.Org*. Accessed November 3,

⁹⁶ "Ajit Doval walks out of SCO meet of NSAs over 'fictitious' Pak map that violates norms", *Hindustan Times*, Sep 16, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-walks-out-of-meeting-of-nas-of-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-states>

Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges: JRSP, Vol.58, No 2(April-June 2021)

forum and its various cultural, public diplomacy and people to people initiatives. This is also a forum where Pakistan can build its image through constant engagement with the public and private levels of the institutions in the member countries of SCO. Apart from that Pakistan can be a communication and interaction hub for the regional countries. With its own rich history and cultural background, Pakistan can connect with the member countries to stronger cultural and people to people contacts.

Conclusion:

The extension in SCO's membership does mark the growth and development at the regional level as the Organization has long been focused merely on the region of Central Asia. Inclusion of Pakistan and India has brought the Central Asia and South Asia link creating further opportunities and challenges for the organization. Pakistan couldn't make important economic relations with Central Asian Republics in more than 25 years due to several regional and national level compulsion including Afghanistan and Pakistan's longstanding inclination towards the west and the US. SCO's full membership does provide the chance to Pakistan to work collectively and maximize the options for opportunities including increase trade, amplification for security and stability in the region at bilateral and bilateral and multilateral levels. With CPEC completing its second phase of industrial and agriculture development at the national level creating a deep rooted relations with China, Russia is also bidding to move closer to Pakistan recently with its own incentives. Central Asian States are converging their interests with Pakistan especially in the economic and geostrategic gains. Thus, diverse opportunities coupled with Challenges are for Pakistan in the SCO. This unique position of Pakistan can strengthen the linkages between all stakeholders for trade and regional security integration in the region.