

## Pakistan's Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from 2011-2024: A Comparative Analysis to Other Member States

Minahil Zahid<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Zain Ali<sup>2</sup>, & Muhammad Shahbaz<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad. Email: [iminahilzahid@gmail.com](mailto:iminahilzahid@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> M.Phil Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages, (NUML) Islamabad. Email: [Zainbidwal5@gmail.com](mailto:Zainbidwal5@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad. Email: [muhammad\\_shahbz@outlook.com](mailto:muhammad_shahbz@outlook.com)

### ABSTRACT

This research explores Pakistan's experiences as the SCO member from 2011 to 2024 as well as the purpose and dynamics of its membership, its calculating interests, an impact on the organization's decision-making processes, and the compatibility of its SCO activity with its general foreign-policy goals. Qualitative research methodology was adopted by using secondary data. This work explores Pakistan's politics of security economic cooperation and multilateralism. The research outcomes show Pakistan's transformation from a mere watcher to a player utilizing the SCO framework for combating terrorism, stabilizing the region, and particularly for the CPEC in boosting economic cooperation and integration. Nonetheless, Pakistan was effective in counterterrorism and connectivity, and it still has a less-powerful role in compared with the Russia and China that set the SCO's strategic narrative. Despite noting that Pakistan has fully associated itself with the goals of the SCO for instance through having a special place in the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), the study points out issues like limited decision making power, economic constraints and bottled up bilateral conflicts with India that sometimes complicate multilateral interactions within the SCO forum. However, Pakistan's membership in SCO is evidence of changing its foreign policy course in a more multipolar direction, deepening its activity in South and Central Asia, and explaining the position of regional associations in the creation of governance and addressing new threats.

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## Introduction & Study Background

The regional organization previously known as the Shanghai Five was created in 2001 and currently stands as one of the most important geopolitical formations of Asia. Most significantly initiated as the 'Shanghai Five' including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan the SCO were aimed at improving security cooperation, to fight terrorism, extremism separatism and then to bring stability in the region. In the meantime, its membership increased and incorporated economic cooperation, trade, and exchange of cultures, thus, deepened its influence on Asian political power realignment. Having brought India and Pakistan on board in 2017 the SCO expanded its influence of the organization and highlighted shifts in power in Eurasia (Bailes, et al, 2007).

The partnership has its advantages and disadvantages for Pakistan. Though once exclusively concerned with defense and structural competition with India, Pakistan has adjusted its foreign policy due to the development of regional and international circumstances. With China as fast emerging as an economic giant and Russia continuously shifting its strategic focus to the emerging economic giants of the east, Pakistan membership of the SCO can help the country foster closer relations with these powers and in the process gain a more influential status in the region. The SCO gives membership to Pakistan to communicate with not only the Chinese and Russian powers but also with Central Asian states, which is in harmony with its general economic, security, and political incidence. The subject of Pakistan in the SCO has more importance than the other countries. Geo-politically, it presents Pakistan an exclusive opportunity to expand cooperation with

CONTACT Minahil Zahid  [iminahilzahid@gmail.com](mailto:iminahilzahid@gmail.com).  Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan

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China, Pakistan's aligned partner, and Russia, the nation that has similar threats with Pakistan (Xue, & Makengo, 2021). The SCO also provides Pakistan with the desirable opportunity to deal with their traditional rival – India – in a framework of multilateral organization that both states became members of in 2017. In this regard, Pakistan can undertake regional security discussions and processes, while avoiding straight bi-lateral conflict which has otherwise negatively affected interaction with India in past.

From the Economic viewpoint, Pakistan will possibly gain from the SCO's focus on connectivity and infrastructure mainly. The organization is interested in optimization of trade corridors and energy, which is in compliance with the major goals of Pakistan's development such as CPEC. Due to this, Pakistan is well placed to act as trading and transit hub connecting the Central Asian states with the Arabian Sea. We can note that this economic cooperation can promote development, improve the turnover and deepen the integration with Central Asia (Abdul Rab, & Rasheed, 2023). SCO provides an opportunity to negotiate and launch regional development initiatives that are important for Pakistan's national interests. Terrorism, extremism, and militancy have continually affected the security situation of Pakistan mainly, the border regions with Afghanistan. Thus, counterterrorism, the military aspect, and security are especially relevant within the framework of the activities of the SCO. Prospective for SCO can be explored by Pakistan to counter threats to stability in the region, curb cross border terrorism, and respond to a changing security situation in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the United States.

It is pertinent to note that the goals for Pakistan to join the SCO remain significant multipartite, both for economic and security gains as well as diplomatic reparations. Economically, Pakistan wants to improve access to Central Asia's resources, and the SCO aims at improving trade, energy and infrastructure. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) develops Pakistan more as a bridge to central Asia to receives and forward investment to achieve sustainable economic development. Security is especially important for Pakistan, which like most of the SCO member states is concerned with terrorism and militancy. Getting involved in the regional security mechanisms and forums is an opportunity for Pakistan to improve its counterterrorism capacity and receive information sharing options and prospects of military cooperation. As a multilateral organization with its approach to regional stability the SCO gives Pakistan a multipronged structure which is very useful for managing security problems which are not amenable to a unilateral solution especially those originating from Afghanistan and India (Nizamani, 2018).

In diplomatic aspect, the SCO membership facilitates its relations with the regional powers in the multilateral format and strengthen cooperation with Russia and Central Asian states. Considering the history of hostility between India and Pakistan, and now China and India, the atmosphere in the SCO does not put pressure for direct confrontation and helps two physics look at the regional problems without risking an onset of large-scale conflict within their countries. There is no doubt that one of the largest challenges for Pakistan within the SCO framework is the issue of regional security and specifically Afghanistan. For Pakistan being the neighbor of Afghanistan who has directly suffered instability in the region, SCO is precisely seen as the security problem solving forum. The mechanisms of the counter-terrorism cooperation and the collaboration in the military aspects give Pakistan means of regulating security interests in the SCO. The aim of this organization to promote tolerance and conflict prevention, and fight against radicalization prescribe to the long-term interest of Pakistan (Wang, & Kong, 2019).

Its membership also creates possibilities to shape the SCO's security agenda as well. Pakistan especially counter-terrorism operations have extensive experience, therefore is capable of support SCO-led efforts against extremism and cross-border terrorism. As a result, its increasing engagement in defining and implementing the SCO's security policies translates the organization's goal to boost regional security and protect national interests. This study seeks to undertake a Strategic Analysis of Pakistan's Engagement with the SCO from 2011 to 2024 and Pakistan's Role and Contributions to SCO's Goals. In the process, the research will unveil the strategic direction of the country's foreign policy and its role in regional and global governance systems.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To analyze the evolution of Pakistan's role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from 2011 to 2024.
- To examine Pakistan's strategic, political, and economic motivations for engaging with the SCO.
- To assess Pakistan's influence on SCO decision-making processes and initiatives.
- To investigate how Pakistan's participation in the SCO aligns with its broader foreign policy objectives.

## **Research Questions**

The study will explore the following research questions:

- How has Pakistan's role in the SCO evolved from 2011 to 2024?
- What are the strategic, political, and economic motivations behind Pakistan's engagement with the SCO?
- What influence has Pakistan had on SCO decision-making processes and initiatives?
- How does Pakistan's participation in the SCO align with its broader foreign policy objectives?

## **Significance of the Study**

This research in to geopolitics of South Asia mainly focusing Pakistan foreign policy and regional organizations SCO playing prominent role for cooperation in Asia. The research also sought to establish change over time in the organizational structure of the SCO and the role of Pakistan in the organization as relations and tensions in the region progress. This paper, by arguing the strategic, the economic, and the security angles of the Pakistan's accession to the SCO, will offer important lessons regarding the role of regional actors in remaking global governance and responding to emergent threats. In addition, the study will demonstrate ways in which Pakistan's engagement with the SCO is consistent with its enduring strategic interests to shape geopolitics not only of southern Asia but also of Eurasia as a whole.

## **Literature Review**

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

The SCO was created in 2001, its main goals are constructively addressing emerging security threats and ensuring the six member-states' further common economic and cultural development. The SCO basic organizational form is the full-member countries, observer states, and dialogue partners with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, India, Pakistan. SCO's main goals are to promote preventive diplomacy for ensuring the stability in the region by combating terrorism, extremism activities, separatism and the promotion of economic integration. Of strategic importance to the SCO as a security-oriented organization, all the countries of Central Asia share similar concerns over peace and-terrorism and conflict. Bailes (2017) has also pointed out the strategical importance of the SCO as organization contributing to balance the Western influence in the Area thru security cooperation regime between China and Russia.

Subsequent literature has also attributed the diversification of focus in the SCO to the enhancement of security cooperation and the emergent focus of economic interaction and integration. As stated by Kozhanov (2019), the economic activities mainly embraced through infrastructure development and trade liberalization foster dependencies of the member States. With observer and dialogue partners relations, the SCO can be viewed as extending its sphere of influence to the extent that it poses a threat to the developed geopolitical outlook in Asia (Bailes, 2017). Furthermore, India and Pakistan joined in as regular members in 2017 clearly depicts the organization's boon to encourage discussions in a zone that is known to have more incidences of war specifically between the two nations – India and Pakistan. These developments define new status and function of the SCO which can influence the future position of Asian geopolitics (Aris, 2011).

### **Pakistan's Foreign Policy and Regional Security**

Since 2000 especially since the year 2010, Pakistan foreign policy has been dynamic due to change in power equation of the world and regional realities. As the United States left Afghanistan in recent years, Pakistan insisted on deepening cooperation with China, Russia and Central Asia in the security, economic and cooperation spheres (Shah, 2016). Therefore China has become perhaps the most important relationship for Pakistan mainly due to the CPEC which is scheme designed for the improvement of connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asian States for enhancing economic cooperation. Another relatively new type of relationship seen in the recent years is that of the relations between Pakistan and Russia where Pakistan has had good cooperation recently mainly focusing on fight against terrorisms and regional security (Haider 2020). The SCO thus serves the purpose of strengthening these relations especially with Russia and China while Pakistan's hostility with India axes this progress.

The constant hostile relations with India as well as the location of Pakistan in the region requires that this country's FP is influenced by the complex geopolitics of the South Asian region. Thus, the strategies of Pakistan often try to recall its security risks by appealing for cooperation with the SCO. According to Malik (2019) participation within regional security organising under the SCO enables Pakistan to contain cross border militancy and counterterrorism essential for regional stability. Furthermore, the SCO cooperation

prospect has immense latent capacity for the growth of economic relations because Central Asia is a region endowed with various resources but is still poorly developed in terms of trade. This shift of focus towards Central Asia is also the indication of Pakistan's attempt to minimize its foreign policy relationship in South Asia and diversify its relations and foreign policy partners (Zaman, 2018).

### **Pakistan's Engagement with the SCO**

Observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was recognized in 2005, which is a major change in Pakistan's foreign policy by becoming the permanent member of this organization in 2017. It will be seen that this decision was enough influenced by economic calculation, security imperatives and a possibility of multilateral negotiations with major regional powers like China and Russia. Membership of Pakistan in the SCO offers it access to strengthen relations with these key power actors while dealing with issues like terrorism and militancy in the region, Crimea said Ahmad (2019). Such work as Khan (2020) acknowledge that the SCO provides Pakistan with an ideal forum for engaging these Central Asian nations as well as global actors to discuss issues of security, economics, and politics that appear relevant to Pakistan's strategies.

Besides fulfilling its political-strategic interests vis-à-vis China and Russia, the SCO participation also factors Pakistan's geostrategic aims. Pakistan seems to see the SCO as a way to reduce hostility with India by engaging in a multilateral organization in which the two rivals are both members (Malik, 2019). Despite all challenges, the direct dialogue between Pakistan and India in diplomacy is still difficult yet the SCO offers an indistinct diplomacy for both nations on issues like counter terrorism or economic growth needs of the region. This multilateral environment lets the Pakistan find solutions for its security conveniently different from that of direct confrontation involved in bilateral relations with India. Additionally, the security framework of the SCO give the Pakistan a means of dealing with terrorism that crosses its border especially when in the backdrop of the instability in Afghanistan (Khan, 2020). Therefore, proper coordination of the Pakistani state and its national security concerns with the general objectives of the SCO also presents the strategic role of the organization in the Pakistani foreign policy.

### **Comparison with Other Member States**

Since joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017 as a full member, Pakistan's function has transformed. First, still the recent member of the organization and placed in the multilateral setting where Pakistan faces more powerful members, particularly China and Russia. While China and Russia are part of the SCO since its formation and actively participating and contributing in the SCO's strategic and economic integration processes Pakistan's direct cooperation is in the field of security issues and counter-terrorism operations. Zaman (2018) further claimed that, despite recognizing Pakistan's growing significance in the SCO, its decision making is still ranked secondary to SCO's strategic directors, including China and Russia. This has been seen as the case with Pakistan's input in the SCO's framework Afro and superstructure security and economic agenda as it mostly follows the Chinese and Russian line on most strategic matters concerning regional security, especially in the war on terror.

In terms of the comparison, the leadership and distinctiveness of China as SCO member is manifested through its key economic capabilities and strategic outlook as well as through its crucial role in SCO policymaking and formation of the organization's priorities. It is in the light of these that China, as one of the SCO members and a critical promoter of regional economic endeavors such as the BRI has used this forum to advance its economic agendas in Central Asia and other parts of the region (Kozhanov, 2019). Russia also has historical aspects of its relations with the Central Asia and focus on regional security also play an important role and exercise much more influence in shaping the decisions of the SCO, most particularly those relating to security cooperation and military alliances. Concurring with Bailes (2017), the two countries occupy the place of prima donnas in SCO governance, with China and Russia exercising the strongest impact on the organization's decision-making agenda bearing on its initiatives encompassing economic integration, counter-terrorism activities. On the other hand, Pakistan has been only an observer whose action has been generally a response to other nation's actions. Nevertheless, through its pro- strategic cooperation with China and Russia, Pakistan has gradually managed to consolidate its influence in the SCO and more precisely within the discussion concerning to common interests of the member states and within sensitized topic like counterterrorism and regional security.

However, with this notwithstanding, Pakistan has been able to effectively SCO to foster its security agenda and challenges within the region. Concurring on SCO-led activities on counterterrorism and extremism in place, Pakistan is seen as a key factor in the security discourses in the region. The idea of

collective approach of SCO in dealing with terrorism and extremism has provided Pakistan an opportunity to engage and coordinate with big influential neighbors such as China and Russia to tackle issues that are imperative to Pakistan's security threats particularly in relation to militancy of Afghan border (Ali, 2021). Furthermore, joining the SCO also means for Pakistan a chance to engage in multilateral security dialogue, which in bilateral format would not be possible, especially with India. While not directly involved in decision making in SCO, Pakistan's participation in policy making on issues of security, as provided by intelligence cooperation and joint counterterrorism contributes to a greater involvement in the decision-making processes. In the long run, as the organization gets on with the other partners more often, one can expect that Pakistan will have more of an opportunity to influence the development of Security initiatives within the region, particularly those most pertinent to Pakistan's strategic interests in Central Asia and South Asia (Ahmad, 2019).

### **Historical Context: Pakistan's Membership**

Pakistan initiated the SCO cooperation in 2005 as the observer country, which changed the course of its foreign policy. This decision occurred at a time when Pakistan has been experiencing some changes in the regional security political situation and also it's interested to enhance relations with China and Russia neighbors. Interests – As an observer, Pakistan sought to enhance its strategic and, especially, economic cooperation with the states in the given region in light of evolving changes in the geopolitical landscape after September 11. From the case of the SCO, Pakistan was enabled to amplify its power and protect its interests in the Caucasus and central Asia as a whole with respect to energy, transit and stability. The observer status also allowed Pakistan to give input for debates on counter terrorism and security in region as such issues of concern due to its security situation (Malik, 2019).

During this period, two major factors dominated the Pakistan's foreign policy that derives primarily from the security of South and Central Asian region. The threat perception which CAC considered in the regional context, especially with respect to India, and Afghanistan considerably influenced its stance on the SCO. Pakistan's observer status was thought of as a way to ally with the Organization against India, which joined the organization as a full member in 2005. In this regard, Pakistan intended to exploit membership to bolster its security and economic relation with Central Asian republics and at the same time to balance with its traditional ally the United States. But the observer status provided the full accomplishment of the SCO's security and economic cooperation to Pakistan and thereby restricted Pakistan to avail maximum benefit from the organization (Khan, & Sultana, 2019).

In the year 2011, Pakistan moved up to a new level of foreign policy engagement when it was granted full membership of Sculptors Club of countries known as SCO. This development was brought by many factors amongst them being the change of geopolitics politics of the region, the improved relationship between Pakistan and china as well as Pakistan and Russia and the quest to gain more power in the region. Another major driver of change in Pakistan was a growing bilateral cooperation with the country that was already an ally in economic and military terms – China. However, enticement of better relations with Pakistan and Russia's desire to diminish the dominance of Western power in the continent also contributed to the membership of Pakistan. The full membership aimed at recognizing Pakistan's position in the security of the region as well as its activity in stabilization of Afghan security situation and combating terrorism (Akhtar, & Javaid, 2024).

When granted FMC, Pakistan had many expectations that it could bring in terms of security cooperation, economic interaction and connectivity to Central Asia. Nevertheless, the country would have several issues in participating in the SCO's activities more effectively. As the membership led to more engagements in multilateral discourse on principally security and economical affairs in the region, there was historical problematic relations with some of the SCO members most notably India. Inness of the organization on stability and cooperation in Central Asia, where Pakistan looked forward to enhancing trade as well as transit opportunities, was to be manage with regional powers as well. Thus, the discussed membership was helpful for Pakistan for its further steps to become a member of the SCO, but it also illustrates the prospects and potential problems of the SCO member within the multilateral mechanism.

### **Timeline of Pakistan's Role in the SCO (2011-2024)**

#### **Early Phase: 2011-2015**

**2011:** This organization was formed in June 2001 having Pakistan as an observer member since 2005 was granted a full membership in June 2011. It was the more significant development in the Pakistani strategic direction as the country became more actively involved region security, counter-terrorism and economic

cooperation in the Central Asia. At the same time, Pakistan membership also gave it a leverage to enhance its bilateral relations with Russia and China which are two important members of the SCO. In addition to the voting rights, which none of the longstanding relationships provided, and the bureaucracy, full membership meant that Pakistan could participate in decision making and gain access to industrial development particularly through trade, infrastructure and energy (Xue, & Makengo, 2021).

**2012-2013:** The year 2012 and 2013 marked Pakistan's' full participation in SCO summits meeting. During these summits Pakistan stressed about security for the region and especially that many countries in this area should provide collaboration for combating terrorism and Pakistan offered linkages between South and Central Asia. Located at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, Pakistan wanted to enhance the part of a transit point for export, energy and investment. Furthermore, Pakistan focused on synchronizing its security threats especially on terrorism and extremism with that of the SCO's integrated counterterrorism constructs. During this period, the relations between the two countries have escalating in upcoming infrastructural projects, more specifically the CPEC which was launched in 2013 (Shahzad, et al, 2024).

**2014-2015:** During the SCO summit, Pakistan NA speaker emphasized that Pakistan is focus on two key groups – economic cooperation in the region and enhancing security relations. During the SCO summits in 2014 and 2015, Pakistan willingly contributed to the discourse on counter-terrorism, prevention of drug trafficking and combating religious extremism which were the focal issues of the organization. The country also supported regional integration especially economically by supporting the inclusion of CPEC as the big infrastructural project aimed at enhancing economic cooperation. Another area of the development of multilateral cooperation was the relations between Pakistan and China and Russia, where Pakistan after joining SCO tried to expand the economic interests and cooperation in the sphere of security (Khan, & Jamal, 2024).

#### **Strengthening Ties and Expanding Influence: 2016-2020**

**2016:** From 2016, the activity of Pakistan in the SCO has increased as a country tried to foster relations with Central Asia and deepen its integration with the security and economic architecture of the SCO. In 2016 year in Bishkek during the SCO Summit Pakistani Prime minister reaffirmed that Pakistan is continue working actively to provide its contribution to SCO counter-terrorism and security initiatives in enforcing its efforts to preventing extremism in its territory. It also emphasized further the need to connect regional markets with special focus on energy trading and infrastructure. The interaction with China on the LOC for CPEC project remained active and Pakistan started to promote CPEC as the cornerstone of its regional connectivity plan.

**2017-2018:** With the context of CPEC, Pakistan stepped into a greater recognition in the framework and development of the SCO. The improving connectivity of the Central Asian States with other regions: During the 2017 and 2018 SCO summits, Pakistan emphasised how the 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor', or CPEC, could increase the volume of trade and energy transit within the SCO area, the Chinese developed communications that would link the Gwadar Port in Pakistan with western China as a way to connect the landlocked Central Asian republics with other markets of the global The achievement of CPEC was also viewed as the evidence of Sino-Pakistani relations, which played the role of priorities in the Pakistan's foreign policy throughout the period in question. Insecurity issues, with special references to the situation in Afghanistan were also considered within the SCO framework of the meeting; Pakistan expressed his desire for finding a political solution of the Afghanistan problem in order to prevent destabilization of the region (Mustafa, Naeem, & Sattar, 2021).

**2019:** They were participating in SCO meetings and dialogue to counter terrorism particularly in the changing situation in Afghanistan by 2019. The country stressed the need for the cooperation with other countries of the region in fight against the further spread of terrorism and extremism. The author in his report for this year's summit urged the member states to enhance cooperation since militancy was rapidly spreading within this region, which Pakistan also in its statement demanded more cooperation and unity among member states. Also, Pakistan also remained persistently emphasizing its strategic location in the supply of energy and transit for Central Asia's connectivity to the rest of the world. Pakistan's focus was more or less maintained on China, with both aggressively planning and working on different infrastructure and connectivity projects under the CPEC (Abdul Rab, & Rasheed, 2023).

**2020:** The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as the major concern for all SCO member states, including Pakistan. Due to the emerging unpredictable public health challenges all over the world, Pakistan called for increased coordination in public health and medical support stressing on the fact that only through increased multilateralism the impacts of the pandemic on the world economy and societies can be effectively managed. Pakistan also focused on post-pandemic rebuilding of economy by focusing on the aspect of trade

liberalization at the regional level, which was also significant part of the countries' overall vision for the further economic cooperation with the Central Asia and other states. However, this core principle of Pakistan's diplomacy for the SCO remained unchanged even during the pandemic: stability and economic development.

### **Role in Regional and Global Geopolitics: 2021-2024**

**2021:** The situation dramatically changed when Kabul fell into the hands of the Taliban in August 2021, And, as for Pakistani involvement in the SCO, Pakistan as a neighbor with important interests in Afghanistan's stability during the SCO session called for a political settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan. As one might expect, Pakistan's diplomacy was devoted to convincing the Global North to talk to the Taliban so that Afghanistan would not turn into a safe heaven for terrorists and extremists. In the context of the SCO, Pakistan also joined with the Chinese and Russian leaderships to develop a regional response to the new situation in Afghanistan. The changes in the geopolitics of the region also resulted in Pakistan raising its profile on regional security cooperation in SCO format (Warikoo, 2019).

**2022-2023:** On the multilateral level, Pakistani-Indian relations within the SCO remained quite sensitive within this period because the countries failed to solve disputes on Kashmir and other issues. Nonetheless, the two countries held meetings at SCO summits and also posed a positive note of continuing talks to maintain stability in the region. Pakistan has been insisting on the peace in conflicts including in South Asia within the SCO yet, it remained restrained on the issue of Kashmir. Thus the SCO as a multilateral organization represented an instrumental diplomacy for Pakistan's diplomatic relations with India and other actors in the region in spite of continuous political conflict between both countries.

**2023-2024:** By 2023 the increasing role of Pakistan in the SCO more and more is seen as an important actor within the continents changing international dynamics. The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and China's ascendancy, along with the increasing contributions of the SCO in world affairs, offered Pakistan a renewed chance to reinforce bilateral and multilateral relations with specific members of the SCO mostly encompassing China and Russia. The CPEC, which is a component of the Chinese BRI, amid which Pakistan has been actively supporting, became one of the main subjects of cooperation with the SCO. The emerging Sino centrism in the region helps the cause of Pakistan-China bonding as both have similar strategic interests. Moreover, Pakistan's increasing assertiveness in the regional security discourse, particularly on Afghanistan and its support towards SCO led initiatives on counter-terrorism, trade and economic cooperation are portends of its changing role as a significant player in regional and global geopolitics (Ahmed, & Bhatnagar, 2019).

Over these years of its membership, Pakistan has learnt how to be a player in the SCO, desirous of its place in enroll instead of being a player acting as a policy maker of the organization's policies on the secularity, trade, and economics. Relations with China and Russia and Pakistan's interest in regional stability within the common SCO vector, interest in economic security and cooperation have defined Pakistan's stance within the newly emerged regional paradigm.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper employs a comparative and historical research approach to analyze Pakistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) between 2011 and 2024. At this, the study is based solely on secondary sources in the form of scientific articles, books, and reports, which can discuss Pakistan's interaction with the SCO. The discussion is centered on exploring the dynamic events and undiscovered narrative in Pakistan's involvement and strategic engagement with the organization, especially in the sphere of security architecture, economic cooperation and multilateralism. The study locates Pakistan's involvement in the SCO within the wider strategic body by analyzing both the organization's goals and activities and Pakistan's rationale based on the country's strategic, political, and economic interests.

Such a method as content analysis serves as the methodological fundament of the research, analyzing secondary sources to identify their essential pattern concerning Pakistan, including its contribution, prospects, and challenges within the SCO framework. A comparative analysis is done to state and compare the roles of other prominent members of the SCO such as China, Russia, and India and to determine Pakistan's impact and compliance with the SCO mission. Applying this approach, all paramount sources and the most influencing views identified in the academia and foreign expertise will be introduced to analyze Pakistan's strategic interaction with the organization and reflect on the potential impact of the SCO on regional and international governance systems. In emphasizing secondary data, the study maintains access and richness and richness; it eliminates practical difficulties inherent in primary data research.

## Study Findings

### Evolution of Pakistan's Role in the SCO (2011–2024)

Analyzing the dynamics of Pakistan's participation in the activities of the SCO, it is possible to distinguish four stages, each of which is characterized by active changes in the level of participation in the work of the organization from passive to active in the context of 2011-2024. Firstly, from 2005 to 2017, Pakistan's status was Observer, in this capacity, Pakistan had no decision-making power; country could only offer suggestions on the discussion table. Nonetheless, full-fledged membership in 2017, together with India, became iconic, which means that the country is recognized as a geopolitical player in the Eurasian space. From 2011 to 2014 Pakistan's concern was how to align itself with the SCO Charter and the fight against 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism and extremism. In order to assert common security interests, mainly regarding Afghanistan and terrorism, Pakistan joined SCO on meetings (Warikoo, 2019).

When joining it in 2017, Pakistan has become the full member; however, its involvement has become more dynamic. For example, it became a member of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure as well as participated in cooperated counterterrorism operations like the "Peace Mission" series. Pakistan assumed a greater role of its mediation after the US exit from Afghanistan in 2021, in which it painted itself as a stable actor in the region. Through 2024, Pakistan has been participating regularly in SCO summits and working groups and actively presenting its strategies like CPEC as the part of SCO connectivity vision.

### Strategic, Political, and Economic Motivations

Pakistan's strategic interests in interacting with the SCO are linked to factors related to its security on the one hand, and to check the growing Indian might on the other. SCO anti-terrorism stand supports Pakistan's stance to combat terrorism and militancy especially in the border areas with Afghanistan. For example, through SCO-RATS, Pakistan improved the exchange of information and became involved in various regional security sectors aimed against the cross-threat of extremism from neighboring countries. The SCO also gives Pakistan an opportunity to interact with India in a diplomatic manner under the framework of the organization and reduce tensions between two countries and negotiate on the stability of the region.

Economically, an important factor for the engagement of Pakistan with the SCO is its vision to region connectivity and development. The focus of the SCO on the infrastructure and trade correspond with the Pakistani main project of CPEC under the BRI of China. By 2024, CPEC remains as significant passage of China to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan's Gwadar port. This step enhances the strategic importance of Pakistan in the region mainly as a transit country for CAs energy products as well as trade corridors. In addition, the SCO opens up the center Asian republics to Pakistan selling goods and there is a plethora of opportunities in energy cooperation especially in oil and gas (Shahzad, et al., 2024).

In political context, SCO aches Pakistan's global status by aligning it with a powerful Eurasian group spear headed by China and Russia. This membership has seen Pakistan benefit in diversification of its foreign policies thus breaking with the traditional western oriented policies. Pakistan's role of becoming a part of these groupings also benefits from including the observer states like Iran and Turkey because the SCO—and more broadly, regional groupings that oppose Western pressures in geopolitics—fears those. For instance, Pakistan has endorsed SCO agendas on Afghanistan, with regards to bringing regional stability in Afghanistan that in return puts the security of Pakistan in a strategic position.

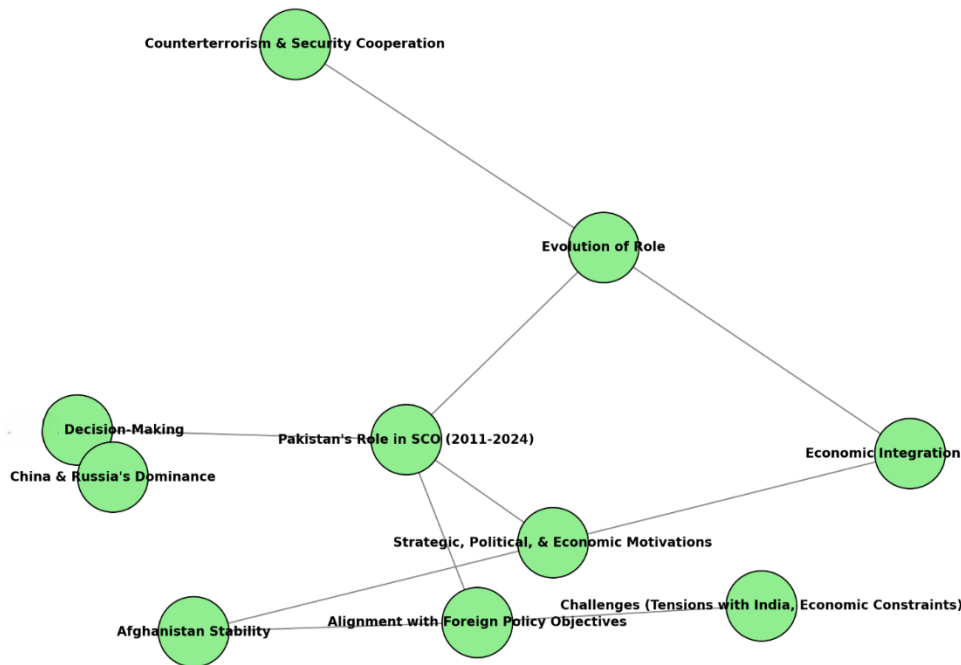
### Pakistan's Influence on Decision-Making

In this case Pakistan is a member of the SCO the country did not exercise the kind of control it has the right to control as a founding member like China or Russia. These powers seize operational control of the organization's strategic and economic planning and have enormous resources and political influence. Pakistan occupies a much smaller role, existing for the most part merely as a supporter of Chinese projects such as the BRI. Nevertheless, Pakistan has an impact with regards to particular tasks which include counter-terrorism and stability of the region. Pakistan and through SCO-RATS has participated in sharing intelligence and combined exercises related to threats such as terrorism originating from Afghanistan. For instance, in August 2021 when the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, Pakistan aligned with SCO to seek for multiparty administration in Kabul and to ensure that the radical revolutionaries did not regain authority in the region. Moreover, there is an attempt to present CPEC as a model of regional integration with special focus on Central Asia's accession to global markets through the Arabian Sea. This is in line with SCO's long term strategy of economic integration keeping Pakistan involved in deliberations about regional development projects (Nizamani, 2018).



**Alignment with Broader Foreign Policy Objectives**

Pakistan’s SCO membership fit well in the country’s foreign policy goals and enables it to seek multilateral solutions to most issues affecting it. The primary of these is the Pakistan’s objective to further enhance the ties with China, which is its most important friend. Moreover, it has the added advantage of utilizing the SCO as a softer tool for economic integration through CPEC, as well as military cooperation for the sake of presenting it as security related. The SCO also gives diplomatic freedom for Pakistan to interact with India in the framework of an organization and meet without using joint working level talks or negotiations that are likely to result in controversies. For example, at 2019 SCO summit in Bishkek, Pakistan urged to unite in fight against terrorism and reiterated its gross concerns over India’s actions in Kashmir. Unlike bilateral relations which entail negotiations between two parties, the current multilateralism reduces the extent of an adversarial relationship between India-Pak. Furthermore, I argued that through the switch of SCO as a ‘Central Asian’ organization Pakistan’s transit towards the region makes a lot of sense (Dadabaev, 2014). Remained uncharted for a long time, it holds good prospect for Pakistan particularly for trade and energy sources. Projects such as CASA-1000 electricity transmission and TAPI gas pipeline represent Pakistan’s desire to absorb Central Asian assets into its economic mix through interaction with the SCO.



This figure captures the research outcomes on Pakistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for the period 2011-2024. These are key themes like a category of Pakistan’s changing role, the role of strategy, motivations, impact, and relationship to foreign policy goals; the interrelated aspects include counterterrorism, economic cooperation, and major issues.

**Data Analysis**

**Qualitative Content Analysis**

While political and economic rapport occupy a significant part of the bilateral relation, security issues remain the core of Pakistan’s relationships with the SCO. Pakistani authorities frequently use mechanisms such as RATS to combat terrorism and extremism in the country because the organization focuses on the fight against terrorism. Since the joining of the SCO, Pakistan has involved in information-sharing processes and exercise/plans to counter terrorism with other partners. More specifically, in the scope of the 2018-completed Peace Mission exercise, Pakistan worked with Russia and China to counter assumed security threats, which improved its counter-terrorism capabilities as well as its integration into the SCO framework. Pakistan’s support for the Group of Five (G-5) power’s and Central Asia’s strategies toward instability in Afghanistan also supports PAKs’ active engagement in the SCO’s security architecture.

A study of all the statements made by Pakistan at the SCO summits shows that the key aspects covered are counter terrorism, security and stability, economic connectivity. For example, during the 2022 Samarkand meeting, Pakistan outlined its actions to fight terrorism by showcasing the previous military operations – Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad as well. Likewise, desire to involve concerned country's infrastructure in the wider regional connection schemes, Pakistan also wanted to see CPEC as integral part of SCO connectivity vision.

Geographically situated at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, the economic policies with the SCO have been shaped from this perspective in Pakistan. The CPEC which is part of belt and road initiative has been an iconic project of showcasing Pakistan as a connectivity hub. With Gwadar Port connected to Central Asia, Pakistan has put itself in advantageous place in the connecting and transit of trade and energy. However, several cross-cutting issues including internal political instabilities and frosty relationship with India have been a hindrance to Pakistan fully cashing in these opportunities. Nevertheless, Pakistan has persistently urged the members to work on developing infrastructure and regional connectivity during the SCO summits, this has highlighted modules of energy and trade connectivity.

### **Comparative Analysis with Other Member States**

In contrast to the two great powers — China and Russia — Pakistan's place within the SCO is still limited to a narrow area of cooperation including that of security, connectivity within the region. While the Chinese uses the SCO as a platform to promote BRI and increase economic power in the region and Russia's primary SCO goal is to address NATO presence and remain a historical power in Central Asia, Pakistan's activity is mostly remnant and reactive in dealing with terrorism, extremism and regional security threats (Xue, & Makengo, 2021). Pakistan's position has the primary goal of using its geographical advantage along with friendship particularly with China in supporting CPEC, which fits SCO's large perspective for increased connection and cooperation.

India's engagement with the SCO is much more measured. As a competitor to Pakistan and China, India is passive in some projects of the SCO because of political considerations. At the same time, the economic and political potential of India gives it a great deal of leverage in this organization. However, India's policies more frequently remain Eurasian-European oriented unlike Pakistan which is closely dovetailed with China's goals in the region; while counterterrorism is a key area of cooperation where India participates in SCO initiatives, it yet refrains from involving in deeper SCO-led economic integration projects. New membership of India and Pakistan in 2017 make the SCO as an organization more complicated due to tension between two full members of the organization for actual engagement with each other.

Pakistan's cooperation with China is beneficial for the formation of Pakistan's position in the framework of the SCO. By developing the projects like CPEC, Pakistan has indeed played its role in strengthening connectivity amid regional integration by marking itself as an important trade gateway between Central Asian states and Arabian Sea. This is particularly relevant to the formation of the SCO, in which the main priorities include economic cooperation for integration and the development of transport infrastructure. Pakistan's fight for stability in Afghanistan and the region has extended its promotion of the use of the SCO. For example, at the 2021 SCO summit when Pakistan was stressing the situation in Afghanistan, humanitarian assistance, terrorism threats, and the broad-based Afghan government, other SCO members also supported those initiatives. It focuses on the country's capacity to manage important regional issues and at the same time promote its security and foreign policy agenda.

However, the place of Pakistan within the framework of the SCO is still somewhat circumscribed as compared to the latter's hegemonic position occupied by the Chinese and Russian participants. China controls much of the BRI and thus is the dominant force in the organization; Russia's historical and geopolitical influence in Central Asia makes it a major organizer of the SCO's assessment of interests. Pakistan, nevertheless, has been able to establish itself by targeting those sectors where it enjoys some sort of competitive advantage, including security cooperation and counterterrorism. Thus, in combination with the geographic factor, such competencies increase the organization's value in the discourse on regional security and cooperation frameworks within the SCO.

Even though Pakistan is not as influential as much as China or Russia in the organization, the country has mobilized the organization to fulfill its strategic goals. Thus, Pakistan has proven its skill in overcoming the multilateral challenge within the SCO: by supporting China's vision of the economic development of the region, entering into a dialogue with Russia on security concerns, and calling for stability in Afghanistan. Intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation with the organization remains some of the previews it

has made towards protection of security in the region and remain in line with the objectives of the organization, this puts it in a special place of connecting between South Asia and Central Asia.

### **Challenges Identified**

Nevertheless, Pakistan has its issues with the SCO. These include: The decisions within the SCO are mainly influenced by China and Russia. The complex relations between Pakistan and India are transferred to the SCO level; there are many threats that turn into unilateral actions and can significantly affect the extent of regional cooperation. Pakistan has a relatively lower level of economic development in comparison with most members of the SCO, which makes it impossible for Pakistan to come up with and launch regional projects on its own initiative. Nevertheless, Pakistan has been an active member of the SCO, and still, there are some challenges for this country inside the organization. Its impact in shaping economic policies is still subdued by the Chinese and Russian counterparts. Thirdly, conflicts with India are always manifested in the framework of the SCO, which means that an increase in the scale of regional cooperation is not possible. Internal problems in Pakistan, such as political instability and economic problems at the same time limit options for Pakistan to get optimal benefits from the SCO membership.

### **Conclusion**

The exploration of the Pakistan's SCO membership during 2011-2024 uncovers a new paradigm shift in the country's foreign policy making thereby demonstrating multidimensional purposive operation of the country through multilateral diplomacy for economic benign and secure regional environment. First, Pakistan had only the observer status, but when it acceded to the SCO in 2017, it gained fully-fledged membership to shape decisions more actively. Regarding the issues in question, namely, combating terrorism, preventing instability in Afghanistan, and developing connectivity, such as CPEC, the SCO offered Pakistan the parameters that it necessary to consider.

However, Pakistan's status in the SCO remains lowly in contrast to that of founding members China and Russia but more advantageous in some of the special areas. A key factor that has made Pakistan suited to work together with other member states is translating of Pakistan's national security priorities into regional security goals embraced by the SCO. Moreover, the organization has enabled Pakistan to deal with India diplomatically in a forum that avoids two country direct confrontation. Indeed, there is a Pakistani success: its recognition as a full SCO member on June 7, 2010. However, Pakistan still has problems: internal economic issues; the country's limited SCO decision-making authority; and its chronic conflict with India. However, Pakistan has also proved quite tenacious to offset its geographic location and unilateral support to its allies most especially China to call for regional integration and stability. Reflecting the scenario, this study reveals the SCO aspect of regional cooperation and the relatively enhancing yet still a bit limited power diplomacy aspect of Pakistan within the SCO structure. By submitting Pakistani endeavors to the SCO as a regional ambition, the country has become the subject of Eurasian politics and laid the groundwork for further harmonization and coordination in the area.

### **Disclosure Statement**

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