

The Bilateral Engagement of India and Pakistan at Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects and Challenges

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*Sarwat Rauf¹ & Maira Tariq²

Abstract

This article examines the complex relationship of Pakistan and India in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It points out cooperation pathways through steady advances in economic and security sectors. New Delhi and Islamabad have entered a puzzling state of affairs where both work for regional cooperation with serious bilateral frictions. In this context, the emphasis lies in highlighting the SCO as a favored platform for mitigating the rift between India and Pakistan, following thorough assessments of various alternatives. The argument is developed on the conjecture that establishing cooperation between rival states sometimes seems impossible, yet governments could enter into cooperative relations and collaborate through institutions. The central research question revolves around understanding how the SCO alleviates tensions between Pakistan and India. It is discerned that the SCO's gradual advances toward regional integration hold the potential to facilitate collaboration among member states. The study further examines various instances wherein India assumes responsible roles within the SCO, agreeing to take concerted actions for regional security and stability alongside other partners, including Pakistan.

Keywords

India, Pakistan, Central Asia, SCO, Cooperation

Introduction

This article aims to study the signs of reduced tension between Pakistan and India after their full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The primary

¹*Corresponding Author: *Sarwat Rauf* is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.
E-mail: srauf@numl.edu.pk

²*Maira Tariq* is an M.Phil. Scholar in International Relations at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.

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purpose of forming SCO was to enhance regional security and foster economic stability. The essence of the SCO is rooted in the Shanghai Five, founded in 1996 to promote cooperation and understanding among its member countries (Fredholm, 2013).

Primarily, China sought to alleviate tensions with newly independent neighboring countries, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia, aspiring to cultivate amicable borders with all. After the inclusion of Uzbekistan in the grouping in 2001 (Jaffer, 2016), the organization sought to deepen the military trust by reducing the military forces on the borders to maintain the mutual trust between the five (member) states and to prevent security threats (Aris, 2013). Subsequently, it was expected by member states that SCO would act as a valuable platform for engaging the hostile states of Central and South Asia.

It has been argued that the rivalry between Pakistan and India challenges the SCO. Some scholars note an escalation in the region's stability predicament due to unpleasant incidents in 2018 and 2019, such as the Pulwama attack intensifying conflict on the Line of Control (LoC). Moreover, Pakistani concerns voiced at the SCO regarding Indian actions in Kashmir, including the revocation of *Articles 370 and 35A* and the enactment of the controversial Citizenship Act, have further exacerbated the situation (Adil, 2023; Varma, 2017). The rift extends beyond India and Pakistan as a group of Muslim countries within SCO faces a sectarian schism (Khan, 2008). Consequently, some intellectuals and practitioners foresee an inevitable clash of interests among states within the SCO.

However, there is a lack of scholarly work on de-escalating tension among SCO members. Most scholars have predominantly focused on depicting the SCO as an anti-West organization (Bryant, 2013) or a military alliance prepared against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). There has always been a traditional viewpoint presented about Pakistan and India that their perennial conflict cannot be resolved by any means. However, this article takes a novel approach by examining the role of SCO in de-escalating tensions between the two nations. Although SCO has not facilitated military disengagement between India and Pakistan, it has significantly managed friction between the two states. As the SCO evolves into a dialogue-oriented cooperative forum, its success in de-escalating tensions among Central Asian states suggests the possibility of a similar outcome for the South Asian states.

Many scholars have already accepted that states doing business with each other have a diminished likelihood of conflict. Shaheen Rafi Khan and his associates argued that improved economic and political relations in an interdependent marketplace could advance peace-building efforts between states (Khan et al., 2009). Therefore, the SCO, exemplifying economic interdependence, not only serves to prevent conflicts between member states but also safeguards the economic interests of nations, including India and Pakistan, through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

After a prolonged wait, a recent publication has surfaced, asserting the SCO's role in de-escalating tensions among its members. MacHaffie (2023), in this work, delves into the SCO's potential for conflict de-escalation and trust-building among its rival members. However, it is worth noting that the author primarily emphasized the mutual tensions among Central Asian states.

Certain scholars maintained that the India-Pakistan rivalry would have limited detrimental effects on the SCO. Their argument is rooted in the leadership of Russia and China within the SCO, both committed to rooting out the Western world order in the region (Ahmed et al., 2019). Consequently, the SCO provides avenues for

collaboration in the realm of security, potentially yielding a positive impact on Indo-Pak relations. Rehman and Faisal (2015) anticipate resolving the conflict between India and Pakistan through a multilateral forum, heralding a new era of security and economic cooperation in South Asia.

Several studies have undertaken a comparative analysis of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the SCO. The primary cause attributed to the failure of SAARC is the inherent distrust between India and Pakistan. This distrust has made it challenging for states to place confidence in any regional organization that claims to foster stability and cooperation between the two countries. The SAARC charter repeatedly used the terms 'peace,' 'non-interference,' 'territorial integrity,' and 'non-use of force' (Mitra, 2014) but could not bring states on the converging points for mutual understanding. This has led scholars to view regional organizations skeptically regarding reducing the rivalry between India and Pakistan. In contrast, the case of the SCO is distinct, primarily due to the involvement of China. The presence of China introduces a dynamic that sets the SCO apart from the SAARC. However, it is essential to note that success for the SCO requires diplomatic acumen in handling the deeply rooted mistrust between member states, as highlighted by Singh and Singh (2021).

In this diverse background, this article endeavors to find the functional role of the SCO in fostering collaboration between the two rival states through potential areas of cooperation. Much of the existing literature has overlooked the various dimensions of rivalries within the SCO, with limited scholarly attention devoted to understanding how the organization manages interactions between Pakistan and India. The central inquiry revolves around how the SCO reduces mutual tension between Pakistan and India.

To ensure an objective analysis, this research employs an interpretive approach, interpreting qualitative data through the development of conceptual categories. Most data was sourced from various textual materials, including books, articles, newspapers, and official websites. Thorough scrutiny of speeches by key politicians from Pakistan and India provided insights into the evolving dynamics within the SCO. To comprehend the states' intentions, we relied on local sources with notable references, including Dawn newspaper and the Journal of Central Asia and Regional Studies in Pakistan. Similarly, significant Indian sources, such as the 'Institute of Chinese Studies-Delhi' and 'The New Indian Express,' were consulted. Independent sources like 'The Astana Times,' 'Al Jazeera,' and the 'Council on Foreign Relations' were also referenced for diverse perspectives. Furthermore, official websites, including the Ministry of External Affairs: Government of India and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, were consulted to facilitate an impartial and objective analysis.

This article is structured into three sections. The initial section delineates the perspective of institutional liberalism, examining the inclination of states towards cooperation. The second section highlights the paradoxical situation arising after including India and Pakistan in the SCO. Lastly, the third section elaborates on the potential for diminished hostility between India and Pakistan, exploring avenues of collaboration in the security and economic domains facilitated by the SCO.

Conceptual Framework

Cooperating can bring returns for India and Pakistan, primarily through trade and investment. In this regard, institutional arrangements appear to be the most appropriate

approach for states' cooperation and the economy's betterment. Not much has been studied about this in the case of India and Pakistan. The SCO has pioneered a novel approach to multilateral cooperation, effectively addressing the fundamental interests of its members. With over two decades of practical implementation, the SCO has introduced a cooperative path that aligns with the contemporary trend and meets the region's actual needs.

Institutional liberalism (as a school of thought) suggests that shifting from a chaotic to a peaceful world is possible. International institutes enhance the cooperation among states by providing them with opportunities to negotiate. Robert Keohane emphasized that organizations mediate between states to uphold trust and lessen their differences. In this context, SCO appears as a platform providing continuity and stability. Moreover, the organization also impacts members' and observers' behavior in formulating policies and agreements. Organizations usually observe the security competition between rival states to foster cooperation for stability. International organizations share security information with countries to reduce potential threats (Keohane, 2012). Additionally, increasing economic interdependence poses challenges for participants as well. Unlike conventional hostilities, states now compete for economic benefits, prioritizing the growth and prosperity of their respective nations. Keohane contends that cooperation is inevitable when states share mutual interests (Keohane, 1984). Consequently, business collaborations involving groups of different states necessitate cooperation between business lobbies and states. The increasing collaboration and mutual trust among states can enhance human values, fostering policy coordination and confidence among governments, ultimately benefiting the pursuit of common interests.

The abovementioned canon is needed in a region prone to separatism and extremism to mitigate inter-state mistrust. Unlike many other organizations, the SCO operates with a degree of secrecy but has proven effective in promoting the economic development and assistance of the region. The SCO may seem like a complex assembly of nations with conflicting views on various issues, but its members come together to boost trade and enhance security. There is a growing trend of innovative cooperation among distant partners; for instance, Kazakhstan is increasing collaboration with India in the mining industry while simultaneously engaging in light industry partnerships with Pakistan (Assaniyaz, 2022). In general, members provide potential assistance to weaker members, such as the collective support for Afghanistan. In light of this, most recently, in the SCO summit held on September 15-16, 2022, Uzbekistan proposed launching an assistance fund for Afghanistan to support its upliftment and development (Imamove, 2022).

Despite the friction between states, the organizational potential is sufficient to enhance the likelihood of cooperation by acknowledging common interests. In this vein, India has assumed a more responsible role after taking up the rotating position as the head of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), where it actively seeks collaboration with partner states.

The prospect of improved relations between India and Pakistan is also plausible through joint military exercises in which both states participate, fostering mutual trust. The SCO encourages cooperation by assigning distinct roles; for example, India's presidency of the SCO for 2023 highlights its proactive role. This is further underscored by the speech of the Indian Prime Minister, where he signals the potential for increased economic activities in South and Central Asia ("India assumes Presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," 2022). Hence, cooperation driven by

economic interests will become imperative for SCO members, achievable through strengthening mutual trust. Thus, the rivalry conundrum finds a solution within the SCO framework, where a shift in perceptions is attainable through frequent interactions.

Emerging Regional Scenarios

Upon becoming permanent members of the SCO, Pakistan and India have entered a new epoch in history, inaugurating a fresh phase of regionalism. Through this, India and Pakistan, along with Central Asian states, are to get access to new markets, cultures, increased capital flow, and new skills. Regional cooperation serves as an apparatus, highlighting the importance of individual states, with each member being a building block of regional-level integration. The evolving regional dynamics in South and Central Asia have paved the way for collaborative actions in economic activities and countermeasures against rising extremists.

Pakistan and India hold central importance in the South Asian region due to their possession of nuclear weapons. Therefore, their inclusion in the SCO reflects the compelling influence of the organization. This inclusion compels their leaders to convene to discuss regional issues and establish a connection between South and Central Asia. Additionally, it introduces a new line of thinking for collaborative efforts to remedy the Afghanistan situation. In a geographical sense, Afghanistan serves as a bridge connecting two regions, namely Central Asia and South Asia. The turbulence within the country also has implications for the states in its vicinity.

In 2021, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan created a power vacuum that not only stirred unrest within Afghanistan but also had repercussions for neighboring states. The current turbulence is of paramount concern to both China and Russia. Beijing has made substantial investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure, while Russia is particularly alarmed by the presence of Daesh (ISIS) in Afghanistan (Rab & Zhilong, 2018). The success of China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Russian-led economic integration projects hinges on mitigating security problems in Afghanistan (Piekos & Elizabeth, 2015). Stakeholders are actively seeking solutions to address the security situation in Afghanistan, particularly in South and Central Asia. To this end, an institutional approach has been adopted again, with member countries intensifying collaborative efforts for security. The members of the SCO have embraced the 'Program of Terrorism, Extremism, and Separatism for 2019-2021,' assigning a pivotal role to the RATS of the SCO in addressing security threats through the exchange of information — a testament to mutual collaboration, irrespective of the severity of their bilateral issues.

Indeed, India's influence in regional affairs has grown as it undertakes new roles assigned by the organization. Reflecting on the past objectives and goals of the SCO, the members established the 'SCO Development Strategy until 2025,' encompassing areas such as politics, security, and economics. This indicates that Pakistan and India discuss various regional and international issues, Afghanistan's unstable political environment, economic development, countering security risks, and other cooperative areas like tourism, sports, culture, and trade. What remains are their bilateral issues, to be resolved amicably, which fall outside the jurisdiction of the organization. However, the working mechanism of the SCO is convincing both India and Pakistan to move in the same direction. The SCO provides a platform for its members to engage in repetitive routines, forming the foundation for steady trust-

building (MacHaffie, 2023). In this context, considerable room is available for economic and trade cooperation between India and Pakistan.

With India's position gaining influence, especially after the dramatic return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and securing the role of chair in the SCO, it has been closely monitoring regional security issues. India assumed the chairmanship of RATS in October 2021 and has since shown interest in establishing regional peace. However, it has not extended any conciliation offer to Pakistan, signaling a halt in making meaningful progress on the SCO's cooperation and regional integration agenda.

Nevertheless, its reiterated commitment to collaborate for regional peace and frequent official meetings with Pakistani representatives under the SCO has a discreet role in reducing tension. Similarly, there was a divide between Pakistan and India over their interaction with the Afghan Taliban. Now, the SCO has taken the lead in negotiating with the current government in Kabul and establishing working links with the locals of Afghanistan. The balancing act has become one of the discernible qualities of the SCO, which both India and Pakistan are observing.

Similar to India and Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) also rely on the SCO for their security, especially with the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan impacting their security structure. In this scenario, collaboration between Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and India becomes crucial for sharing intelligence. Moreover, Pakistan has extended its sea route to Central Asian states and Afghanistan, earning it the status of a bridge in South Asia. While India has expressed displeasure over the Chinese-led BRI and the CPEC, Pakistan remains composed, recognizing this as more of a concern for China. The SCO is establishing a Sino-centric order in South and Central Asia, where Islamabad and New Delhi, among others, are involved. Under the auspices of the SCO, both Pakistan and India have expressed their views on regional problems, mutual security threats, and eagerness to work for economic advancement (Kaushik & Rajesh, 2023).

The Influence of SCO on Pakistan and India

There are two opinions regarding the extension of the SCO, namely optimistic and pessimistic (Kupriyanov, 2020). The optimistic viewpoint suggests that including these two states in the SCO aims to resolve the ongoing contention between the two South Asian countries and address regional security lapses. This perspective argues that without the involvement of Islamabad and New Delhi, other members, particularly China and Russia, would struggle to maintain stability in Eurasia. On the other hand, the pessimistic perspective envisions this inclusion as detrimental to the organization's image, potentially hindering its advancement. It has been nearly six years since India and Pakistan became full members of the SCO, and relations between the two have been deteriorating with each passing day. Despite these challenges, the organization continues to thrive, rejecting both pessimistic and optimistic propositions.

Unequivocally, relations between India and Pakistan have been strained since their independence. Nevertheless, Islamabad and New Delhi's accession to the SCO expanded the geographical influence of the organization and strengthened its economic base. However, their accord also resulted in contradictory approaches to global issues (Raghavan, 2022). The admission of Pakistan and India to the SCO has led them on a peculiar path of association where, despite being bilateral antagonists, they are bound to work together for regional stability. The intensity of the conflict has fluctuated with different courses of action, leading Islamabad to decrease diplomatic connections with

New Delhi in 2019, particularly in response to the Indian government's revocation of the autonomous status of Indian-Held Jammu and Kashmir (IHJ&K).

Nevertheless, India is also obligated to work under the set rules of SCO. A former Indian diplomat, P.S Raghavan, maintains that "SCO facilitates India-Central Asia interactions and enhances opportunities for monitoring the internal and external influences there, promoting economic connections and deterring hostile activities against Indian interests" (Raghavan, 2022, para. 12). However, for some, it is perplexing that New Delhi would operate on terms set by Beijing. For this reason, the engagement between India and Pakistan at the SCO summit on September 15-16, 2022, followed by a virtual interaction in 2023, has garnered global attention — especially in the aftermath of a series of clashes between the two. The dialogue that seemed to have halted is now being renewed, as they are obliged to cooperate on specific terms within the SCO despite not engaging in bilateral discussions.

The SCO establishes rules for its members to share intelligence with RATS to address security-related issues. Bilaterally, India and Pakistan accuse each other of involvement in Kashmir and Baluchistan (Siddiqi, 2018), making cooperation challenging. Given that the forces of India and Pakistan are engaged in strikes on the Line of Control (LOC) against each other, effective intelligence sharing becomes difficult (Haidari, 2019). Nevertheless, their intelligence agencies must share data, potentially reducing discontent between the two South Asian giants. Hence, the SCO has positively engaged the two rival states, fostering discreet trust.

The Areas of Cooperation

Since its inception, the SCO has been key in fostering collaboration for regional stability. It has actively promoted practical cooperation across various fields, including military, economic, and political domains, among its member states, as explained in the forthcoming section. Currently, the SCO is expanding its areas of cooperation to multi-level and multi-field dimensions. The organization prioritizes addressing boundary issues and consolidating political mutual trust and good neighborliness among its member states (Hao, 2021). The SCO's objectives bear some resemblance to the U.S. war against terrorism, as its unambiguous and compelling goal has facilitated trust and cooperation among states, uniting them against the common challenges of extremism, terrorism, and separatism. Through its agenda, the SCO maintains strong links between countries, fostering a collaborative spirit as a relatively comfortable means to achieve shared goals.

Military Cooperation

To combat extremism, separatism, and terrorism in the region, military cooperation and intelligence sharing are deemed mandatory, for which both India and Pakistan align themselves with the agenda of the SCO. The organization orchestrates joint military exercises with its member countries to enhance mutual trust. Prior to the admission of India and Pakistan, the SCO had a history of conducting several Peace Mission operations in 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2010, aiming to reduce terrorist threats in the Central and South Asian regions (Hashmi, 2015). Interestingly, participation in the military exercises organized by the SCO at different times is mandatory for all member countries to promote mutual trust and maintain a congenial environment. Notably, the anti-terrorist military exercises held in 2018 marked the first joint participation of Pakistan and India ("Indian, Pakistani Troops," 2018). Subsequently, in 2021, another 'Peace Mission' was scheduled in Russia (Xinhua, 2021), with active participation from

all member states. The frequent interactions between the two rival states under the provided security platform demonstrate the success of the SCO.M

Similarly, the RATS of the SCO, established in 2004, monitors cross-border illegal and terrorist activities among its member states. Amidst all the challenges, terrorism has emerged as the most significant phenomenon that cannot be effectively addressed without the cooperation of countries (Azhar & Muhammad, 2018).

RATS-SCO examines all the terrorist information shared by the member states to control illegal activities. During India's chairmanship of RATS in the year 2021-2022, it hosted a meeting on Afghanistan in November 2021 that was attended by Pakistan ("India hosts SCO-RATS meet," 2022). However, their intelligence data sharing reports were made public to address their regional security problems. Some reports emerged from the 22nd meeting of the Council of Heads at Samarkand in 2022, indicating that all SCO countries agreed to prepare a consolidated list of terrorist entities in their respective countries (Haidar, 2022). These instances testify that the SCO's provided security framework is functioning for regional security and connecting states, regardless of their existing tensions.

Economic Cooperation

Economic cooperation is the key to fostering peaceful relations between states, as their economic interests influence their foreign policy behaviors. Liberal institutionalism emphasizes the potential for cooperation between states, where mutual trust becomes indispensable due to their commercial ties. This framework envisions the future of India-Pakistan relations and suggests that the reduction of hostility is likely through increased economic dependence. New Delhi and Islamabad aim to secure energy resources from the nearest region, namely Central Asia, which is rich in various natural resources. Moreover, India's industries are seeking cost-effective resources, and Pakistan's economic growth hinges on access to energy resources. Hence, common interests strongly influence their foreign policy behaviors and bind them together.

In this context, the CPEC emerges as a potential avenue for economic development, benefitting Pakistan and offering opportunities for Central Asian countries seeking open markets. However, India has expressed reservations about joining CPEC, citing concerns that the project passes through disputed territory in Kashmir. This reflects India's apprehensions about a growing partnership between Pakistan and China in the region. Despite these concerns, the trade interdependence between India and China, valued at 70 billion US dollars, indicates a pragmatic approach to cooperation ("India PM Narendra Modi to Visit China," 2015).

Moreover, in 2015, the Indian Prime Minister's visit to China, shortly after the announcement of CPEC, resulted in the signing of agreements encompassing infrastructure development such as railways and roads, scientific research and development, and education ("India and China Sign Deals," 2015). This highlights the nuanced dynamics where India, while hesitant about specific regional integration projects led by China, actively engages in trade deals and infrastructure collaborations with its Asian neighbor.

Indeed, India's upcoming role as the rotating chair of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could significantly shape its perspective on the CPEC. As the chair, India will have a heightened responsibility within the SCO, providing a platform to engage with regional issues and foster collaboration among member states. This leadership position might encourage India to adopt a more nuanced and cooperative approach, considering the economic and strategic implications of

projects like CPEC within the broader regional context. With its focus on promoting stability and cooperation, the SCO may serve as a forum for India to address concerns, find common ground, and explore constructive engagement with China and Pakistan on matters of shared interest and mutual benefit.

Additionally, the Business Council of the SCO plays a crucial role in advancing the organization's development strategy for 2025, focusing on supporting businesses and facilitating trade. Between 2017 and 2021, the SCO's Business Council expanded its activities to enhance cooperation, regional trade, and investments among member states. Notably, foreign trade within the SCO has experienced consistent growth, reaching a volume of 6.6 trillion US dollars in 2021, marking a significant increase compared to the levels over twenty years ago (Hao, 2021). This steady rise in foreign trade is poised to bolster the implementation of economic projects for practical development among member countries and pave the way for establishing new agreements.

Regional Integration

Regional integration has become an integral component of the foreign policy for Central and South Asian states in the 21st century due to their geographical proximity to China and the escalating complexity of geo-economic issues. Chinese leaders reiterated this emphasis on regional integration and cooperation during the meeting of the Council of Heads of States (CHS) of the SCO held in 2022 ("Ride on the Trend of the Times," 2022). The two regions share a common history, ideology, culture, and security, establishing strong links between them (Azhar & Muhammad, 2018). The SCO members actively pursue the promotion of regional integration projects bilaterally and directly through the organization's platform. For instance, economic exchanges among SCO members exhibited remarkable resilience during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic ("Expanding SCO can boost regional integration," 2021) when the international economy was experiencing a downturn.

The SCO actively promotes the BRI and other regional connectivity projects, including initiating a rail link between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan. The BRI injects new momentum into infrastructure development, people-to-people connections, road and rail construction, and trade exchanges. There are plans for the Trans-Afghan railway line to run from Termiz in Uzbekistan to Mazar-e Sharif, Kabul, and Jalalabad and eventually cross the border to Peshawar in Pakistan ("Afghanistan and Uzbekistan draw roadmap," 2022).

Given India's bilateral interactions with Central Asian states, it cannot overlook Pakistan's engagements with these nations. Additionally, implementing other energy projects such as the South Asia and Central Asia (CASA 1000) and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) adds to the regional collaboration. Moreover, there are potential areas for Pakistan and India to initiate new economic projects at the regional level.

The fundamental concept behind establishing the SCO was to foster collaboration among member states, reshape their approach to security challenges, and promote economic and political cooperation. This objective is substantiated by the substantial increase in investments among SCO members. The expansion of the organization further attests to its growth and popularity. The proceedings of specific meetings of the Council of Heads of States (CHS) of the SCO in 2022 garnered widespread attention, as the new agenda of the SCO includes enhancing the well-being

of its people and maintaining the connectivity of member states to world markets (Dadabaev, 2022).

Indeed, the SCO offers opportunities for India and Pakistan to engage with Central Asian states and extend their influence in the region. Given India's lack of direct geographical access to Central Asia, Chinese initiatives in regional connectivity provide India with a means to connect with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). India has also been emphasizing regional connectivity, aligning somewhat with Chinese ideals.

Evolving Complexities

It is clear that India and Pakistan have struggled to maintain positive relations, and the intensity of their interactions often hinges on geopolitical issues. The longstanding dispute over Kashmir, dating back to their independence, has been a persistent source of tension. Despite signing 44 peace agreements to thaw their frosty relationship, progress has been minimal. The situation escalated further when both countries joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2017.

In less than two years of becoming a permanent member of the SCO, India made a significant move by revoking *Article 370* of its constitution, effectively dividing Jammu and Kashmir into two separate regions. This decision sparked a vehement response from Pakistan, exacerbating hostilities (Shah & Shah, 2020). Adding fuel to the fire, India imposed a lockdown in Jammu and Kashmir and deployed military forces in the region (Zia, 2021). This move has raised concerns that the actions of the BJP-led Indian government are not only threatening the well-being of the Kashmiri people but also jeopardizing regional stability (Alvi, 2021).

Pakistan strongly asserted that India's revocation of *Article 370* amounted to a blatant violation of bilateral agreements and international resolutions. In response, Pakistan unveiled a new political map incorporating Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) as part of its territory. India, however, dismissed Pakistan's move as an unlawful act devoid of legal validity, both nationally and internationally ("Pakistan affirms claim to IHK," 2020). The consequences of this exchange were dire for the South Asian region, further complicating an already intricate situation.

The tensions eventually reached a turning point when, in February 2021, New Delhi and Islamabad agreed to a ceasefire. While this might be considered a small step, it holds significant meaning for both sides as they navigate the path toward peace.

Moreover, the involvement of extra-regional powers has exacerbated tensions between India and Pakistan, reshaping the dynamics of the entire region. The Indo-US alliance and the evolving relationships between China, Russia, and Pakistan have significantly influenced regional power politics. Notably, Chinese investments in the BRI and the CPEC projects in Pakistan have raised concerns for India and the United States. The expanding Chinese influence has also fostered a closer relationship between Moscow and Islamabad, leading to collaboration in the energy and defense sectors. This shifting geopolitical landscape adds another layer of complexity to an already intricate situation in the region.

The SCO serves as a crucial multilateral forum, bringing representatives of India and Pakistan together on numerous occasions. However, despite these opportunities, the domestic pressures faced by political leaders in both states have made them hesitant to display alignment towards each other overtly. Both nations actively seek engagement in the Eurasian region and are signatories to various security projects. There is potential for collaboration in regional initiatives, such as electricity trade

projects, which could provide a common platform for interaction based on shared interests.

Furthermore, the involvement of China, Russia, and other Central Asian states — associates of both India and Pakistan — in these initiatives could play a constructive role in easing tensions. The collective participation in regional projects may offer a diplomatic avenue for fostering dialogue and cooperation between the two nations.

Despite the ongoing challenges, there is an opportunity for both states to initiate trust-building measures through small, incremental steps. Exploring cooperation in diverse areas such as telecommunication, agriculture, fostering people-to-people contacts, education, health, sports, and culture could pave the way for mutual understanding. Building trust through collaboration in various sectors and fostering open communication on essential security-related matters remains the most viable option for achieving lasting peace between the two rival states.

Conclusion

The SCO emerges as an effective organization, fostering member-state cohesion, promoting regional stability, and mitigating tensions through dialogues. The organization advocates the development of economic corridors, facilitating connectivity between inaccessible and developed areas. Its focus on the cooperation of states aims to enhance security in the Central and South Asian region. While the SCO does not directly intervene in state disagreements, its operational mechanisms compel member states to convene, fostering the sharing of crucial intelligence data for regional security. Consequently, several Central Asian states (members of SCO), once entangled in various issues, now collaborate. Though characterized by longstanding and complex tensions, the India-Pakistan case is viewed as atypical. However, the operational dynamics of the SCO are believed to contribute to easing tensions between the two nations.

Undoubtedly, the exchange of surgical strikes signaled a heightened risk of a full-scale war between India and Pakistan, which was fortunately halted. Concurrently, the SCO continued its expansion, playing a vital role in completing numerous projects related to geographical connectivity. The organization has also assigned responsibilities to its members to combat terrorism, extremism, and separatism in South and Central Asia. In this context, the RATS-SCO has trained and equipped its members to counteract terrorism effectively. India's appointment as the chairman of RATS for one year facilitated cooperation among member states, including Pakistan.

Currently holding the rotating presidency of the SCO, India's congenial role as the host state suggests the potential for reduced tensions. Frequent interactions between the armed forces of the two states during peace mission exercises have already become common. Additionally, meetings of political leaders and interactive delegations make a positive impression on each other. The SCO's noteworthy initiatives for economic exchanges among member states contribute significantly to fortifying mutual trust, thereby promoting regional stability.

While the dialogue on terrorism-related issues appears to have stalled interactions between Islamabad and New Delhi, the limited sharing of intelligence data has proven helpful in building confidence and reducing differences. In addition, the promotion of regional integration and economic connections between South and Central Asia is aligning the interests of both nations. Recognizing mutual trust between India and Pakistan is pivotal; minor steps for collaboration would make considerable

contributions towards regional integration. In essence, the pragmatic cooperation between the two countries is feasible under the framework of the SCO.

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