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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Promoting Regional Peace and Stability: Analyzing the Case of Indo-Pak Conflict

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Abstract *By looking at the institutional settings of SCO, it is believed that this organization has a huge potential to maximize cooperation and minimize conflicts among the member states. Founded under the leadership of Russia and China, SCO extended not only the opportunities and roadmaps for promoting bilateral trade and security collaborations of the mentioned countries but also helped promoted regional integration across Central and South Asian states. To further analyze the viability of this platform, this article seeks to evaluate the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from a 'security institution to a multilateral organization' perspective. It will further examine SCO's role in promoting regional peace and stability and finally elucidate how far the inclusion of new members like Pakistan and India can utilize the magnitude of SCO to mitigate their tensions.*

Key Words: Indo-Pak, Regionalism, Regional Peace, SCO, Shared Security, Stability

Introduction

Established in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization encompasses a huge territory of member states coming from Eurasia, Central, and South Asia. SCO has developed swiftly since its start to become a very major regional player, the relevance of which is extensively debated not only in academia but also on the international stage. Its four members viz. Pakistan, India, Russian and China are the nuclear powers, and two of them, namely China and Russia, are permanent members of

the UNSC (United Nations Security Council). SCO has eight member states in total including, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Republic of Tajikistan, the Republic of India, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan; it has four observer states; the Republic of Belarus, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of

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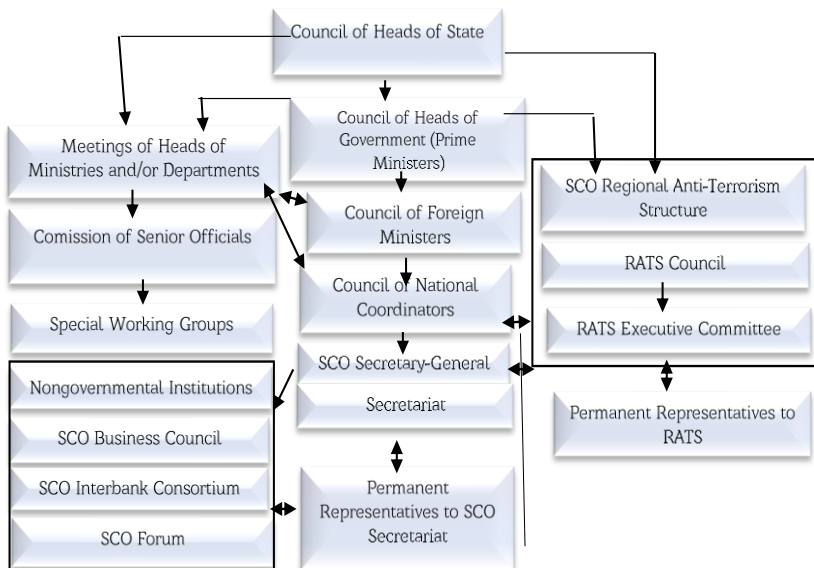
Afghanistan, and the Republic of Mongolia; and six dialogue partners, which include, the Republic of Turkey, the Republic of Armenia, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. Its member nations cover over 30 million 189 thousand square kilometres of area, accounting for three-fifths of the Eurasian continent, and have a population of 1.5 billion, representing a quarter of the population of the globe __[\(Ahmad, 2018\)](#). The SCO's charter was adopted in 2002 that outlines the key principles of the organization as "strengthening mutual trust, good neighbourliness, and friendship among member states; developing effective cooperation in political affairs, economy, trade, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transport and environmental protection; and working together to maintain regional peace, security and stability". In December 2004, the organization officially got observer's status at the United Nations General Assembly December 2004 __[\(Rehman M. I., 2016\)](#).

The SCO member nations maintain collaboration in the realms of politics, military, economics, energy, and culture. Significant economic cooperation requirements include energy, of which Uzbekistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Iran are major suppliers while China and India are major purchasers. The SCO's main players are Russia and China. SCO was founded as a security group that provided services ranging from border security to anti-terrorist operations. [\(Aghazade, 2015; Ahmad, 2018; Sayfiddinova, 2017\)](#) With shifting regional circumstances, SCO members regularly indicated for this

organisation that it is mainly intended for political and economic cooperation, with military coordination concentrating on internal security playing a small role. Since then, SCO has developed as a powerful organisation and a key player in the formation of new polycentric world order. Under Russia and China's leadership, the organisation failed to achieve meaningful advances in security and multilateral political, economic, and humanitarian cooperation among member nations. __[\(Williams, 2012\)](#).

This paper aims to investigate the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in promoting peace and stability in the region by using Regionalism as a theoretical frame of reference. By cautiously analyzing the already published literature on the subject matter, the authors have tried to explore the answers to the following questions 1. If regional alliances are considered lucrative in conflict resolution, then what role SCO can play in regional peace and stability and how constructive it can be for the whole region? 2. How the platform of SCO can be utilized to mitigate the longstanding Indo-Pak tensions? The paper argues that the newly developed SCO has gained prominence in the international arena in a short period. Given its efficacious experience of resolving border issues during the days of Shanghai five, SCO has the required aptitude to provide its member states with an exceptional platform for conflict resolution. Furthermore, after the addition of India and Pakistan, SCO can be of great significance in mitigating longstanding conflicts, including border issues between India and Pakistan.

Understanding the Organizational Mechanism of SCO



Source: Pradt T. (2020) Progress of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In: The Prequel to China's New Silk Road. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1708-9_5

The organizational mechanism of SCO mainly consists of two fragments, i.e. permanent organs and the meeting apparatus. The SCO's highest body is the Council of Heads of State. Regular sessions are held by the Council of Heads of State annually in the member states, following the Russian alphabetical order of the country's names. The hosted country for the following year of the session of the Council of Heads of State ensures the rotatory presidency (Sayfiddinova, 2017). The Heads of State Council (HSC) is the ultimate highest decision-making body in the SCO. Every once a year, they arrange meetings for taking decisions and setting directives on all crucial and necessary issues of SCO activity. The Heads of Government Council (HGC) also meets once a year to discuss a multilateral cooperation strategy, major directions within the Organization's framework, resolving some important and critical concerns

of cooperation not only in economic but also in other areas, and adapting the Organization's annual budget. Aside from HSC and HGC sessions, there are certain procedures for meetings at the level of Speakers of Parliament, Secretaries of Security Councils, Foreign Ministers, Ministers of Defense, Emergency Relief, Economy, and others. Transportation, Culture, Education, Healthcare, Heads of Law Enforcement Agencies, Supreme Courts and Courts of Arbitration, Prosecutors General (Hu, 2013).

SCO For Promoting Peace and Stability: A Regionalist Framework of Analysis

In the twentieth century, the global world order begun to experience a transition from unilateralism to multilateralism. Regionalism appeared as a prominent characteristic of the century. Regionalism means regionalist

organizations, regionalist systems, and regionalist doctrines. Regional organizations unequivocally emerged as active actors at the stage of international affairs (Rana, 1979). So far, looking at the changing dynamics of global politics, it is observed that Regionalism has proved to be one of the viable sources of state-building and intensified cooperation among states. Generally, regional institutions formation based on achieving the mutuality of interests of the members. Mostly, states are determined to have stable and peaceful relations with their neighbors (Simona, 2015). They're enhanced potential tapping whereas also expediting the solution of unyielding regional tribulations. The emerged concept of Regionalization has steadily evolved into a variety of structures through the emergence till now, including outstanding patterns of regional integration comprise the construction of global governing systems, more flexible models of collaboration across a range of fields that advance at varying rates and levels, and eventually culminate in the construction of a new mixed type model of partnership. (Langenhove, 2010). The main objectives and goals of such partnerships are mainly to demand the settlement of key regional challenges and the common desire for discussion of members, and the pursuit of mutually advantageous sustainable development for the whole area.

SCO is one such mechanism governing under the regionalist framework of analysis that promises regional integration and offers collective progress. "Insecurity terms, we can look forward to the peaceful and friendly new borders between China and Central Asia. This cooperation on attacking the three forces and transnational crimes became the key components of security cooperation" (Alimov, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role

and place in the development of Eurasia.", 2018).

In view of a regionalism perspective, the empirical aspects of SCO creation are explained with the fundamental concept that a hegemon includes weak (relatively) powers into an alliance for influence purposes (Gorodetsky, 2003); however, in reaction to the vicinity of hegemonic power, comparatively weaker nations have sought to embrace balancing mechanisms in regional frameworks (Allison, 2004). The collaboration of Central Asian Republics (CARs), Russia, China, and Pakistan ushered in a new era of regionalism in Central and South Asia, with China assuming a leadership role. The regionalist framework helps to comprehend Asian States' regional integration; it focuses on external elements impacting the policy of other States. It also shows that once a large power has joined regional integration, it will affect the process of influence and integration expansion. Furthermore, the process of integration drives other states to modify their response tactics and interactions (Rauf, 2019).

Under SCO, the cooperation between China and Russia confirms the notion that the presence of major powers is vital to regional integration in states that are eager to cooperate. Push and pull factors are dominant characteristics of the SCO, and, in spite of problems with the new Member States, all nearby nations have learnt to work in an integrated system, for example. Central Asia has been utilised by regional and global powers as a chasing ground for geopolitical influence (Huchet, 2010)

Role of SCO in Maximizing Mutual Interests and Minimizing Conflicts in the Region

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was founded being a multinational organisation to safeguard peace and stability throughout Eurasia, to combine

forces to fight growing problems and dangers, and to improve commercial, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation. The whole framework of the organisation is meant to promote multilateral coalitions in order to assist sovereign members in coordinative tactics and methodologies to resolving critical transnational issues and meeting regional requirements. It also enables member nations to concentrate their energies on common ambitions in accordance with the concepts of voluntary partnership and impartial dissemination of responsibilities_ (Alimove, n.d.).

Without compromising on its fundamental principles of fighting against three evils, i.e. extremism, terrorism and separatism, SCO has been practising a range of peace and stability initiatives. The cohabitation principles (Shared trust, shared benefit, inclusiveness, joint engagement, tolerance for cultural variety and the will to progress together (The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, n.d.)) surely reduce hostility and foster friendship amongst regional actors. The SCO also functions on a consensus framework that enables harmonisation of its policies by increasing its bilateral disputes between the Member States. It also gives a platform for conflicting parties to discuss their conflicting problems during side-by-side leadership sessions_ (Jaspal, 2013)

To make it a sustainable regional organisation, SCO strives to increase economic cooperation through multilateral commerce between the Member States. In 2005, the Interbank Association created as well as the Business Board in 2006. With the assistance of the members, the SCO Development Fund was established. By 2007, approximately 20 major transportation, energy and telecommunications projects were being launched by the SCO. Both bilateral and multilateral trade volumes are certain to rise and generate powerful commercial

lobbies, tying wealth and progress to regional stability in both nations (Jaspal, 2013).

Cooperation in the energy sector is another important area of interest for the SCO, given that the organisation includes vital energy exporters such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Iran, besides substantial energy importers such as China and India. Accords in the energy industry are often done on a bilateral or multilateral basis, but the benefit of SCO is that it serves as a convenient venue for negotiating energy deals. _ (Cooley, 2012). On the energy front, the SCO's oil reserves, including those of its observer state Iran, account for around 20% of the world's. Since these nations are not affiliates of OPEC, western oil corporations see the region's oil riches, particularly in Central Asia, as a very appealing place for investment and collaboration. The gas situation is significantly more critical. According to a Russian official source, the combined gas reserves of Russia, Central Asia (including Turkmenistan, which is not yet a member of the SCO), and Iran surpass 50% of the world's known reserves (Christensen, 2015).

Arms control arrangements contribute favourably to regional strategic stability in the strategic domain. Since the weapons have an integrated potential to unleash a defensive and offensive military race, SCO objected to the development and deployment of missile defence systems. The race of armaments is causing transitional power, leading to strategic instability in the area.

Cohesiveness and compactness are essential for any regional organisation to function effectively. The SCO's efficacy is hampered by members' divergent opinions on security and economic development concerns, particularly between Russia and China. Even on a critical topic such as the events in Afghanistan and their effects on regional peace and

security, members are unable to reach a consensus on a cohesive viewpoint within the scope of the SCO agenda. As a result, the SCO lacks a united policy for Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), it should be recalled, was a Chinese effort launched in 1996 to institutionalise the goodwill and friendship that arose as a result of the signing of two major border resolution agreements. Russia initially agreed with the decision. Initially, Russia agreed to the decision since it was in everyone's best interests to stabilise the border and the situation in Central Asia. As a result, 15 years later, perspectives began to diverge, and it is difficult to bridge the gap for a variety of reasons. [_\(Kundu, 2017\)](#).

Undeniably, no regional organisation can ever entirely address long-standing conflicts between hostile neighbours or replace bilateral connections that countries currently rely on. "Not even the most accomplished of regional organisations, the EU, has superseded state-to-state relations or completely aligned central and western European nations' economic and security priorities. Thus, while the SCO might be able to do more to mitigate conflicts between members, its stated policy of noninterference suggests that it will use mostly diplomatic methods to influence actions within the group" Julie Boland pointed [_\(Boland, 2011\)](#). SCO's diplomatic approaches certainly have good consequences in reducing warring parties' tension (Jaspal, 2013).

SCO and China's Strategy Towards the Region

The 18th SCO Summit established the groundwork and agenda for constructing a New World Order based on China's economic and political influence, CPEC and BRI, as well as immense natural riches in the SCO area. Improving Pakistan-India and Pakistan-Afghanistan ties is also critical for a variety of reasons.

Pakistan must have excellent ties with Afghanistan and India if it is to become an energy corridor. India cannot expand its commerce to Central Asia without a friendly Pakistan, and Afghanistan cannot become a stable and sustainable state until both Pakistan and India have a strong working relationship. Bad ties have an influence not just on them but also on the SCO's ability to expand outside the Central Asian area. According to one astute Pakistani watcher of regional and global affairs, "there is no likelihood of militaristic NATO vs SCO combat lines in the region." But there will be rivalry and struggle for energy sources and pipelines that transport it. This raises the importance of Pakistan, a recognised US non-NATO partner, making sound judgments. [\(Indeo, 2013\)](#).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is unquestionably a massive venture that will have a huge impact on Eurasia. Its timing is extremely important in terms of economics. With the global economy still struggling to recover from the effects of the Great Recession, projects like the BRI can help to revive local economies. Furthermore, the BRI represents a game-changer for China, both in terms of civilisation and foreign policy orientations. The numerous infrastructure projects and routes link China to the rest of the world. China has become the major commercial partner for several Asian countries, therefore integrating regional economies and beyond. The BRI has enormous potential. The BRI has enormous potential to further grow Chinese goods and services across continents [_\(Chandran, 2017\)](#).

The Chinese government is deeply dedicated to long-term Afghan stability as it strives to enhance economic connectivity within the Asian continent to promote growth and stability, particularly in Xinjiang. China sees the region's deteriorating security situation as one of the most serious possible risks to its BRI objectives.

According to discussions with Chinese researchers, while there is universal agreement on the necessity of stability in Afghanistan to the execution of Beijing's objectives, a peaceful Afghanistan is extremely important for the peace and security of neighbouring countries too. Afghan President Ghani has made multiple vows to beef up security around the Mes Aynak installations, and he has continued to urge the Chinese government and business sector to consider boosting their investments in Afghanistan's natural resources. [\(Zimmerman, 2015\)](#).

Role of SCO in Mitigating Indo-Pak Tensions

As major South Asian countries, Pakistan and India face several obstacles as a result of their strained bilateral relations. As a result, terrorism, territorial conflicts, cross-border clashes, human rights violations, socio-political discord, and instability plague the South Asian area. Because of the deep-seated antagonism between the two nations, the cumulative human cost of military conflict has become rather high over the years [\(Paul, 2006\)](#). After the subcontinent's partition, disruptions in Indo-Pak affairs have ruled the regional and national political settings. The primary causes for deteriorating bilateral ties are, first the conflicting philosophies of the majority populations in both nations, and secondly, the split of the subcontinent against the wishes of the Hindu people generated political and religious conflict between two newly constituted republics. Lastly, the unresolved territorial issue in Kashmir is the most essential and basic source of friction concerning the two nations.

The region is experiencing ramifications in the form of uncertainty and underdevelopment as a result of the aforementioned ongoing and extended hostilities between the two nations. Regional

organisations have the potential to foster regional peace, but they have so far been incapable of resolving regional challenges. The key explanation might be that for key decisions and policies to be executed publicly; there must be a balance of ties and authority among member nations in a regional alliance. As an economical, militarily and internationally influential powerhouse, India stands as a staunch ruler amongst SAARC countries hence, quite evident in SAARC policies too. On the other hand, other less developed South Asian states are hesitant to collaborate with India, believing that doing so may end in acknowledging Indian supremacy. [\(Muni, 1996\)](#).

Given the current power dynamics of the South Asian region and, most importantly, after the death of SAARC, the region required a balanced structure that can assist the region in resolving their conflicts amicably and leading them towards peace and stability. In this perspective, SCO can be considered as the rescuer, led by two emerging global powers, Russia and China; SCO provides an exceptional platform and institutional structure that can be extremely beneficial for the settlement of the conflicts in the region. Moreover, both Russia and China are in favour of resolving tensions between India and Pakistan for regional peace and stability. It has been seen in the recent past that whenever things got strained between India and Pakistan, China and Russia have always supported and played their part in easing the tensions between the two.

On June 8-9, 2017, India and Pakistan were given full membership in the SCO during a remarkable meeting of the Presidents of the SCO state council in Astana. Both have taken ten years to get from observer status to full membership. According to a Xinhua news agency commentary, "with the accession of India and Pakistan - the former being the world's ninth-largest economy, while

the latter sits on the crossroads of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the proposed 21st century Maritime Silk Road trade and infrastructure network – the SCO could play a more substantive role.”_(Khalid, 2018)

The inclusion of Pakistan as a full member provides the SCO with a link and route to South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Pakistan has recalibrated its foreign policy to a development policy to become more relevant to the SCO and the New World Order. Pakistan enjoys an important geostrategic location. It has been blessed with enormous natural resources and very hard-working people. By joining SCO, Pakistan could contribute to peaceful relations with neighbours as well as peace, security, stability, and development of the SCO region. Simultaneously, Pakistan must sync its engagement with the SCO with its internal reforms. Pakistan's inclusion in the SCO has dispelled the perception that Pakistan is isolated internationally in the wake of horrendous terrorist attacks in the last one and a half-decade. Pakistan can share with the SCO member states its experiences in combatting terrorism and extremism (Bindra, 2017).

SCO frameworks may be utilised at different levels to discuss bilateral concerns between the two competitors. Meetings on the margins of official events are an excellent method. Because the Shanghai Five's main goal was to reach an equitable settlement of the disputed line, the group has vast expertise in resolving boundary disputes. With the cooperation of other SCO members, the SCO may play a positive part in resolving border disputes between Pakistan and India via multiple outlets, including increasing communication forums, track 1, track 1.5, and track two diplomacy. (Tikhonova, 2017). Albeit the long-standing and deep-rooted Kashmir issue, which requires both parties' willingness to solve the problem as per Kashmiri people's wish and

ignoring the self-assumed attitudes on both sides for long-term peace, efforts would be further supported by RATS and the other bilateral and multilateral channels for both countries to collaborate. There is no doubt that, if resolved properly, The Kashmir issue may generate a lasting peaceful environment in the area since it is the major subject of hostilities and tense relations between Pakistan and India. The Kashmir problem is a major problem for both nations.

Several additional promising innovations are in the works. Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have struck an agreement on Central Asian governments' power exports to meet Pakistan's current needs. Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, has also indicated an interest in the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline, declaring that Gazprom is ready to join in the project. Furthermore, Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan have decided Bus service debut that would not only boost commerce but additionally serve as a significant instrument for promoting people-to-people relations among the four nations. _(Siddiqa, 2016). Together with the Gwadar project, these positive developments make Pakistan a vital connection for SCO member states, and it should be regarded as an attractive candidate for membership. Although the Gwadar port was developed largely for commercial and commercial objectives, its geostrategic importance cannot be overstated, particularly when seen through the lens of any future geopolitical confrontation in the Indian Ocean. _(Hussain, 2016).

With the addition of India and Pakistan, the SCO is likely to become more significant for regional peace and a beneficial venue for collaboration. Currently, it's difficult to predict that how the addition of Pakistan and India can instantly transform the organisation into a more active and cooperative platform, but there is wide optimism

exist among the scholars that this organisation will play a constructive role in bridging the gaps between conflicting parties of the region especially India and Pakistan will come closer via SCO. Xi noted that "SCO members have created a new model of international relations partnership instead of alliance." An enlargement of the SCO will be a good move in light of Xi's expanding BRI goal for improved connectivity throughout continental and maritime Asia. [\(Zahid Shahab Ahmed, 2019\)](#).

Conclusion

The SCO has established itself as a significant regional organisation. China, along with its SCO partners, is committed to constructing a New World Order encompassing a multi-polar world. The task of both China and Russia in the SCO framework has proved a significant result not only for the member states but the region and beyond. However, the BRI, of which CPEC is an integral part, is a manifestation of changing global political understanding of South Asia in general Pakistan China relations in particular. The political clout and economic rise of China are going to serve as an anchor of global peace, global development, international justice, prosperity, stability, win-win cooperation, and economic growth in the SCO area and beyond.

Given its effectiveness in settling border disputes, and establishing trust amid the key member nations, including China, Russia, and the CARs, despite their differences, the SCO can play a significant and constructive part in mitigating tensions between Pakistan and India. The methodology of the organisation, as well as its clear operationalization, permitted dispute resolution, multichannel collaboration, and mutual strengthening among its member states. The SCO may be the ideal venue for bringing Pakistan and India ties towards normalisation and conflict resolution since it can create an atmosphere of effective multi-track diplomacy and regional consenses. Cooperation and reciprocal participation at different SCO meetings and well-organized apparatuses relating to confidence-building, economics, security and culture can stimulate the process and provide a suitable climate for conversation and conflict transformation between the two nations. Therefore, it is hard to imagine building global and regional security architecture without SCO. SCO provides a comprehensive infrastructure that may produce remarkable results for the whole area. It is now up to the member nations to choose how they would utilise this platform effectively and fully to bring peace and stability to the region.

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