

# Pakistan-Russia Relations within the Framework of the SCO: A Regional Analysis

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## Abstract

Pakistan and Russia have shared geographical proximity, but historically, this proximity did not translate into extensive cooperation due to Pakistan's alignment with the Western bloc during the Cold War and India's strong relations with Russia. Pakistan's official membership in the Russian-cofounded Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017 marked a significant development in bilateral relations. While considerable research exists on the SCO and its progress, studies focusing specifically on Pakistan-Russia relations through the SCO framework remain limited. Pakistan's membership in the SCO coincided with important regional developments, including the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, the resurgence of regional terrorism, increased US-China competition, India's strengthening ties with the U.S., the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the hesitancy of Western countries to engage with Russia. An analysis of Pakistan-Russia relations from 2015 to 2024, grounded in the theory of complex interdependence, indicates progress in cooperation and potential for enhanced collaboration in areas such as security, energy, and cultural exchange. Shared interests in China and the Central Asian region also highlight the possibility of increased regional cooperation through the SCO platform. However, several factors have posed challenges to furthering these relations, including tense Indo-Pak relations, India's membership in the SCO and historical ties with Russia, perceptions of Pakistan's susceptibility to external pressures, and regional instability linked to terrorism. Addressing these challenges requires proactive engagement to fully leverage the opportunities presented by the SCO to encourage Pakistan-Russia relations and collaboration.

## Keywords

Regional Organizations, Security, CPEC, Terrorism, Complex Interdependence

## Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been a significant regional body in the Eurasian region. Two major global powers, Russia and China, are members of this organization, as well as several Central and South Asian countries. Russia served as a

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founding member of the SCO, while Pakistan was admitted in 2015 and officially joined in 2017. The SCO's scope encompasses various objectives, including security cooperation and fostering economic engagement among its members. Although substantial research exists on the SCO's various dimensions and progress, there is limited analysis of how the organization shapes the relationships between specific member states. Studies examining the dynamics of Pakistan-Russia relations through the SCO framework are particularly scarce.

This article addresses this research gap by analyzing the relationship between Pakistan and Russia within the context of their joint membership in the SCO. It uses academic literature to explore the opportunities and challenges in Pakistan-Russia relations, employing regionalism and the 'theory of complex interdependence' as analytical frameworks. The study focuses on developments from 2015 to 2023.

The article is structured into three main sections, followed by an analysis and conclusion. The first section examines the historical context of Pakistan-Russia relations, the role of the SCO, and Pakistan's membership in the organization. The second section evaluates the prospects for Pakistan-Russia relations within the SCO framework, focusing on recent developments. The third section discusses the challenges hindering or disrupting progress in these relations. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the discussion and presents the study's findings.

### **Pakistan-Russia Relations in the Context of SCO**

This section examines two overarching themes: the historical context of Pakistan-Russia relations and the role of the SCO in shaping their contemporary significance. Understanding the historical evolution of this relationship is critical to appreciating its current dynamics.

The bilateral relationship between Pakistan and the Soviet Union began to develop shortly after Pakistan's independence. In 1949, the Soviet Union extended its friendship by inviting Pakistan's Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, for an official visit. Although Liaquat Ali Khan initially planned to visit the Soviet Union, he ultimately opted to visit the U.S. instead (Khan, 1961). This decision marked a turning point. Pakistan's subsequent alignment with the U.S. through a defense partnership in the 1950s, during the Cold War, hindered the development of closer ties between Pakistan and the Soviet Union (Iqbal, 2021). Nevertheless, diplomatic relations between the two states continued to persist.

Economic cooperation between Pakistan and the Soviet Union began in the 1960s. A notable milestone during this period was signing an agreement on oil trade. Additionally, the Soviet Union played a significant role during the Indo-Pak War, strengthening bilateral relations. The 1970s witnessed a marked improvement in these ties. In 1971, both nations signed a historic agreement in which the Soviet Union committed to providing technical and financial assistance for establishing a steel mill in Karachi. This agreement signaled a significant shift in Pakistan's foreign policy. Subsequently, in 1972, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, visited the Soviet Union to bolster bilateral relations further. Bhutto's administration marked a strategic pivot in Pakistan's foreign policy, which had traditionally been pro-Western, toward greater engagement with the Eastern bloc (Sattar, 2010).

Several factors influenced this shift in foreign policy under Bhutto. Among these were Pakistan's aspirations to establish greater foreign policy independence and diminish the U.S.' influence. Another key consideration was the desire to counterbalance India's growing military capabilities, bolstered by Soviet support (Haqqani, 2005). While Pakistan maintained close ties with the U.S. during Bhutto's tenure, his government pursued a diversified foreign policy to strike a balance by fostering relations with the Soviet Union (Amin, 2021).

Despite these advances, the relationship faced significant challenges. The Soviet Union's close ties with India during the Cold War posed a critical obstacle, particularly given the ongoing Kashmir dispute. Pakistan perceived Moscow's provision of military and economic assistance to India as a bias that undermined its interests in the region. This perception strained bilateral relations. Additionally, the U.S. viewed Pakistan's increasing engagement with the Soviet Union as a potential threat, interpreting it as a departure from the capitalist bloc and an alignment with the Eastern bloc (Amin, 2021).

The relationship between Pakistan and the Soviet Union remained hostile from 1979 to 1988, coinciding with the Soviet invasion and subsequent war in Afghanistan. In 1979, the Soviet Union intervened militarily in Afghanistan to support the communist government. This action significantly strained relations, as Pakistan, under the leadership of General Zia-ul-Haq, actively opposed the Soviet invasion. Pakistan became a key ally of the U.S. in the region and provided frontline support to the Mujahideen fighting against Soviet forces (Hilali, 2017).

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, a new phase in Pakistan-Russia relations began to emerge, characterized by a shift in dynamics and the creation of opportunities for renewed engagement (Iqbal, 2021). The post-Cold War era witnessed consistent growth in economic ties between the two countries. In this context, Sardar Asif Ahmad Ali, then Foreign Minister of Pakistan, visited Russia, followed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. These meetings focused on exploring prospects for economic cooperation. Positive developments continued into the post-9/11 period. In 2003, President Pervez Musharraf visited Russia, paving the way for the establishment of joint working groups aimed at addressing terrorism, managing strategic instability, and fostering cultural cooperation.

Further milestones in bilateral relations included the visit of Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov to Pakistan in 2007—the first visit by a Russian premier. This was followed by a visit to Moscow by President Asif Ali Zardari in 2011, underscoring the progress in the bilateral relationship. In 2012, President Vladimir Putin planned to visit Pakistan to attend a quadrilateral summit involving Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. However, the visit was canceled, with the official explanation citing technical issues related to the summit. Some analysts, however, attributed the cancellation to pressure from the Indian Prime Minister at the time, Manmohan Singh (Hanif, 2013). This episode reflects two persistent themes in Pakistan-Russia relations: shared regional interests, particularly concerning Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the influence of Indian hostility as a limiting factor.

Beyond bilateral relations, Pakistan and Russia have cooperated in international organizations. Pakistan supported Russia's observer status in the Organization of

Islamic Cooperation (OIC), while Russia reciprocated by facilitating Pakistan's observer status in the SCO (Razil, 2022). Russia has also shown interest in regional energy projects, such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. A landmark development in their relationship was Pakistan's formal inclusion as a full member of the SCO in 2017, making it the only regional organization where Pakistan and Russia are permanent members.

However, potential roadblocks remain that could hinder the progress of their relations. Both countries harbor grievances that act as barriers to deepening cooperation. This research seeks to identify the driving forces behind these states' foreign policies, examining the conditions under which their relations improve or deteriorate. The role of global powers, particularly the U.S., is critical, as the Pakistan-Russia relationship has implications for U.S.' strategic interests (Ahmad & Hashmi, 2021). Similarly, the roles of India and Afghanistan have been consistently influential and merit further exploration (Hanif, 2013). Additionally, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict represents another significant challenge, as Western countries exert pressure on South Asian states, including Pakistan, to limit engagement with Russia (Shah et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, Pakistan's membership in the SCO marks a significant milestone in its relationship with Russia. Pakistan's close ally, China, is also a member of the SCO, which positions the organization as a platform for fostering regional cooperation and connectivity. For Russia, the SCO underscores Pakistan's strategic importance as a regional partner, particularly given Moscow's interests in the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and regional integration (Skalamera, 2023).

While considerable academic work exists on the SCO, few studies have specifically examined bilateral relationships through the lens of joint membership in this multilateral organization. Although the SCO represents the only regional platform shared by Pakistan and Russia, research addressing the opportunities and challenges in their relationship within the context of this institution remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the evolution of Pakistan-Russia relations in the framework of their joint membership in the SCO, highlighting both the potential and the challenges this dynamic presents.

### ***The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)***

The SCO is currently the largest and most populous regional cooperative organization globally, encompassing nations that account for over 40% of the global population and more than 20% of the global GDP (IIS, 2018). The SCO originated from the shared aspirations of former Soviet states and China to establish a platform for regional collaboration, initially leading to the formation of the 'Shanghai Five' in 1996 (Bailes et al., 2007). Although the group initially focused on resolving border disputes, its mandate expanded significantly with the inclusion of Uzbekistan, ultimately evolving into the SCO in 2001 (Jia, 2007).

The 2002 Charter of the SCO outlines its objectives, which include fostering regional cooperation in areas such as security, economics, and culture, all while adhering to the principles of the 'Shanghai Spirit'—a framework emphasizing mutual

trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, and respect for cultural diversity (Xue & Makengo, 2021).

While Russia has been a founding member of the SCO since its inception, Pakistan's membership was formally approved in 2015. The SCO is the only regional international organization where both Pakistan and Russia are permanent members, underscoring its significance for bilateral relations. Russia's endorsement of Pakistan's membership in the SCO marks a critical juncture in their relationship, highlighting shared interests and the potential for enhanced cooperation across various domains. These factors, among others, will be explored in the following sections.

### **Prospects of Pakistan-Russia Relationship in SCO's Context**

One promising avenue of Pakistan and Russia's joint membership in the SCO is the opportunity for cultural exchange. Historically, no precedent or aspect of Russian culture precludes the possibility of cultural exchange programs with South Asian states. Russia has a well-established history of successful cultural exchange programs with India (Chaliha, 2021). If such programs have flourished in India, there is significant potential for similar initiatives in Pakistan.

An additional prospect for cultural exchange arises from Russia's sizeable Muslim population, comprising immigrants and native citizens. Muslim communities in Russia maintain strong cultural and religious practices, including the establishment of mosques and adherence to traditional customs such as Hijama<sup>3</sup>, and the organization of religious institutions (Turaeva, 2020). With over 13 million Muslims in Russia sharing cultural and religious affinities with Pakistan, the potential for collaboration in cultural, religious, and societal domains is substantial (Hunter, 2016).

The SCO offers a platform to deliberate on the specifics of these programs and facilitate their implementation. Potential initiatives include tourism development, academic exchanges, and scholarship programs. A concrete step in this direction was taken when the Russian ambassador to Pakistan and Pakistan's Federal Minister for National Heritage and Culture agreed to launch cultural exchange programs and foster cooperation in cultural heritage (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2023).

Historical precedents for Pakistan-Russia cultural cooperation further strengthen this prospect. For instance, the Soviet magazine *Tulu*, which was published in Karachi until 1982, and the significant influx of Soviet tourists to Pakistani cities like Karachi during the pre-1980s period reflect prior people-to-people engagement (Hussain, 1987; Hussain & Fatima, 2015). Although Cold War dynamics disrupted these exchanges, the potential for renewal exists today. The presence of Pakistani students in over a dozen Russian universities and the establishment of an Urdu faculty at Moscow State University signify steps in the right direction (Hussain & Fatima, 2015).

### ***Defence Cooperation Under the SCO Framework***

A core aim of the SCO is fostering security cooperation, and historical instances of Pakistan-Russia defense collaboration provide a foundation for further development.

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<sup>3</sup> It is a Sunnah-backed version of cupping therapy in which small incisions allow for the suction of stagnant blood from the human body.

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan, particularly following the 2014 reduction of NATO forces, coincided with a renewed understanding between Pakistan and Russia to enhance defense ties. This led to the signing of a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in 2014 (Qazi & Bashir, 2022). The subsequent regional realities, including the complete U.S. withdrawal and the instability in Afghanistan, created mutual concerns for Pakistan and Russia, offering further opportunities for defense cooperation.

High-level engagements between Pakistan and Russia reached a milestone in 2018, with the Pakistani Army Chief, Vice Chief of Naval Staff, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee visiting Russia. In the same year, the formation of the Pakistan-Russia Joint-Military Consultative Committee (JMC) marked a significant institutional step. Chaired by the Russian Deputy Defence Minister and Pakistan's Defence Secretary, the JMC has since held multiple direct meetings (Siddiq, 2021).

The most notable example of Pakistan-Russia defense cooperation is the Druzhba or 'Friendship' joint military exercises, conducted annually since 2016. Despite Indian objections and pressure on Russia to withdraw from these exercises due to alleged Pakistani involvement in Indian security issues, the collaboration has persisted, with six exercises held by 2021. Furthermore, in 2022, Pakistan agreed, alongside other SCO member states, to take concrete measures against terrorism originating from Afghanistan, highlighting mutual concerns regarding regional security threats (Rauf & Tariq, 2023).

The SCO also provides institutional opportunities for defense cooperation through its annual Defence Ministers' Meeting. Pakistan's decision to attend the 2023 session, hosted by India, virtually rather than withdrawing altogether underscores the significance of these meetings. These meetings have enabled Pakistani and Russian defense ministers to engage on the sidelines, discussing avenues for further cooperation.

There is also an all-important Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) within the SCO, which is of mutual concern to both Pakistan and Russia. Zeb (2006) explained that under the SCO framework, there is a possibility of progress in Pakistan-Russia security and defence ties that have remained underdeveloped due to the Indo-Russian strategic relationship and India-Pakistan hostility. The SCO may also contribute significantly to further developing Pakistan's anti-terrorism capabilities, mainly through the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). Although Pakistan has signed bilateral anti-terrorism cooperation agreements with some SCO member states, RATS could help Pakistan institutionalize anti-terrorism cooperation comprehensively and on a broader scale. Hence, security cooperation between Pakistan and Russia is possible. It is important to note that some political analysts have compared the SCO with the Warsaw Pact and predicted that the SCO would turn into a counterbalance to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (De Haas & van der Putten, 2007; Dauekeev, 2011).

Although the SCO is a multilateral platform, there can be opportunities to strengthen bilateral ties. The heads of the member state frequently hold and attend sessions of the SCO. Opportunities remain on the sidelines of these sessions for one-on-one meetings and discussions on bilateral ties. Similar opportunities also exist during multilateral meetings at other levels, e.g., the SCO hosts an annual defence

ministers' meeting, and defence ministers of the two countries can meet on the sidelines of that event. Pakistan and Russia used one such opportunity to use multilateral forums to improve bilateral ties when the Pakistani Prime Minister met the Russian President on the sidelines of the SCO session in 2022.

Scholars agree that Pakistan's inclusion in the SCO has provided Pakistan and Russia with the highest level of dialogue to improve their bilateral relationships (Dedov, 2019). Moreover, scholars are keen to highlight why Pakistan is important for Russia and its regional and global ambitions. One of the regional aims of Russia is to become a major and stable power in the greater Eurasian region. Moreover, China's closeness with Pakistan is not lost on Russia and is a pivotal factor that drives the current Russian interest in Pakistan (Efremenko, 2019; Batool, 2021).

Pakistan is a developing nation with the sixth largest population in the world. Due to a lack of capacity and increasing needs, it remains in a dire search for energy project partners. One of the primary features of the billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is its offerings in terms of energy production to Pakistan (McCartney, 2022). Russia has abundant natural resources that can be instrumental in bridging the gap between Pakistan's energy production and requirements. With the war in Ukraine, sanctions, and disinterest in dealing with Russia by the Western states, there remains an opportunity for Pakistan and Russia to move ahead on energy cooperation, as Pakistan might get cheaper prices from Russia, and Russia has fewer options to deal with.

One of the hallmark projects of Pakistan-Russia energy cooperation is the PakStream Gas Pipeline Project (PSGP), a 1,100-kilometer-long liquefied natural gas (LNG) transport pipeline extending from Karachi and Gwadar to Lahore. The original agreement for this project was reached in 2015—the same year Pakistan formally joined the SCO—while the details of the current agreement were finalized in 2021 (Chia & Haqiqi, 2021). Despite logistical, technical, and international challenges delaying its implementation, Pakistan's urgent energy needs and European concerns about over-reliance on Russian gas create a conducive environment for advancing this initiative. While the project is not a direct outcome of the SCO, the organization's platform could help address obstacles impeding its realization. Notably, the project's conception and progress coincide with Pakistan's inclusion in the SCO, underscoring its significance as the most substantial energy cooperation agreement between Pakistan and Russia since the Soviet Union's engagement in the 1970s.

### ***Mutual Interests in Central Asia***

Pakistan and Russia also share mutual interests in Central Asia, which is strategically and economically significant. Russian policy towards the Central Asian Republics (CARs) consistently aims to maintain close ties with these states, which share geographical proximity with Pakistan. At one point, only the 20-kilometer-wide Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan separated Pakistan from direct access to these republics. Central Asia is rich in energy resources, and Pakistan's increasing engagement with these states can benefit from Russian facilitation.

Russia's interest in fostering connectivity between Pakistan and the CARs is driven by its dual objectives: maintaining regional stability and advancing its ambitions for



Eurasian integration (Galimov, 2024). These republics represent vital opportunities for Pakistan to secure energy and trade partnerships. Moreover, Pakistan can provide the CARs with access to the Indian Ocean, offering a vital trade route through its infrastructural projects, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As an aspiring partner in CPEC, Russia could play a crucial role in facilitating Pakistan's integration with Central Asia through the SCO platform (Fayyaz, 2023).

Russia's aspirations to remain a significant player in a multipolar world order and its goal of maintaining influence in Central Asia position Pakistan as an important regional partner. By aligning its strategic ambitions with Pakistan's geographical and infrastructural advantages, Russia enhances its prospects for deeper regional integration and stability (Sultana et al., 2019; Federov, 2009).

Since its inception, Pakistan has maintained cordial ties with China, a relationship that persisted even through the Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War. In recent years, Pakistan's alignment with China has deepened, particularly in the context of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the strengthening of the U.S.-India strategic partnership. This closer relationship aligns with China's broader goal of regional integration, exemplified by its ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. OBOR aims to connect Europe with Asia through extensive infrastructure projects, trade routes, and economic zones inspired by the historic Silk Route. A flagship project of OBOR, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), envisions billions of dollars of infrastructural investment in Pakistan, culminating in the establishing of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Many analysts regard CPEC as a transformative project for Pakistan's economy and infrastructure development.

### ***Russia's Turn to the Global South and Shared Interests with Pakistan***

Amid growing criticism and resistance from the Global North due to its actions in Ukraine, Russia has increasingly sought to expand its diplomatic influence in the Global South. Simultaneously, Pakistan faces many crises, including energy shortages and food insecurity, leaving limited options to explore emerging opportunities globally (Konwer, 2023).

However, Pakistan's strategic importance is not the sole factor driving Russia's interest in fostering closer ties. In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the Greater Eurasian Partnership, a plan to integrate the five-member Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with countries such as Pakistan, India, Iran, China, and Commonwealth states (Chia & Haqiq, 2021). Scholars argue that Russia envisions a future merger of the EEU with China's OBOR initiative, reflecting its alignment with China's vision for regional economic integration (Cooley et al., 2022). As a member of OBOR, Russia has demonstrated support for the initiative and recognizes its potential for enhancing connectivity and economic cooperation (Lesmana & Dharmaputra, 2022).

### ***The Broader Geopolitical Context***

Russia and China's shared tensions with the U.S.-led Western bloc underline the call for closer collaboration in the broader geopolitical landscape. Their extensive cooperation through the SCO further solidifies this alliance (Khan & Sultana, 2021). Given Pakistan's strategic partnership with China, Russia has shown increasing interest



in developing positive relations with Islamabad. Pakistan's historical role in facilitating the U.S. opening to China in the 1970s demonstrates its potential to serve as a bridge between Russia and China in the Eurasian region.

Pakistan's shared membership with China and Russia in the SCO and its ability to link OBOR to Russia through CPEC further enhance its pivotal role in fostering this trilateral partnership. By leveraging its geographic and strategic position, Pakistan gains significant economic and geopolitical benefits while contributing to broader Eurasian integration and cooperation.

### **Challenges to Pakistan-Russia Relations and the SCO**

Both South Asian members of the SCO—Pakistan and India—remain entangled in deep socio-political animosity. This hostility has already hindered the progress and effectiveness of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Despite their membership in the SCO, the organization does not directly provide avenues for resolving bilateral disputes, as its focus remains multilateral. On the contrary, the persistent hostility between India and Pakistan challenges Pakistan's progress within the SCO and complicates improvements in Pakistan-Russia relations. For instance, both countries initially attempted to block each other's inclusion in the SCO (Mughal, 2021).

#### ***Indo-Pak Rivalry and Its Impact on Pakistan-Russia Relations***

Recent academic literature increasingly frames Pakistan's membership in the SCO within the context of potential opportunities for strengthening Pakistan-Russia-China ties and the repercussions this may have for India (Abbasi et al., 2020; Chaliha, 2021; Rizvi et al., 2022; Tariq & Mustafa, 2022; Abdulrab & Rasheed, 2023). Scholars argue that Pakistan's growing influence in the SCO, combined with its strategic partnership with China, poses a challenge to Indian interests. Consequently, India will likely employ diplomatic and strategic measures to counter Pakistan's influence within the organization.

The most significant manifestation of Indian hostility lies in its potential impact on Pakistan-Russia relations. Given its long-standing strategic partnership with Russia, India has previously sought to undermine improvements in Pakistan-Russia ties. A notable example occurred in the aftermath of the Pulwama attacks in 2019 when India unsuccessfully pressured Russia to withdraw from joint military exercises with Pakistan (Ahmed & Rasool, 2023). As such, advancing Pakistan-Russia relations will require tactful navigation of Indian efforts to disrupt progress.

#### ***The Role of the U.S.***

Another challenge to Pakistan-Russia relations stems from the U.S. Historically, Pakistan has been a key ally of the U.S. joining military alliances during the Cold War and participating in the War on Terror. However, U.S.-Pakistan relations are best characterized as transactional, marked by oscillating patterns of cooperation and estrangement (Kasuri, 2015). Meanwhile, the U.S. has been a traditional rival of Russia, and recent advancements in Pakistan-Russia relations coincide with the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and a downturn in U.S.-Pakistan ties (Akhtar, 2022).

Scholars have identified patterns in Pakistan's foreign policy, suggesting that its relations with Russia often improve during periods of tension with the U.S. For instance, Pakistan grew closer to Russia in the mid-1960s following its disappointment with American support during the 1965 war, only to pivot back to the U.S. with renewed aid commitments in the late 1960s (Khan, 2021). Russia is aware of these shifting

dynamics and remains cautious of Pakistan's ability to maintain an independent foreign policy (Smith, 2011). Trust-building measures will be essential for Pakistan to assure Russia of its commitment to constructive engagement via the SCO, regardless of U.S. opposition.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has further strained U.S.-Russian relations, with the U.S. likely exerting pressure on Pakistan to limit its engagement with Russia. A widely discussed instance occurred in 2022, when former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan claimed the U.S. opposed his administration's efforts to improve ties with Russia, allegedly contributing to his removal from office (Malik, 2024). Whether or not these claims are substantiated, they highlight Pakistan's geopolitical complexities in balancing its relations with Russia and the U.S.

### ***Internal Security Challenges and Regional Instability***

Pakistan's internal security situation presents another challenge to its engagement with Russia and its progress within the SCO. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) defines terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism as core threats (Sadı & İspir, 2021). The resurgence of terrorist activities in Pakistan following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, coupled with attacks on Chinese nationals and infrastructure projects in Pakistan, could make Russia wary of engaging in extensive collaborations (Iqbal et al., 2024). These security issues delay Chinese projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and risk undermining Pakistan's credibility as a reliable partner within the SCO.

Additionally, Pakistan's reputation has suffered from allegations of harboring terrorist networks, exacerbated by India's efforts to portray Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism (Nadeem et al., 2021; Murtaza et al., 2022). Pakistan risks creating a trust deficit with potential partners such as Russia without addressing these narratives and improving its internal security conditions.

### ***Broader Geopolitical Context: Afghanistan and the Russia-Ukraine War***

Regional instability, particularly in Afghanistan, further complicates Pakistan-Russia relations. Afghanistan's neighbours, except Turkmenistan, are SCO member states, making regional stability a shared priority. Researchers argue that the SCO can potentially play a constructive role in addressing the Afghan crisis (Akhtar & Javaid, 2024). However, Pakistan faces the challenge of balancing its historical ties with the Taliban regime and regional apprehensions regarding terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. A failure to manage this balance could undermine Pakistan's standing in the SCO and its relations with Russia.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war also poses significant challenges. With the war at a stalemate, Western sanctions have severely impacted Russia's economic capabilities (Malik, 2024). These sanctions raise questions about Russia's capacity to fulfil its regional integration ambitions, particularly its involvement in projects requiring substantial financial investment, such as CPEC. Furthermore, Pakistan faces immense Western pressure to limit its engagement with Russia and align itself with the U.S.-led bloc. These factors threaten the recent progress in Pakistan-Russia relations and highlight the need for strategic diplomacy to sustain momentum through the SCO platform.

### **Analysis**

The theory of complex interdependence is applied to analyze the relationship between Pakistan and Russia within the framework of the SCO. Since its inception by Nye and

Keohane, the theory has undergone refinements to make it more sophisticated and adaptable to the modern information age (Keohane & Nye, 1987; Keohane & Nye, 1998; Rogerson, 2000). The central proposition of this theory is that relationships between states in contemporary times are increasingly complex, rendering traditional methods of analyzing bilateral relationships insufficient.

Keohane and Nye (1973) propose three key mechanisms to understand modern state relationships:

- **Multiple Channels of Interaction:** Relationships between states are shaped by diverse actors and channels, extending beyond traditional state-to-state diplomacy.
- **Shifting Agendas:** The issues driving these relationships are dynamic and fluid, making it difficult to establish a clear hierarchy of priorities at any given time.
- **Reduction in Coercive Power:** Modern state relationships emphasize reducing reliance on coercive measures and hard power, favoring cooperative interdependence. This interdependence, however, is multifaceted and contingent on numerous factors.

The theory of complex interdependence provides a suitable framework for analyzing the evolving dynamics of Pakistan-Russia relations within the SCO context. First, the SCO itself serves as a multilateral platform, aligning with the concept of 'multiple channels' outlined by Keohane and Nye. Secondly, the agendas within this relationship are highly fluid, influenced by rapidly changing global developments, such as the Taliban's takeover of Kabul and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Finally, Pakistan and Russia have demonstrated a willingness to move away from hard power tactics in their bilateral relations, focusing instead on collaboration and mutual benefit.

Thus, the presence of complex interdependence within the region underscores the relevance of this theory in understanding the opportunities and challenges shaping Pakistan-Russia relations under the SCO framework.

## Conclusion

This research paper has examined the developments in Pakistan-Russia relations since Pakistan's inclusion in the SCO in 2017. It has highlighted areas where Pakistan and Russia have made direct advancements in their bilateral relationship through the SCO and areas with untapped potential for further improvement. Additionally, the study has explored various hindrances and challenges that have, or could potentially, obstruct meaningful progress in Pakistan-Russia relations under the SCO framework.

The research concludes that while challenges exist, the opportunities and potential for strengthening Pakistan-Russia relations after Pakistan's inclusion in the SCO far outweigh these obstacles. Moreover, the challenges are not insurmountable but can be mitigated through prudent strategies and diplomatic acumen. For instance, the Indian factor, which poses a significant challenge to Pakistan-Russia relations, can be addressed through several avenues. Historical precedents demonstrate that Russia has shown a willingness to improve ties with Pakistan despite Indian pressure, as evidenced by the continuation of joint military exercises between Russia and Pakistan. Additionally, the growing India-U.S. strategic partnership and the resurgence of a Cold War-like rivalry between the U.S. and Russia create favorable conditions for Pakistan and Russia to develop their bilateral relationship without allowing Indo-Pak tensions to dominate.

The decisive factors for an enduring Pakistan-Russia regional partnership will likely include Russia's ability to balance its relationship with India and Pakistan's capacity to maintain an independent foreign policy toward Russia, even in the face of external pressures from the U.S. A shared commitment to collaboration and strategically utilizing platforms like the SCO, Pakistan, and Russia can overcome these challenges and forge a more robust and cooperative regional partnership.

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