

SCO and India-Pakistan Conflict

Huma Rehman and M. Faisal

Introduction

In last 15 years SCO has evolved into a regional security organization with focus on combating terrorism and enhancing regional stability by enhancing security and confidence building amongst its members. China and Russia are the leading drivers behind the primarily, Central Asian group, with interests spread over Eurasia. In 2015, SCO decided to expand its membership to include India and Pakistan, the South Asian arch-rivals. SCO had been reluctant to give both rivals permanent membership because of the active nature of their conflict. However, membership of India and Pakistan, brings with it new opportunities. It is for the first time, that, both rivals will join a regional security organization, where, close ally of each is also present, Russia in case of India, and China in respect of Pakistan. Membership of SCO, and presence of China and Russia, will likely lead to emergence of stability and gradual building of trust in security sector, as India and Pakistan will be working together in various fora of the organization. A key focus of SCO is to stabilize the border areas and cooperation among member states to combat terrorism. Islamabad and New Delhi can address their bilateral concerns on these two issues via a multilateral forum and building much needed mutual trust, thus, beginning a new era of cooperation for stability in South Asia.

SCO Formation: A Brief history

Emergence of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a regional security architecture has its roots in a 1996 meeting of five states in Shanghai. These states, had sought to ensure good neighborly relations and reduce the number of military forces in the border regions in Central Asia. Then called Shanghai Five, the five states, signed the Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions, on 26 April 1996.¹ It was signed by heads of states of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. As a follow up, in 1997, the same five countries signed the Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions, in a meeting, in Moscow.²

Subsequent annual summits of the Shanghai Five group have been held every year since 1998. During its June 2002 summit, in the Russian city of St. Petersburg, the heads of the member states signed the SCO Charter, which expounded on its purposes, principles, structures and form of operation, and established the organization officially.³ Presently, its six member states account for 60 percent of the land mass of Eurasia and its population is a quarter of the world. With inclusion of Observer member states, its affiliates account for half of humanity. At the summits, members discuss agenda on the basis of parameters defined by SCO's charter. The main points include opposing intervention in other countries' internal affairs on the pretexts of 'humanitarianism' and 'protecting human rights; support the efforts of one another in safeguarding the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and social stability of member states.⁴

Purpose

Since its inception, SCO's agenda has focused on enhancing regional security and improving stability for maintaining peace. SCO has undertaken bilateral agreements for reducing border tension by confidence building measures, and jointly providing for stability to combat separatism, extremism and terrorism in an ethnically fragmented region. Central Asian Republics (CARs), Russia and China through the SCO forum have attempted to find a way for peaceful co-existence, and addressing security concerns of the neighbors for maintaining regional peace, as their border disputes could not have been resolved bilaterally.

Article 1 of the Charter states that SCO seeks to “strengthen mutual trust, friendship and good neighborliness between the member states and to consolidate multidisciplinary cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace, security and stability in the region”.⁵

SCO is primarily focused on its member nations' security-related concerns, describing the threats confronting states in the region, terrorism, separatism and extremism. The main areas of co-operation in SCO includes; military activities, economic development and cooperation on cultural issues.

Organization structure

Council of Heads of State is the highest decision-making body of the organization. SCO Summit and its meetings are held once a year where heads of member states deliberate on regional political and security matters, and take decisions on these issues and give guidelines for further improvement of SCO's functioning.

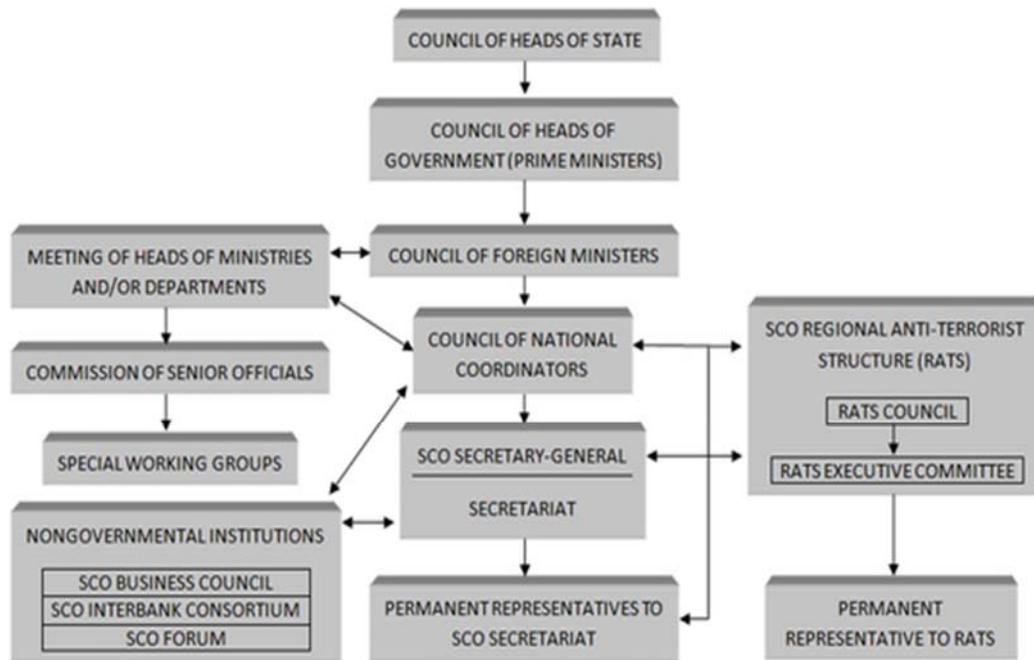
Heads of Government Council (HGC) comprises Chief-Executives/Prime Ministers of member states and is the second highest forum of the SCO. HGC also explores avenues of multilateral cooperation, including economic cooperation, within the SCO framework. HGC also sanctions the annual budget of the SCO.⁶

Moreover, mechanisms are also in place for convening meetings of Speakers of Parliament, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Economy, and Education. Heads of Law Enforcement Agencies and Persecutors General are also involved at appropriate decision-making levels. The Foreign Ministers' council also looks at interaction with other regional organizations, observer states, membership aspirant states and the SCO members.⁷

Administratively, the most important organ of SCO is Council of National Coordinators (CNC). It coordinates issues related to multilateral cooperation amongst the member states in the framework of SCO.⁸

The Secretariat of SCO is in Beijing and its Secretary General is appointed for a period of three years by Councils of Heads of States on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION



(Source: “Shanghai Cooperation Organization Chart”, Wikimedia, accessed August 29, 2015, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/e/e7/Structure_of_the_SCO.png)

SCO’s Cooperation Arrangements with other Regional Organizations

The 2004 Council of Heads of States of SCO meeting, called for expanding cooperation between SCO and international and regional organizations, including United Nations. It also stressed the need for MoUs between SCO and regional organizations.⁹ Since then SCO has been participating in the sessions of the UN General Assembly as an observer. It has signed MoUs with Commonwealth of Independent States (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). SCO and partner multilateral organizations maintain regular contact. The Secretary-General of the SCO has taken part in the CIS, CSTO and EEC Summits in recent years. Reciprocally, high-level

representatives of these regional organizations have also attended SCO summits. Moreover, regional organizations regularly invite representatives from other organizations to attend each others' activities. In particular Executive Committee of CIS and SCO have held dialogue on pressing international issues and have also explored avenues for economic and cultural cooperation among member states. Moreover, SCO and CSTO Secretariats have exchanged views on issues related to international security and stability, including terrorism, and trans-border organized crimes.¹⁰

SCO over the years

The early meetings in Shanghai and Moscow laid the foundations of what has evolved into the modern day SCO. Member nations sought to address regional issues and long contentious Soviet/Central Asian-China border disputes. For this member states invested in building military trust between members countries as they planned to reduce military presence along their borders and make a 100-km demilitarized zone.¹¹ The organization's efforts, for developing confidence between militaries of its member states, bore fruit when in 2005 under the aegis of SCO first ever Russian-Chinese military exercises were organized. Similar military training activities were also undertaken in 2007 and 2009 and a Peace Mission 2010, conducted in September at Kazakhstan's Matybulak training area, saw over 5,000 military personnel from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan conduct joint planning and operational maneuvers.¹²

For maintaining internal stability, Chinese government had concerns over the activities of Uighurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities, which lived in the areas adjoining CARs, and also enjoyed support among Kazakh and Kyrgyz nationalists. Violent activities by Uighurs groups, which the Chinese government had declared terrorists after a spate of bombings in Western China in 1997, forced CARs to take stringent action against Uighur in their territories, and resolving non-delineated border areas, so that strict regulation regime could be put in place.¹³

Gradually, SCO began to expand its agenda, as reflected in the 2000 meeting. In a first, SCO reacted to unilateral US foreign policy measures and called for maintaining authority of UN Security Council, and a more proactive role of the UN in resolving conflicts, and went on to condemn violations of sovereignty of other states on the pretext of mitigating human rights violations. It also hinted that China

and Russia are keen to work towards a multipolar world, beyond the US unipolarity.¹⁴

In June 2004 SCO summit, held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) was established. Moreover, SCO member states also adopted 'Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremisms', as another indication of its focus on striving to stabilize the region.¹⁵

In 2005, SCO made headlines, when in a joint communiqué it called on the US to withdraw its troops and remove military bases from the region.¹⁶ This statement created an impression that SCO was an anti-Western coalition aimed at countering expanding US military footprint in Central Asia.

On 21 April 2006, SCO announced plans to fight cross-border drug crimes under the counter-terrorism rubric which is a solid step towards security cooperation.¹⁷

SCO also addressed the arms control issues and opposed the proposed US plans for a National Missile Defence (NMD) while declaring support for making Central Asia a nuclear free zone.¹⁸

In October 2007, the SCO signed an agreement with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in the Tajik capital Dushanbe, to broaden cooperation on issues such as security, crime, and drug trafficking.¹⁹

In 2009, SCO called for stabilizing Afghanistan, through cooperative counter-terrorism efforts and combating narcotics trade.²⁰ For the consultations on Afghanistan, SCO also invited the United States to its meeting, thus, signaling that it was not an alliance against Washington.²¹

Moscow, has sought to expand SCO ambit, towards checking growing Western security presence across the region. For Moscow, SCO is an instrument to work as a counter-weight to NATO and the West. For realizing this goal, Moscow has sought Chinese support against the US presence in the region.

For Beijing, however, SCO remains a mechanism to counter "three evils" of separatism, extremism, and terrorism,²² and it views SCO and its relationship with the West, mutually exclusive of each other. For China, security cooperation with SCO

member states has been vital in arresting members of terrorists groups operating from the territories of SCO states. But for Beijing, to establish a military security alliance against the US and NATO is not a feasible strategy, as it would undermine Beijing's cooperative relationship with Europe, and complex ties with Washington.

Economic Cooperation among SCO Members

All SCO members except China are also members of the Eurasian Economic Community. A Framework Agreement to enhance economic cooperation was signed by the SCO member states in September 2003.²³ Cultural cooperation is also promoted within the SCO framework. Culture ministers of the SCO met for the first time in Beijing on April 12, 2002, signing a joint statement for continued cooperation.²⁴

SCO is working for integrating military, political, economic and cultural areas in order to pursue shared interests and address common threats to the member states. According to multilateral cooperation approach it provides a forum within boundaries of its charter but at the same time an opportunity to engage other states and promote stability in the region.

Pakistan and India in SCO

The India-Pakistan rivalry and patterns of hostility are amongst the most enduring inter-state conflicts since 1947. It emerged from the partition of British India and creation of India and Pakistan as independent nation-states and unresolved disputes between the two neighbours. The conflict transmuted into a near-permanent inter-state, politico-military rivalry between them. It acquired a nuclear dimension in mid-1970s and today both states possess near-equal nuclear warheads and launch capabilities. Rivalry between the two antagonists led to four wars (1948, 1965, 1971 and Kargil conflict, 1999) and recurring crises (1984, 1987, 1990, 2001-02 and 2008) that had the potential to escalate into full-scale war. This state of adversarial relations has stalled development of normal inter-state relations between the two neighbors. Periodic peace overtures and diplomatic engagements have not led to any meaningful measures that could lead to conflict resolution and establishment of lasting peace.²⁵

The territorial dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, which formed principal cause of conflict has continued to simmer and is manifested in relative power position of the two states in the South Asian region. The nuclear tests carried out by both countries in 1998 has now spawned into missile development rivalry. Nuclear parity enabled Pakistan to continue to compete with India on equal-footing. However, gradually, India has surged ahead economically and has consequently become militarily more powerful. Meanwhile, Pakistan has struggled with internal instability and economic challenges over the last decade. As a result, disparity in the economic and military strengths has increased power differential between the arch-rivals, thus, diminishing the leverage of Pakistan, and reducing incentive for India to engage in meaningful negotiations. Intense security competition under a nuclear over-hang, however, continues to define the South Asian conflict.²⁶

Meanwhile the 2015 Summit in Ufa, Russia, moved further on the decisions taken during the 2014 SCO summit in Dushanbe to lift the moratorium on the accession of new members and the expansion of partner countries in dialogue with the SCO. Consequently at the Ufa Summit, applications of India and Pakistan were accepted for full membership of the SCO. The Declaration at the end of the summit announced that membership process had been initiated and in 2016, India and Pakistan will become regular, permanent members of the organization.²⁷

India and Pakistan had joined the SCO as Observer States in 2005.²⁸ In the subsequent years, both states moved to seek full membership status. Leaders of India and Pakistan regularly attended SCO summit meetings in the intervening period as observers. However, it was only in 2014 that SCO member states agreed to expand the organization for the first time since 2001.²⁹

Accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO will expand scope of the organization. The regional expanse of the SCO members will also include South Asia. The SCO charter had previously allowed membership to Central Asian states, and countries bordering Central Asia i.e., China and Russia. With the inclusion of India and Pakistan, territorial expanse of SCO covers the larger area of Eurasia, connecting Central and South Asia with China and Russia. This will encompass around half of global population, and presence of three leading countries by population i.e. China, India and Pakistan on the same table. It will in turn open the entire Eurasian region for greater cooperation including, economic development, inter-state connectivity, integration, peace and security. Pakistan's geography will serve as an asset in its

integration with Eurasian region, as the nation seeks to enhance connectivity, and trade with China, as well as Central Asia and West Asia states.³⁰

Geopolitically, it will bring China, India, Pakistan, Russia and Central Asian states closer to discuss pressing issues of stabilizing Afghanistan, and the menace of terrorism affecting nearly all members of the SCO. It had established an Afghanistan contact group in 2005 to discuss evolving situation in the wake of withdrawal of US/NATO troops from the region.³¹ China had also participated in the peace talks between Afghan government's representatives and Taliban held in Murree, near Islamabad.³² For countering terrorism, India and Pakistan can seek assistance from the expertise of the Regional Counter-terrorism Centre being run by SCO states. Pakistan's security agencies can initiate institutional dialogue with this center for coordinating their efforts and pursuing a joint strategy to eliminate this menace from the region.

For India, particularly, there exists a military interest in joining the SCO. India has a military presence at the Farkhor Air Force Base in Tajikistan and operated a military hospital during late 1990s and 2000s at the air base, located near Afghan border.³³ From 2003 onwards India provided loans for reconstruction of Ayni airbase near Dushanbe. However, Russia objected to operationalization of the base by India.³⁴ No further progress has been reported on this issue.

Regional Economic Integration

Dividends to Pakistan and other member states under the aegis of SCO organization's charter parameters would be enormous in the wake of North-South Trade & Energy corridor. It offers opportunities of road, rail and pipeline linking Pakistan's new port of Gwadar with the rest of the region. The Pak-China MoU, concluded in April 2015, on establishing of a Kashghar to Gwadar road-rail network is an encouraging development in the right direction for the advantage of all involved regional member states.³⁵ At Economic and Trade Ministers meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Xian, the capital of China's Shaanxi province on September 16, 2015, Pakistani commerce minister reiterated that Pakistan's trade strategy focuses on developing linkages with neighbors, leveraging Pakistan's geographical location and capitalizing on regional connectivity initiatives. In accordance with PM Sharif's vision of "shared prosperity through connectivity", Pakistan has undertaken several steps which include revival of

Quadrilateral Agreement for Traffic in Transit (QTTA) between China, Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan and Pakistan³⁶ Moreover, the minister mentioned Pakistan's recent accession to International Road Transports (TIR) Convention which would enhance more efficient and swift transportation of goods across borders to the countries of Central Asia.³⁷

India, too, is strengthening its relations with CAR countries through its "Connect Central Asia Policy".³⁸ As a result, it is engaging with the region at multiple levels. India, on its part, will also be able to gain access to Central Asia via Lahore and Kabul and ultimately linkup with the New Silk road project.

Both Pakistan and India are considering two issues imperative for their economic development. Firstly, cooperation in achieving energy security. Pakistan looks to expanding cooperation with Central Asia by completing CASA-1000 electricity project and initiating work on TAPI gas pipelines.³⁹ Secondly, cooperation in improving and accessing transport connectivity between Asia and Europe for enhancing trade. Expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asian states will integrate the region and deepen the connectivity.⁴⁰

India-Pakistan Conflict and SCO Membership

According to SCO charter, its member-states should not have an active military conflict, and work towards stabilizing the volatile border regions, while building military trust for maintaining peace and stability. However, India and Pakistan have an active military conflict, with increasing ceasefire violations by their militaries along the contested borders in the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir.⁴¹ Thus, the question is how inclusion of India and Pakistan into the SCO will impact their enduring conflict?

For India and Pakistan, the foremost political imperative would be the improvement in bilateral ties, followed by normalization and peaceful co-existence. Pakistan has long sought external mediation to resolve the disputes; however, this has not materialized.⁴² But, this is the first time that both arch-rivals are joining the same regional security organization. At SCO, close military and strategic allies of both countries are present. Russia is a close partner of India, and China a strategic ally of Pakistan. Moreover, security issues of India and Pakistan, also involve China, due to geographic proximity, and India's threat perception from China, thus, it will

also be a first that China, India and Pakistan will be sitting at the same table to discuss regional security issues. Though, security issues on the agenda of SCO do not reflect the territorial and other disputes of the South Asian rivals and China. However, presence of three antagonists on the same table to discuss other issues will contribute to the building of mutual trust, as SCO charter calls for “searching of common positions on the basis of mutual understanding” for “peaceful settlement of disputes”.⁴³

Of immediate significance, for India-Pakistan and India-China, is the focus of SCO on reducing border tension and maintaining stability. The Line of Control and Working Boundary between India and Pakistan in the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir, and Line of Actual Control between India and China in the Ladakh region has seen intermittent violence in the past year. Article 2 of the SCO charter prohibits member states from aggression, use of force, and seeking unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas, thus, calling for respecting territorial integrity and inviolability of state borders.⁴⁴ Hence, at SCO Beijing, Islamabad and New Delhi will have an opportunity, in accordance with the Article 2 of the charter to discuss border issues and build much needed trust for comprehensive bilateral dialogue.

Similarly, New Delhi prioritizes cessation of terrorist violence in the region as a pre-requisite to broader talks with Islamabad. Focus of SCO on terrorism, as stated in Article 1 that member states will “jointly counteract terrorism, separatism, and extremism in all their manifestations”⁴⁵ is another area where Islamabad and New Delhi can address mutual concerns and make forward movement in removing the bottlenecks that hinder talks. Therefore, SCO provides a platform to the member states to revive dialogue on the issues rather than a forum for debating the issues.

The SCO walks a thin line between its promotion of regional stability as stated in Article 1 that SCO will work for “maintenance and strengthening of peace, security and stability in the region”⁴⁶ and its stated rejection of interference in other’s internal affairs as stated in Article 2, that member states pledge “non-interference in internal affairs”. The important aspect of SCO forum is the presence of two major powers Russia and China. Both have their respective axes of influence in the region. Russia views Central Asia squarely within its sphere of influence and tilts more towards security aspects of the SCO, while the Chinese desire economic inroads and the influence that it brings.

Conclusion

Generally, it is not possible to create a universal list of criteria to judge and quantify the success of an international regional organization. The argument is simple that regional alliances are arrangement for different reasons, with different objectives and in different circumstances. They foresee a different level of political coordination or economic integration and with different stages of development. Regional political projects are assessed by history itself. This is what is happening to the SCO.

The creation of the SCO was a vigilant response of the organization's founders and members to the emerging growing threats of terrorism, separatism and extremism. In order to address the negative trends and ensure national and regional security interests, the countries decided to resort to the option of multilateral cooperation.

At present, SCO is not a formal military alliance. Its defense ministries interact and coordinate specifically for purposes of anti-terrorist cooperation. SCO activities are also not aimed against third countries; it doesn't approve the ideology-driven and conflictual approaches to resolving pressing problems of international and regional development. It strives for stability in international relations and domestic affairs of the member states. This is a unique and dynamic approach in global politics. The SCO sets an example of how non-bloc alliances may ensure and contribute to international security.

This model has great conceptual importance. SCO member states objectively dilute the role of military force in global politics, by focusing more on to efforts of international cooperation, economic viability and soft power. Consequently, the new security architecture upholds the ideas of equality and transparency, based on legal non-bloc principles and respecting legitimate interests of all countries.

Presence of India and Pakistan at the same forum dealing with regional security and peace means that old rivalries and conflict have to give way to new convergences and constructive cooperation between regional countries. This will lead new SCO member states to "cooperate in prevention of conflicts and in their peaceful settlement."⁴⁷

*Huma Rehman is a
Research Officer at CISS*

*Muhammad Faisal is a
Research Assistant at CISS*

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