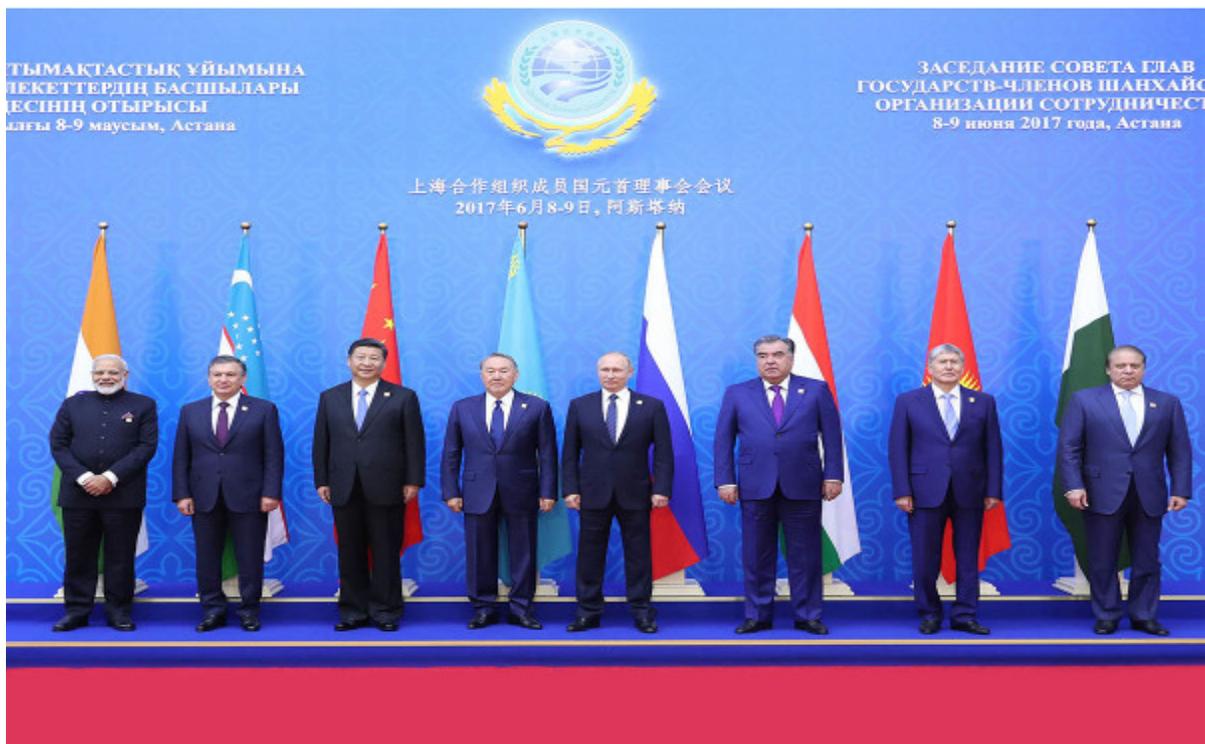


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Shanghai Cooperation Organization and South Asia: Balancing Act



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Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) welcomed India and Pakistan into its cohort in 2017, a move that not only revamped the organization, but made it relevant in the South Asian context. This unveils the scenario of friendly relations between India and Russia on the one hand, and Pakistan and China on the other, playing out diplomatically on the SCO stage. However, can the SCO ever become a platform for rapprochement between India and Pakistan? Or will both countries use it as another forum to display their acrimony? The article analyses the myriad permutations and combinations that have been put into motion in the SCO, because of its expansion to include India and Pakistan and what this means to South Asia?

Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001, is considered to be a power bloc parallel to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It covers the largest area of landmass for any regional cooperation organization, includes two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and two of the top ten economies in the world- China and India. The SCO, hence, has considerable economic, military and territorial power. It often works in collaboration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and has also been consulted on counter-terrorism^[1] by the United Nations.^[2] The organization also focuses on increasing cultural contact and community building. It participates as an observer at major Asian committees. Besides these Eurasian and global relations, there is ample scope for new diplomatic ties to flourish within the SCO. The SCO has the potential of becoming a pivotal organization in changing the diplomatic dynamic between its old and new members. Russia and China, as well as Central Asia coupled with the developing economies of India and Pakistan can become the part of a new axis of power. Optimistically, the SCO can help transform relationships between India, China, and Pakistan.

The permutations and combinations that abound in the SCO are dominated mostly by the interests of the 'big-four' players namely China, Russia, India and Pakistan. According to the World Bank^[3], China and India's hegemonic economic power may reach even greater heights by 2030. Similarly, notwithstanding the recent hiccups, Russia's indomitable leveraging ability with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and its historical significance as the leader of the Communist Bloc give it much clout. Pakistan, the apparent underdog, has the advantage of holding a tactical position vis-à-vis Afghanistan and its access to the Persian Gulf via the Arabian Sea. India and Pakistan are nuclear weapons states and Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) non-signatories. Not surprisingly, the four central Asian countries that are part of the SCO do not get much attention.

The India-Pakistan Dynamics

The inclusion of Pakistan and India in the organization in 2017 can be considered a watershed moment in the history of the SCO, for it brought three geographical neighbours (India, China and Pakistan)—who have been witness to varying degrees of hostility marking their relations—together. India and Pakistan had previously been observer States at the SCO along with neighbouring Afghanistan. India rallied for entry in 2012 on the grounds of reaching out to its neighbours and extended neighbours.^[4] India and Pakistan's membership status had to be elevated simultaneously. Both Russia and China were pitching India and Pakistan as potential members respectively in order to increase their area of influence in the SCO.



(Indian and Pakistani soldiers participated in the SCO counter-terrorism drill at Chebarkul, Russia in August 2017, Photo Source: Zee News)

The enmity demonstrated at proceedings of the UN General Assembly and the Hague would hopefully be forgotten at the SCO and its future summits. In 2017, India and Pakistan had a face-off at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over the execution of Kulbhushan Jadhav- allegedly a former Indian naval officer, who was arrested in Pakistan and sentenced to death.^[5] The ICJ ruled in India's favour and stayed the execution. Pakistan has also often used the United Nations' General assembly as a pedestal to accuse India of atrocities committed in the contested state of Jammu and Kashmir.^[6] Since India boycotted the 19th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit held at Islamabad in 2016 owing to the Uri attacks^[7], it was at the SCO's Qingdao Summit in 2018^[8] that India and Pakistan received an opportunity to communicate once again at an international level. Although this opportunity was not utilized, Indian and Pakistani troops did participate in a military exercise hosted by the SCO.^[9] This may appear to be a of little significance, but can still be considered an important step. Given the conditions of political upheaval both in India and Pakistan, the time for rapprochement may not be near but the platform provided by the SCO may suffice to maintain a channel for communication.

Change in leadership in both India and Pakistan keeps the possibility of talks in flux. Analysts opine that the new Pakistani Prime Minister and ex-cricketer Imran Khan a person that 'India can do business with'^[10]. Mr. Khan's non-military background coupled with cordial ties with the army is a plus for India. Furthermore, with the 2019 General Elections around the corner in India, a shift in power may initiate a new era.

In order to fully understand the multiple streams that diplomatic ties between India and Pakistan would take by virtue of their membership in the SCO, it is imperative to understand the new power nexus that has arisen within the SCO since 2017.

The SCO and Internal Power Dynamics

The web of power housed in the SCO has the ability to both impede and accelerate the workings of the organization. China is a giant that none of the members can afford to slight. The configuration of every member's dynamic with China can arguably be taken as the foundation of the SCO, but the introduction of India and Pakistan has equalized the balance in Russia's favour.

All of SCO's original members, apart from China, have been a part of the former Soviet Union. It can be construed as the Communist bloc coming together to form an organization in the 21st century. The commonality of an ideology is difficult to infiltrate or pry open. The relatively closed-off organization undoubtedly kept its doors shut to outsiders not only because of its historically determined cohesion but also because of the fear of dilution of the Communist spirit. Nevertheless, the addition of two new members bodes a change in policy and appears to be an expression of a desire to expand further into the Asian sphere.

The SCO and its primary objectives of counter-terrorism and economic cooperation can prove to be fertile ground for an intensification of bilateral ties. Unfortunately, India and Pakistan have locked horns in the past with respect to the former and have been suspicious of each other's activities concerning the latter. China's explicit support for Pakistan has raised India's defenses. Previously, China had blocked sanctions against Pakistan for harbouring the terrorist Zakir-ur-Rehman Lakhvi and has also used its clout at the UN to try and stall the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)/Jamaat-ud-Daawa (JuD) from being termed as internationally recognized terrorist organizations.^[11] At the same time, it has also strengthened its economic understandings with Pakistan through the initiation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major bone of contention between India and Pakistan.

The CPEC has far reaching consequences for the future of South Asia. Not only is it a legitimization of the intrusion of an economic giant into the region but also that of an authoritarian Communist State with dubious domestic controls. The China-Pakistan axis, as the alliance is now being called^[12], could prove to be a roadblock for India even in SCO proceedings. This is a probability primarily for two reasons. Firstly, China spearheads the SCO (it is named after one Chinese city and another houses its headquarters) and has extended most financial support to the organization. Secondly, India and China have an uneasy relationship as well.

The possibility of the Beijing-Islamabad axis out-weighting the predominance of decisions undertaken by the BRICS appears to be low. This is primarily because of the global privilege associated with the BRICS as opposed to the pan-Asian purview of the SCO. It is also probable that China may prioritize the appeasement of countries that pose a larger military threat to its sovereignty (Russia and India) over a beneficiary State. Optimistically, this can result in an easing of ties between a China-backed Pakistan and India.^[13]

Russia and India have historically maintained cordial relations with each other. The last Russia-India Summit, concluded in October 2018, saw Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Narendra Modi signing treaties concerning space research and nuclear energy. The highlight of the meet was the US\$5 billion deal for the acquisition of Russian S-400 Triumf missile by India.^[14] Moreover, Russian economists and ministers have been pushing for the de-dollarization of the Indian economy in the wake of tariffs and bans imposed on trade by President Trump.^[15] Russia also routinely supports India as a contender for membership into the Permanent-Five of the Security Council.^[16] Russian Senators visited India in January 2019, and vowed to work through the combined forums of the SCO and BRICS.^[17]

Despite some clearly demarcated relations, ties in the political world are never static. The rekindling of a Pakistan-Russia friendship has added a new dimension to India-Pakistan relations as well. Joint military exercises between Russia and Pakistan were conducted in October 2018.^[18] Russia has also planned to invest US\$14 billion in Pakistan's energy sector.^[19] This may not bode well for India although Russian diplomats have assured the former that increased bilateral relations with Pakistan cannot be equated with Indo-Russian ties^[20]. A change in the alignment may be a result of an increasingly US-backed India. In 2017, Trump called on India's assistance in

Afghanistan[21], implicitly bypassing Pakistan-Afghanistan's neighbour. Simultaneously, Trump has also taken tough stands against terrorism and has deemed Kashmir's freedom struggle terrorism.[22] These steps have bristled Russia and therefore it is engaging in increasingly aggressive military tactics such as combined drills with Pakistan and the export of military equipment.

The Sino-Soviet split of the 20th century is a bitter memory in the history of China-Russia relations. Even today, the two countries continue to have neutral if not lukewarm ties with each other. According to a report by the New York Times, they have a "quiet rivalry" that can be said to have precipitated from their shared communist past.[23] They supposedly have a "comprehensive strategic partnership" under which Russia provides China with oil and the latter provides Russia with consumer goods. They also have close military ties despite Russia providing armaments to Chinese rivals-India and Vietnam. Albeit, Robert Kaplan says that there's geopolitical tension under the surface.[24] Within the SCO though China and Russia more or less hold a similar position of esteem. Russian and Chinese were originally the only two official languages of the organization, although now English has been added to the roster. These two nations were instrumental in the very conception of the SCO as well. An analysis by a Chinese news channel shows that Sino-Russian relations have been on the ascendant ever since the inception of the SCO.[25]

One also needs to look from the opposite vantage to get an objective view of the reconfigured SCO. Pakistan appears exalted at its SCO membership. According to media reports in Pakistan, its ministers have often heralded the partnership as a vibrant way to facilitate peace talks and global trade.[26] An analysis by The Herald has delineated how the SCO has widened its ambit beyond Central Asia.[27] The report did not seem very optimistic about the strategic prospects that may fall Pakistan's way given that India has also joined. Despite these less-than optimum circumstances, Pakistan continues to be optimistic about its membership in the SCO because the organization is a symbol of unity between unequal partners.

Pulwama Attack: A Game Changer?

The Pulwama attack on 14 February 2019 though became a major setback in Indo-Pak relations. A vehicle-borne suicide bomber pummeled into a convoy of CRPF personnel in the Avantipora region of Jammu and Kashmir.[28] Forty soldiers were martyred in the attack. Pakistan based Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility for the attack. On 26 February, India engaged in "non-military pre-emptive" action by bombing an alleged Jaish camp in Balakot in Pakistan.[29] Clearly a retaliation against the Pulwama attack, the Balakot strike brought India and Pakistan the closest to a breakout of war since the Kargil confrontation. A dossier on JeM's role in the Pulwama attack as well locations of the group within Pakistan's territory was shared by India with Pakistan[30], which at a first-glance appears to be a justification for the Balakot retaliation.

Although JeM has been blacklisted as a terrorist group by India and the UN, sanctions against Jaish chief Masood Azhar at the UN Security Council are routinely thwarted by China. Masood Azhar has not been labeled as a global terrorist by the UNSC because of China's lack of support. China's while standing by the UNSC's condemnation of the attack, was cryptic about the country's unwillingness to coin Azhar as a designated terrorist under the 1267 Sanctions Committee.[31] As outlined earlier, China has been uncannily unsupportive of efforts to issue sanctions against terror groups allegedly headquartered in Pakistan. But with the Pulwama attack and its subsequent fallout, China seems to have tempered its position and is now showing restraint in its statements. Initial statements following the attack saw China urging its neighbours and fellow SCO members to aim for stable bilateral relations.[32] Peace in the region would only be possible if both India and Pakistan say eye-to-eye. Russia too condemned the attack and called for a stricter handling of such "inhuman acts"[33].

China did attempt to dilute the severity of the UNSC's statement condemning the attack by objecting to the description of JeM's as being 'Pakistan-based' and also wished Jammu and Kashmir to be addressed as 'Indian administered Kashmir'[34]. On the one hand it is acting as an arbitrator between its warring neighbours by calling for a 'regional engagement' to counter terrorism[35], and on the other it is continuing to exhibit its allegiance with

Pakistan. The SCO's aim of countering terror in the narrow scope of Central Asia and the broader region of Eurasia appears to have reached a stalemate in this situation. Not only have the two newly initiated members reached the precipice of war but also the issue of terror came knocking on their doors once again. Notwithstanding its role in the SCO, China holds regional ambitions in Kashmir as well. Aksai Chin is a heavily contested border issue between India and China, the Karakoram Highway or the China-Pakistan Friendship Highways passes through the disputed territory of Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir, and the developments of CPEC have tied the Pakistan military closely with Chinese workers living in Pakistan.[36] Cumulatively, all three countries have high stakes in the issue, which even the remedying powers of the SCO seem inadequate for.

Conclusion

The Beijing-Islamabad axis and the Moscow-Delhi axis mutually reinforce restraints on each other's actions in the SCO. There is some semblance of equilibrium since no power coupling is able to gain the upper hand. An alliance amongst the four nations will also be asset since the members of the SCO also hold a greater responsibility of substituting American hegemony in world politics and economy. The BRICS and the SCO are two agencies that have the firepower to take a gamble at contesting Western supremacy in the modern neo-liberal world.

Ultimately the direction that relations between nations at the SCO take will be incumbent on what is most pressing for every player. On the one hand, if regional dominance were a priority then occasional conflicts would not be a surprise. On the other hand, if the aspirations of establishing an alternate world order gains traction, then the changed membership of the SCO would prove to be more successful.

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