

# Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Regional Security

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## Abstract

*The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), having regional players, including Afghanistan as an observer and member states – Russia, China, Central Asian states, Pakistan and India can be a platform to discuss regional security issues. This article highlights how the Organization has contributed towards peace. In this context, the differential approaches of these states will be explored in the context of how they impede efforts towards regional security. The Pakistan-India existential disputes, the security situation in Afghanistan and contradiction over terrorism are seen as defining trends. Meanwhile, interregional connectivity and the benefits linked with economic interdependence offer scope for cooperation.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Regional Security, Central Asia, Afghanistan, CPEC, Regional Organisation.

## Introduction

In a globalised world, terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, border security and environmental degradation have altered the security landscape of the world. To address transnational challenges, multilateral approaches are being employed - a number of regional as well as international organisations have emerged, wherein, the political actors

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in pursuance of economic goals and to counter the security threats opt for multilateral approaches.<sup>1</sup>

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a transnational organisation of the Eurasian region.<sup>2</sup> The member states' endeavour for regional peace amidst the threat of terrorism was the driving force behind its creation. As per its Charter, the SCO is 'the first international organization to set counter-terrorism as its target.'<sup>3</sup> The initial membership of the Organization comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.<sup>4</sup> Following its expansion, Pakistan and India<sup>5</sup> became new member states. Geographically, the SCO covers a vast area, stretching from Russia in the North to waters of the Indian Ocean in the South.<sup>6</sup> The member states differ in size and political standing. Russia and China are UN Security Council members, Central Asian Republics (CARs) are resource-rich, but do not have political clout,<sup>7</sup> and Pakistan and India carry different political lineage. Pakistan, under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is likely to emerge as a regional economic hub; while, India due to its strategic partnership with the United States (US) stands on the opposite plank. While the political and security environment, terrorism, instability in Afghanistan, drug trade are existential threats; the Central-South link offers scope of cooperation. This platform having regional players on board, including Afghanistan

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Ihsan Qadir and Saif ur Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," *Journal of Political Studies* 23, no. 1 (2016): 117-132 (117), [http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/pols/pdf-files/8%20-%20IHSAN%20-%20SAIF\\_v23\\_1\\_16.pdf](http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/pols/pdf-files/8%20-%20IHSAN%20-%20SAIF_v23_1_16.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>3</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization Charter, China- Kazakhstan- Kyrgyzstan- Russia- Tajikistan- Uzbekistan, June 15, 2001, <http://people.unica.it/annamariabaldussi/files/2015/04/SCO-Charter.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Nabila Jaffer, "The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications," *Regional Studies* XXXIV, no. 2 (2016): 65-93 (65).

<sup>5</sup> Seema Sengupta, "Bigger Shanghai Cooperation Organization may be Game-Changer," *Asia Times*, June 5, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/bigger-shanghai-cooperation-organization-may-game-changer/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Qadir and Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," 121.

(observer state),<sup>8</sup> can be an opportunity to chalk out a collaborative strategy. However, the US' absence from it leaves a question mark over SCO's neutral approach, and reinforces the perception that it is an anti-West alliance to limit Washington's ingress in the region.<sup>9</sup> The subject article will discuss SCO's role in building a stable region, the approach of member states concerning regional challenges and the likely political competition hampering the Organization's performance.

### **SCO – A Brief Overview**

The SCO was formed on June 15, 2001.<sup>10</sup> It has eight member countries, namely China, Russia and CARs (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), Pakistan and India.<sup>11</sup> The predecessor of SCO was 'Shanghai Five' under which China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan concluded the 'Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions' in April 1996 and the 'Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions' in Moscow in 1997.<sup>12</sup> Afterwards, a 7400 kilometres 'belt of peace and stability' was established in the region.<sup>13</sup>

The institutionalisation of Shanghai Five into SCO was primarily meant to strengthen multilateral cooperation. The idea was floated by China, and later with the acceptance of other member states, formation of

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<sup>8</sup> Syed Farooq Hasnat and Zamurrad Awan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential," *Perceptions* XXI, no. 1 (2016): 83-100 (92), [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/perceptions\\_Spring2016183-100.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/perceptions_Spring2016183-100.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Qadir and Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," 118.

<sup>10</sup> Jaffer, "The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications," 65.

<sup>11</sup> Qadir and Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," 118.

<sup>12</sup> Huma Rehman and Muhammad Faisal, "SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict," *CISS Insight: Quarterly Journal* III, no. 3 (2015): 24-38 (24), <http://ciss.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Paper-3-I-3-V.-3.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Ishtiaq Ahmad, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China, Russia, and Regionalism in Central Asia" (paper presented at Inter-Asian Connections Conference, Social Sciences Research Council, Dubai, February 21-23, 2008), 2, [http://ishtiaqahmad.com/downloads/SCO\\_Dubai\\_Feb\\_08.pdf](http://ishtiaqahmad.com/downloads/SCO_Dubai_Feb_08.pdf).

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the SCO materialised.<sup>14</sup> The four observer states are Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia, while the six dialogue partners include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey. The three guest attendants are Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Turkmenistan.<sup>15</sup>

The US was denied observer status in the Organization, on the pretext of being an extra-regional power.<sup>16</sup> Back in 2005, the US was forced to vacate its military bases from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (c.f. Astana Declaration).<sup>17</sup> The US political scientist Thomas Ambrosio opines that ‘the SCO was created to promote authoritarian norms in Central Asia.’ In fact, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor to late US President Jimmy Carter, ‘control of the Eurasian land mass is the key to global domination and control of Central Asia is the key to control of the Eurasian land mass.’<sup>18</sup> The contention over US membership is indicative that SCO’s relationship with the West is more nuanced than meets the eye. There exist disagreements over international issues.<sup>19</sup> China’s economic prowess and Russia’s resurgence pose a challenge to the unipolar world order, especially to the US.

The SCO’s Secretariat is based in Beijing. The Council of Heads of States is the highest decision-making body in the Organization. It appoints the Secretary General for a three-year term on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The institutional mechanisms are in place, wherein Chief Executives/Prime Ministers of member states,

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<sup>14</sup> Nicklas Norling and Niklas Swanström, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Trade, and the Roles of Iran, India and Pakistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 3 (2007): 429-444, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930701702779>.

<sup>15</sup> Qadir and Rehman, “Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity,” 118.

<sup>16</sup> Ahmad, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China, Russia, and Regionalism in Central Asia,” 7.

<sup>17</sup> Qadir and Rehman, “Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity,” 122, 123.

<sup>18</sup> S. M. Hali, “Impact of Pakistan’s SCO Entry,” *Daily Times*, June 16, 2017, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/6373/impact-of-pakistans-sco-entry/>.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Aris, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Mapping Multilateralism in Transition No. 2” (paper, International Peace Institute, New York, 2013), 10, [https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi\\_e\\_pub\\_shanghai\\_cooperation.pdf](https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi_e_pub_shanghai_cooperation.pdf).

Speakers of Parliament, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Economy and Education meet, and deliberate upon issues of regional interest.<sup>20</sup>

As envisioned in the ‘Shanghai Spirit’, it works on the principle of ‘mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations and pursuit of common development.’<sup>21</sup> SCO member states, other than cooperating on Non-Traditional Security Threats (NTST), have intensified cooperation in political affairs, education, cultural exchange, energy, and environmental protection.<sup>22</sup> The SCO Development Strategy 2025, adopted at the 15<sup>th</sup> SCO Summit (Ufa, July 2015), called for greater economic cooperation, strengthening regional stability and promptly responding to conflicts and crisis.<sup>23</sup>

The SCO also participates in regional and international forums. Its observer status in the UN General Assembly (December 2004), Joint Declaration signed between the SCO and the UN Secretariat (April 2010) shows the Organization’s global outreach. It has signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with CIS, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).<sup>24</sup> Through these transnational platforms, SCO exchanges views on international security, stability, terrorism and transborder crimes.

## **SCO Members**

### ***Russia, China and Central Asian States (CAS)***

The ‘Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between Russia and China’ (July 2001)<sup>25</sup> and the ‘Treaty on Long-Term Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation’ between the SCO member

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<sup>20</sup> Rehman and Faisal, “SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict,” 26.

<sup>21</sup> Qadir and Rehman, “Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity,” 119.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Munir, “Outcome of SCO Summit,” *Pakistan Observer*, July 22, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Rehman and Faisal, “SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict,” 27, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Nicklas Norling, “China and Russia: Partners with Tensions,” *Policy Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2007), <http://www.ips.org.pk/global-issues-and-politics/1022-china-and-russia-partners-with-tensions>.

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states (Bishkek Summit, August 2007)<sup>26</sup> reflect the trend of peaceful coexistence and can be termed as successes. Russia's implicit acceptance of China's regional role, in particular Beijing-CARs (former Soviet Republics) relations is indicative that the strategic competition between Moscow and Beijing has been contained within the regional framework.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the CAS' fear of being dominated by an 'economically developed' China or an assertive Russia also appears to be addressed under this framework.<sup>28</sup>

#### ***Pakistan and India***

Pakistan and India, as SCO members will have to observe the spirit of 'mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilisations and pursuit of common development.'<sup>29</sup> Former Additional Foreign Secretary, Aziz Ahmed Khan views the Pakistan-India SCO membership optimistically:

Resolving outstanding issues and moving toward a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship will enable both Islamabad and New Delhi to exploit the SCO platform effectively contributing to regional peace, combating terrorism and working for the economic development of member states, as per the organization's mandate.<sup>30</sup>

The SCO platform is an opportunity for both countries to interact and discuss security-related issues. However, the present era of confrontational politics, in particular, firing across the Line of Control (LoC), India's explicit opposition to CPEC and subversive pursuits to sabotage its development offer little to no hope for cooperation. Professor

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<sup>26</sup> Roman Muzalevsky, "SCO Attempts to Deepen Cooperation at Head-of-State Summit in Krygyzstan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 10, no. 165 (2013), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=41377&no\\_cache=1#.V76Fffl97Z4](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41377&no_cache=1#.V76Fffl97Z4).

<sup>27</sup> Ahmad, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China, Russia, and Regionalism in Central Asia," 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Qadir and Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," 119.

<sup>30</sup> Sengupta, "Bigger Shanghai Cooperation Organization may be Game-Changer."

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Phunchok Stobdan, a former Indian Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan and renowned expert on Eurasian affairs, believes:

The SCO can beget a gradual thawing of India-Pakistan tension, especially because of Beijing's keen interest in a stable South Asia to realize the full potential of its One Belt One Road (OBOR) project.<sup>31</sup>

In view of Professor Zhang Li, Director of Sichuan University's Centre of Afghan and Regional Security Studies:

The SCO will, undoubtedly, help India and Pakistan narrow their differences in perceiving some important regional issues, including terrorism, border management and physical connectivity... increasing mutual trust and even reconciling their respective policy approaches to regional security challenges... [But] major obstacles such as the vexed question of Kashmir are unlikely to be resolved any time soon.<sup>32</sup>

India can access the Central Asian markets through CPEC. The interregional connectivity and economic dependence can positively improve its bilateral relations with Pakistan. However, subject to India's tenacious opposition to CPEC as stated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 'the project is "unacceptable" because it passes through the disputed territory.'<sup>33</sup> The Karakoram Highway passes through the same territory and has been operational since the late 1970s, the only difference between the Highway and the Corridor is that the latter promises more prosperity and has the potential to make Pakistan a regional economic hub. The Indian claim is a reflection of confrontational politics.

### ***India and China***

India also has a territorial dispute with China. Both countries have contesting claims over the territories of Arunachal Pradesh (held with India) and Aksai Chin (under Chinese control). The Line of Actual

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Sardar Masood Khan, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Win-Win for All," *Hilal* 11, no. 54(2017).

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Control (LAC) between the two neighbours has seen intermittent violence.<sup>34</sup>

### **SCO and Regional Security: Building a ‘Harmonious Region’**

‘To strengthen mutual trust, friendship and good neighbourliness between the member States’ and to consolidate ‘multidisciplinary cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace, security and stability in the region,’ Article 1 – SCO Charter,<sup>35</sup> was adopted on June 7, 2002, at Saint Petersburg, Russia.<sup>36</sup> In line with the SCO Charter:

The member-states should not have an active military conflict, and work towards stabilizing the border regions, while building military trust for maintaining peace and stability.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Discouraging Arms Race***

The SCO also addresses the issue of arms race vis-à-vis regional security. Article 2 of the SCO Charter prohibits ‘seeking unilateral military superiority.’<sup>38</sup> In June 2012, the members pointed out that:

The strengthening of missile defence by a country or a group of countries in a unilateral and unrestrained manner in disregard to the legitimate interests of other countries will cause harm to international security and global strategic stability.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Joint Military Exercises***

The SCO member states hold joint military exercises focusing on peace building efforts. *Peace Mission 2005* held between Russia and China,

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<sup>34</sup> Rehman and Faisal, “SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict,” 34.

<sup>35</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization Charter, China- Kazakhstan- Kyrgyzstan- Russia- Tajikistan- Uzbekistan.

<sup>36</sup> Jaffer, “The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications,” 67.

<sup>37</sup> Rehman and Faisal, “SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict,” 33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, “SCO Membership: Potentials for Pakistan,” *Hilal* 52, no. 2 (2015): 52.



started at Vladivostok, Russia and concluded at Weifang, China;<sup>40</sup> a *Peace Mission 2007* was organised in Russia Urals and Xinjiang region with military personnel from Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan;<sup>41</sup> *Peace Mission 2010* with military personnel from China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan was held at Kazakhstan's Matybulak;<sup>42</sup> *Peace Mission 2012* with military personnel from China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan was held at Khujand, Tajikistan; and *Peace Mission 2014* with military personnel from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was held at Zhurihe training base, North China.

Russian and Chinese navies, under the SCO auspices, held joint maritime exercises twice in 2016.<sup>43</sup> The *Peace Mission 2018* with militaries from the SCO members, including Pakistan and India was held at Chebarkul, in the Chelyabinsk region (West-Central Russia) from August 22-29. 3000 soldiers from the member states took part in the counterterrorism exercise.<sup>44</sup> India and Pakistan have become part of an antiterrorism drill, which makes one to hope that this may lead both countries as SCO members to work towards collaborative approaches in countering terrorism. Such a development will have positive impact not only bilaterally but on the region at large.

### ***Economic Cooperation: 'Aspiration for Joint Development'***

The SCO is also trying to integrate economically under Article 3:

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<sup>40</sup> Martin Andrew, "Power Politics: China, Russia and Peace Missions 2005," *China Brief* 5, no. 20 (2005), <https://jamestown.org/program/power-politics-china-russia-and-peace-mission-2005/>.

<sup>41</sup> Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Expanding SCO for Regional Stability: Pakistani Perspective," in *SCO's Role in Regional Stability: Prospects of its Expansion*, ed. Mushir Anwar (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute: 2013), 87, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/srse.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Rehman and Faisal, "SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict," 28.

<sup>43</sup> Steven F. Jackson and Andrea M. Lopez, "RATS Play Whack-A-Mole: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Problem of Radical Islamic Terrorism" (paper presented at International Studies Association Conference, Hong Kong, June 17, 2017), 16, <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/c3062a77-fb37-4069-921a-969f8cfed4b6.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> "Indian, Pakistani Troops Take Part for the First Time in SCO Military Drill," *Times of India*, August 23, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indian-pakistani-troops-take-part-for-the-first-time-in-sco-military-drill/articleshow/65512859.cms>.

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The member states [will support and promote...] regional economic cooperation in various forms, fostering a favourable environment for trade and investments with a view to gradually achieving free flow of goods, capital services and technologies.<sup>45</sup>

The SCO Business Council was established in 2006, and the projects identified by the Council include ‘energy, transportation, telecommunications, banking, education, technology, health and agriculture.’<sup>46</sup> Chinese investment to support other regional states, power development infrastructures, and transportation/rail links will enhance the CARs trade with the outside regions, ‘in particular – Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, while offering profits from the growing transit trade to countries such as Iran, India and Pakistan as well as the West.’<sup>47</sup> During the 15<sup>th</sup> SCO Summit at Ufa, special emphasis was laid on deepening economic cooperation.<sup>48</sup>

CPEC and SCO can complement each other. CARs will be linked with CPEC through the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor.<sup>49</sup> Russia has also expressed the desire to be a part of the corridor.<sup>50</sup> The resource potential of Central Asian states, along with the energy needs of regional players, offer scope of regional economic integration. Pakistan’s Gwadar Port located at the Arabian Sea provides the shortest route to CARs (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have access to Gwadar via

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<sup>45</sup> Hasnat and Awan, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential,” 90.

<sup>46</sup> Yevgeniy Khon, “Prospects of Economic Cooperation in SCO Region,” in *SCO’s Role in Regional Stability: Prospects of its Expansion*, ed. Mushir Anwar (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute: 2013), 141, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/srse.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Hasnat and Awan, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential,” 85-90.

<sup>48</sup> Munir, “Outcome of SCO Summit.”

<sup>49</sup> Shafei Moiz Hali, Tan Shukui and Sumera Iqbal, “One Belt and One Road: Impact on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,” *Strategic Studies* 34 and 35, no. 4 and 1 (Winter 2014 and Summer 2015): 147-164 (155), [http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Shafei\\_Moiz\\_and\\_Tan\\_and\\_Sumera\\_3435\\_SS\\_41\\_20142015.pdf](http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Shafei_Moiz_and_Tan_and_Sumera_3435_SS_41_20142015.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Imtiaz Ahmad, “Russia to Join China-Pak Economic Corridor,” *Hindustan Times*, November 26, 2016, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/russia-to-join-china-pak-economic-corridor/story-VatjOEoYXHAmxBCBXQuiYN.html>.

Kashgar and Karakorum Highway. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have access to Gwadar via Afghanistan).<sup>51</sup> The electric power from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan can be exported to Kabul and Northwest of Pakistan.<sup>52</sup> Russia, China and CARs could establish a link with Gwadar via the North-South trade/energy corridor.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Fighting Terrorism***

The SCO member states' collective approach to counter extremism was developed in the backdrop of instability in Central Asia; the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-97) and the anti-regime groups operational in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (during 1999 and 2000).<sup>54</sup> Russia and China's geographical proximity with Central Asia also makes them vulnerable to regional developments. The Xinjiang province shares the 2,800 kilometres border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and Russia-Kazakhstan border of about 6846 kilometres.

In June 2001, the SCO member states passed a unanimous resolution called the *Shanghai Convention* to weed out 'terrorism, separatism and extremism.'<sup>55</sup> The adoption of the Convention shows the seriousness on part of the SCO member states to collectively address the threat posed by Non-State Actors (NSAs). As stated by Deputy Director of the SCO Research Centre at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS), Hu Jian, 'terrorism and extremism are key factors in the region and Afghanistan has been a cradle for terrorism and extremism since the US invasion.' It is important to note that the Convention against terrorism was adopted three months before the War on Terror.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Pervez Musharraf, "President Musharraf's Address at SCO Summit Held at Shanghai, China" (speech, Shanghai, June 15, 2006), Our Leader-Musharraf Blog, <https://presidentmusharraf.wordpress.com/2006/07/07/sco-states-summit-2006/>.

<sup>52</sup> Vafo Niyatbekov Alibekovick, "Power Projects of the Republic of Tajikistan as a Factor of Development of SCO," in *SCO's Role in Regional Stability: Prospects of its Expansion*, ed. Mushir Anwar (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute: 2013), 185, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/srse.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Jaspal, "SCO Membership: Potentials for Pakistan."

<sup>54</sup> Aris, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Mapping Multilateralism in Transition No. 2," 5.

<sup>55</sup> Rehman and Faisal, "SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict," 29.

<sup>56</sup> Hasnat and Awan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential," 90.

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The structure within the SCO framework dealing with terrorism is called the 'Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS)', based in Tashkent. RATS comprises of a Council of Ministers and an Executive Committee. The former foresees the terrorist threat, while the latter implements the agenda put across by the Council.<sup>57</sup>

The efforts undertaken by the SCO to curb extremism might not have completely eliminated the threat, but it has contributed towards peace. As evidenced from the RATS anti-terror operations, 250 terrorist attacks have been prevented in SCO member states.<sup>58</sup> Besides, it is 'building a database of suspected terrorists and organizations based on information sharing among the member states.'<sup>59</sup>

The SCO member states also conduct anti-trafficking exercises, primarily to enhance interoperability and curb the smuggling of drugs. The anti-drug trafficking exercise *Kanal 2006* intercepted 19285 kilograms of narcotics substance.<sup>60</sup> In fact, SCO's struggle to curb terrorism and the illicit transfer of drugs is not confined within the organisational domain, rather, through cooperative agreements with other regional bodies, it has been trying to eliminate these inhumane practices. The SCO signed an agreement with CSTO in October 2007 at Dushanbe, Tajikistan, which aims at strengthening 'regional and international security and stability, counteraction against terrorism, fight against drug trafficking and arms trafficking, and counteraction against transnational organised crime.'<sup>61</sup> In 2010, the RATS signed a protocol of cooperation with United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)'s Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC), whereby the two bodies collaborate on efforts to tackle illegal narcotics trade as a source of funding for terrorist organisations in the region.<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ahmad, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China, Russia, and Regionalism in Central Asia," 4.

<sup>59</sup> Jackson and Lopez, "RATS Play Whack-A-Mole: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Problem of Radical Islamic Terrorism," 15.

<sup>60</sup> Ahmad, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China, Russia, and Regionalism in Central Asia," 4.

<sup>61</sup> Marcel de Haas, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Momentum towards a Mature Security Alliance," *Scientia Militaria-South African Journal of Military Studies* 36, no. 1 (2008): 14-30 (23), <http://dx.doi.org/10.5787/36-1-42>.

<sup>62</sup> Aris, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Mapping Multilateralism in Transition No. 2," 5.

Border Cooperation Agreement adopted at the 15<sup>th</sup> SCO Summit in July 2015 is yet another initiative to fortify anti-trafficking practices.<sup>63</sup>

## **Challenges**

### ***Crossborder Terrorism***

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the 14<sup>th</sup> Heads of Government Council meeting, held on December 15, 2015 in Zhengzhou, China stated:

Pakistan would collectively confront the challenges of extremism, separatism, terrorism, human and drug trafficking, organized crime and environmental and natural disasters.<sup>64</sup>

The terrorist attack in Lahore (February 13, 2017) was carried out by a suicide bomber from Kunar, Afghanistan; Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), splinter group of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), was behind the attack.<sup>65</sup> Pakistan can discuss the issue of crossborder terrorism at the SCO platform, which can be helpful in dealing with foreign miscreants fomenting the situation in Balochistan and Pakistan's tribal areas. However, to discuss terrorism and look for a cooperative mechanism within the SCO framework might not be that smooth, given the contradiction over what constitutes 'terrorism'. As stated by Pankaj Saran, India's Ambassador to Russia:

We have conveyed our views to the Russian side that military cooperation with Pakistan, which is a state that sponsors and practices terrorism as a matter of state policy, is a wrong approach. It will only create further problems.<sup>66</sup>

The participation of India, Pakistan (and also Iran) within the sphere of antiterrorism is not likely to work in the current circumstances.

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<sup>63</sup> Munir, "Outcome of SCO Summit."

<sup>64</sup> Hasnat and Awan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential," 92.

<sup>65</sup> Amina Khan, "Pak-Afghan Relations after the Devastating Terror Attacks in Pakistan" (brief, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Islamabad, 2017), [http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Final\\_IB\\_Amina\\_dated\\_23-1-2017.pdf](http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Final_IB_Amina_dated_23-1-2017.pdf).

<sup>66</sup> Jayanth Jacob, "Pak 'Sponsors Terror', War Games with it a Wrong Approach: India Tells Russia," *Hindustan Times*, October 11, 2016, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/post-russia-pak-war-games-delhi-ticks-off-moscow-for-wrong-approach/story-d7Sa8mvNSosFODMI0TgdPJ.html>.

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Frequent Indian accusations of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism across the LoC and the Indian atrocities and human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir would be a tough challenge for the SCO to manage.<sup>67</sup>

### ***Peace in Afghanistan***

At the Cholpon Ata summit (2013), the SCO members agreed that peace and stability in Central Asia depended on development of the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup>

Afghanistan is bordered by Tajikistan (1,344 kilometres), Turkmenistan (744 kilometres) and Uzbekistan (137 kilometres) to the North.<sup>69</sup> Any disturbance in Afghanistan has fallout for the neighbouring Central Asian states.

China and Russia are also concerned about Afghan developments. China, is a leading foreign investor in Afghanistan, which includes USD3 billion in the East (Aynak copper mine located in Logar province); and about USD700 million in the North (oil and gas exploration located in the Sar-e-Pol and Faryab provinces of Northern Afghanistan).<sup>70</sup> China's prime concern is the presence of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) elements. It 'alleges that more than thousand Uighur separatists have been trained in Afghanistan.'<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, an insecure Afghanistan could be an impediment to China's economic vision (BRI). The presence of Daesh (Islamic State-IS) elements in Afghanistan has further reinforced the security challenge to regional connectivity. As stated by the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov 'IS [is] the most obvious challenge to the SCO members.'<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Norling and Swanström, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Trade, and the Roles of Iran, India and Pakistan," 438.

<sup>68</sup> Raj Kumar Sharma, "SCO's Role in Afghanistan: Prospects and Challenges," *Mainstream Weekly* LIII, no. 24, June 6, 2015, <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article5721.html>.

<sup>69</sup> "Central Asia and Afghanistan: A Tumultuous History," *Stratfor*, September 24, 2013, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/central-asia-and-afghanistan-tumultuous-history>.

<sup>70</sup> Salman Rafi Sheikh, "Afghan Peace Talks must be All Inclusive," *Asia Times*, February 4, 2016, <http://www.atimes.com/article/afghan-peace-talks-must-be-all-inclusive/>.

<sup>71</sup> Sharma, "SCO's Role in Afghanistan: Prospects and Challenges."

<sup>72</sup> Hasnat and Awan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential," 97.

Afghanistan holds great significance in the SCO security calculus. The ‘SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group’ has been in place in Beijing since November 2005.<sup>73</sup> In March 2009, the SCO organised a conference on Afghanistan where issues pertaining to terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and organised crime were discussed.<sup>74</sup> At the 15<sup>th</sup> SCO Summit in 2015, the member states called for an ‘anti-terrorism plan’ to limit the ingress of Daesh in Afghanistan.<sup>75</sup>

Of course, each SCO member state is also endeavouring to promote peace in war-torn Afghanistan in line with their individual compulsions, subject to their geographic proximity. Besides, on the regional front, to materialise interregional connectivity between Central and South Asia and the likely operationalisation of energy pipelines like the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI),<sup>76</sup> a conducive environment is required, which largely depends upon the Afghan situation.

The drug cycle/route from Afghanistan to Central Asia, Russia and China has also been a spoiler in regional peace. While, as discussed earlier, member states have adopted an anti-narcotics strategy,<sup>77</sup> proposed a regional anti-drug centre and a specialized training centre to impart training to personnel from SCO countries,<sup>78</sup> the dynamics of narcotics trade coming out of Kabul are so intertwined with the country’s economy that this is likely to be a lingering challenge.

While the SCO’s efforts for a stable Afghanistan are laudable, peace is non-existent. Pakistan and India are the new entrants in SCO; both the South Asian players have remained involved in Afghan regional politics. More so, after US President Trump’s increasing tilt towards New Delhi’s involvement in the area. Pakistan shares a long porous border

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<sup>73</sup> Hasnat and Awan, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Platform for Regional Understanding: Its Economic, Political and Security Potential,” 92.

<sup>74</sup> Sharma, “SCO’s Role in Afghanistan: Prospects and Challenges.”

<sup>75</sup> Munir, “Outcome of SCO Summit.”

<sup>76</sup> Jaffer, “The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications,” 70, 81.

<sup>77</sup> Aris, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Mapping Multilateralism in Transition No. 2,” 5.

<sup>78</sup> Sharma, “SCO’s Role in Afghanistan: Prospects and Challenges.”

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(2,200 kilometres) with Afghanistan,<sup>79</sup> in addition, to social and cultural bonds between the two neighbours. India does not share a border with Afghanistan but wants to have strategic depth.<sup>80</sup> Pakistan's interest for a stable Afghanistan has a regional orientation. CPEC, linking China, Pakistan, Central Asia, and Russia, envisions regional connectivity.<sup>81</sup> Under CPEC, the construction of Peshawar-Kabul motorway will enhance Afghanistan's access to the Arabian Sea and open up prospects of economic activities. Afghanistan will also be connected to CPEC via Chaman through an additional link of the Western alignment (which originates from Gwadar, passes through Khuzdar, Zhob, D.I. Khan and reaches Islamabad).<sup>82</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The SCO platform can be an opportunity for regional players to sit together and look for a solution to Afghanistan. The US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), having troop deployment (Resolute Support Mission 13,000) in Afghanistan, also need to be taken on board. However, having so many stakeholders on one platform, their divergent stance to the peace process is a major challenge. The US views the Taliban as a source of instability in Afghanistan, while Russia is more opposed to IS presence in the country; and through cooperation with the Taliban wants to counter its ingress.<sup>83</sup> Washington has been wary of the Russia-Afghan peace diplomacy, and accused Moscow of arming the Taliban, and undermining the US' presence in Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Jaffer, "The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications," 78.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>81</sup> Jaspal, "SCO Membership: Potentials for Pakistan."

<sup>82</sup> Khalid Manzoor Butt and Anam Abid Butt, "Impact of CPEC on Regional and Extra-Regional Actors," *Journal of Political Science XXXIII* (2015): 23-44 (33), <http://ps.gcu.edu.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Butt-Butt.pdf>.

<sup>83</sup> Amna Ejaz Rafi, "Mr. Andrew Korybko, Correspondent Sputnik, News Agency and Radio Visit to Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) – 17 April 2017" (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2017), <http://www.ipripak.org/mr-andrew-korybko-correspondent-sputnik-news-agency-and-radio-visit-to-islamabad-policy-research-institute-ipri-17-april-2017/>.

<sup>84</sup> Cindy Saine and Ayaz Gul, "US Wary of Russian Role in Afghanistan as Moscow Holds Talks," *Voice of America*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-wary-russian-role-afghanistan/3809349.html>.



It needs to be acknowledged that SCO has been instrumental in harmonising regional competition and discouraging extra-regional presence. The Organization's efforts to curtail extremist elements and holding military exercises have strengthened interoperability and trust at the regional level. Economic activities and energy projects linking Eurasia and South Asia will give an impetus to regional integration. The Pakistan-India disputes are in sharp contrast to the principle of 'peaceful coexistence.'<sup>85</sup> Both will have to observe the 'Shanghai Spirit.' However, will the expanded SCO be able to respond to unrest in Jammu & Kashmir and Indian brutalities remains an open question.<sup>86</sup>

The SCO has been watchful of the developments in Afghanistan which produces around 90 tonnes of heroin yearly.<sup>87</sup> The drug production and their trafficking to Central Asia, Russia and other regions needs to be curbed.<sup>88</sup> Under the SCO platform, the collective border security arrangements, surveillance checks and intelligence sharing could be undertaken to minimise drug trade.<sup>89</sup> The speculation that the SCO is being employed by the regional states to limit the US regional ingress cannot be denied altogether. China and Russia's march towards global power status makes them a contender and a competitor to the US' supremacy in the region.<sup>90</sup>

Lastly, the SCO's effective contribution in dealing with the security issues both internally as well as regionally depends upon the level of trust and cordiality among the member states. Therefore, managing conflictual positions and finding a common ground for cooperation will be a test for this organisation. ■

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<sup>85</sup> Rehman and Faisal, "SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict," 25.

<sup>86</sup> M. Akram Zaki, "Inaugural Address," in *SCO's Role in Regional Stability: Prospects of its Expansion*, ed. Mushir Anwar (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute: 2013), 23, <http://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/srse.pdf>.

<sup>87</sup> Jaffer, "The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications," 79.

<sup>88</sup> Qadir and Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," 125.

<sup>89</sup> Jaffer, "The First Enlargement of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications," 79.

<sup>90</sup> Qadir and Rehman, "Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity," 128.