

Pakistan and India's Membership in SCO: Implications for Bilateral Cooperation

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate whether the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can play a meaningful role in defusing the tension in the bilateral relations of India and Pakistan. The purpose of this study is to explore if SCO has a role in bringing both India and Pakistan closer. With the help of both primary and secondary sources, this study looks at India Pakistan relations through the paradigm of liberalism. Although liberalism sees resolution of bilateral territorial disputes in economic interdependence, this research has concluded that Pakistan considers resolution of outstanding disputes, especially Kashmir, as a precursor to the bilateral trade. Hence, the role of regional institutions such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will remain contingent upon these factors.

Keywords

liberal institutionalism, economic interdependence,
shanghai cooperation organization.

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Introduction

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an intergovernmental organization of eight regional countries i.e., China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and India. The two subcontinental states became members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2017.¹ The inclusion of Pakistan and India contributed toward qualitatively strengthening the Organization in terms of broadening its scope. That said, this paper focuses on the significance of territorial disputes among regional countries in determining the success/failure of SCO. It also looks into SCO, its Charter, including the tasks and goals, and declarations through the prism of liberal paradigm. The liberal school of thought suggests that if interests of the members of an institution are similar to one another, the institution may help them cooperate with one another and help achieve some degree of peace and security in the shared region. Moreover, in the age of globalization, issues are not limited to a single nation; they are transnational in nature, and therefore, need regional and international responses, that increases the importance of regional and international organizations. However, SCO is also seen as an organization of rivals² that have more often than not competing interests in the Eurasian region. Although all the member states of SCO may agree on the basic objectives of the organization, that is, countering the three evils of extremism, terrorism and separatism, yet their interpretation of these threats may be different, if not contrary to each other. Moreover, bilateral disputes among some of the member states are not discussed, let alone resolved, in the SCO setup. Therefore, the principles that the charter of this Organization promotes, i.e. mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states are highly laudable objectives. However, they are difficult to follow in the real world, where states tend to have competing interests.

This paper attempts to explain the factors responsible for driving states like India and Pakistan to join SCO. It would be interesting to see how SCO plays its role in resolving the issues of separatism and territorial disputes after the inclusion of Pakistan and India, who invariably blame each other of undermining security. Whether the ongoing increased cooperation between China and India would contribute to resolution of their agreement to resolve their outstanding territorial disputes to achieve the larger geo-economic and geostrategic gains? And what implications would that have on the bilateral disputes between India and Pakistan, not least the tar pit of Kashmir issue? This paper would address these questions in some detail.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars of liberal paradigm argue that institutions at the regional level can play a vital role in helping the neighboring states to bring their issues of common concern at the institution level, discuss them with each other, and make a commitment to resolve their outstanding issues, and adopt risk-reduction measures. Richard Rosecrance, a scholar of interdependence liberalism, argued that nowadays conflict occurs only between less developed countries. The industrialized countries and countries with large economic integration do not wage war against one another. He referred to the example of the European Union. For Rosecrance, among less developed countries, "land continues to be the dominant factor of production and modernization and interdependence are far weaker".³ This phenomenon is evident in South Asian geopolitical affairs, oft-occurring between India and Pakistan, and intermittently between China and India. The geopolitical tussle between the subcontinental rivals continues to persist even as the world is increasingly globalised and interconnected.

In this context, regional institutions such as SCO can play a constructive role in providing a platform for the neighboring states

to discuss ways to resolve their outstanding issues and start cooperating in, for example, economic initiatives and against common threats. It is argued that bilateral trade will inherently result in economic interdependence between and among states and will naturally play a role in averting conflict. Even if a conflict occurs, the bilateral trade and the economic interests at large make it damaging economically for the states to prolong the conflict. In essence, the factors of high politics such as security and survival that had determined the course of action among major powers in international affairs throughout the history are subjected to the factor of low politics of economic interests and trade relations in the post-Cold War world.⁴

Moreover, in the globalized nature of international politics, states are no longer the only actors internationally. Role of Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have also increased in the last few decades in impacting the course of interstate relations.⁵ Similarly, some issues are no longer dealt with at the bilateral level. The process of globalization has engendered transnational trade-related issues, terrorism, the issue of climate change, and human development issues like poverty and spread of diseases, etc. States cannot confront these challenges by themselves or at bilateral level. These challenges are either regional in nature or global in layout or both. And therefore, they need a regional or/and global response. This necessitates the role of institutions in bringing the regional and world countries on a single platform. SCO is a great platform for countries like Pakistan, China and India that face the common issues of climate change and transnational terrorism. This is also reflected in the expansion of the scope of SCO from issues of terrorism, separatism and extremism to cooperation on economic engagement, climate change and improvement of regional rail, road and transport infrastructure system.

David Mitrany in his *functional theory of interdependence* proposed that “a greater interdependence in the form of transnational ties between countries would lead to peace”. Ernst Haas further built on Mitrany’s ideas and added in his neo-functionalist theory of international integration, in which he argued that the “self-interested” heads of states of regional countries need to place their interests in the regional institutions and intensify cooperation for the bringing the states in the region closer. According to him, the “functional” process of the integration of interests of the states would create a “spill over”, resulting in an “increased cooperation from one area...to increased cooperation in other areas”.⁶

In the context of SCO, regional countries need to think beyond the unitary approach of countering religious extremism and terrorism through military drills. If they place their interests in strengthening SCO, they would find common ground to cooperate on addressing the drivers of terrorism, religious extremism and separatism. Their cooperation for trade and economic connectivity regionally would prove influential in fostering harmony of interests among them. It will, according to the functionalist theory, motivate the neighboring states to work concertedly for expanding their cooperation in other areas such as human development and security, trade, and investment in projects that will benefit the region as a whole. This argument can also run vice-versa. For instance, cooperation in projects of regional connectivity may also move toward cooperating for resolving, or at least, shelving territorial disputes. Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline⁷ is a case in point. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor⁸ is another example of economic connectivity. These initiatives can generate interests of the regional countries of SCO in trying to maintain security and stability in the region, owing to their collective stakes in peace.

To be sure, SCO does not per se diminish the possibilities of conflict among antagonist states. No one expects that joining the

SCO would radically transform the nature of bilateral relations between India and Pakistan or India and China. Still, the liberal scholars claim that these institutions can help member countries in promoting mutual cooperation and reduce conflict by pursuing a course of action that is contributory toward regional security, stability and economic development. Liberal scholars can make a case in point here. They can argue that it was the meeting of Indian premier A.B. Vajpayee and Pakistan's then-president General Musharraf at the side-lines of the SAARC summit in 2004⁹ that melted the ice in relations between India and Pakistan. In the press conference that followed the SAARC summit in May 2004, the leaders from both the countries vowed to initiate a dialogue on resolving all outstanding issues. Thus, from a liberal perspective, the platform of the SAARC proved helpful in bringing both the countries to the negotiating table and they certainly made recourse to serious efforts in mollifying the strained bilateral ties. It is discussed in knowledgeable circles that if Musharraf's rule was not weakened by domestic political instability in terms of lawyers' movement¹⁰ and post-Red Mosque operation terrorist violence,¹¹ the two countries were close to resolving the Kashmir issue, the longstanding irritant in their relationship. This paper would, therefore, attempt in part to explain what motivated countries like India and Pakistan to join SCO, and whether it has got anything to do with the territorial disputes like Kashmir issue, Tibet and so on.

Drivers of Pakistan's and India's Membership of SCO

SCO was founded largely in the backdrop of the terrorists' insurgency, separatism and religious extremist movements in the 1990s¹² in Central Asia and Chinese Xinjiang province. China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were the founding members who then established Shanghai Five in 1996.¹³ After Uzbekistan joined it, the organization was rechristened as

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. Turkmenistan, another Central Asian state, however, opted to remain neutral. SCO member states had a “common objective of dealing with the ‘three evils’: terrorism, separatism and religious extremism”.¹⁴ With the formal membership of Pakistan and India on June 8-9, 2017, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became an intergovernmental organization of eight member states.¹⁵ Currently, SCO comprises eight member states and four states with observer status, namely, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Belarus, and six dialogue partners, which are Nepal, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.¹⁶ The geography of SCO members covers an area of “nearly 70 per cent of the Eurasian region and comprises nearly half of the world’s population.”¹⁷ With the increase in the membership of SCO, its goals, priorities and scope have also widened.

It is well known and widely written about that the basic interest of China which played a leading role in establishing SCO is countering the religious extremism, separatism and militancy in its Uighur community in the Xinjiang province. Some analysts, in particular, Thomas Wallace argued that China could tackle the militancy problem alone by the realist construct of self-help. It had the financial and the military capabilities to achieve that objective. However, the issue of Uighur militancy was not limited to the internal dynamics of the Xinjiang province. It had transnational support and motivations.¹⁸ Andrew Small has written at length about the spectre of Uighur militancy, its support bases in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, in his book “The China-Pakistan Axis”.¹⁹ China increasingly sought the support of the Central Asian countries and Pakistan in tackling the challenge of Uighur militancy. SCO proved helpful in bringing the Central Asian countries on a single platform in forging cooperation against the common threat of militancy in the region. Islamabad supported

China by taking strong military action against China(Xinjiang)-focused terror outfits operating in Pakistani tribal areas.

That said, the sub-theme of this paper is to explore the reason that made Pakistan and India join the SCO and what value will their inclusion add to SCO's objectives. Ian Talbot's work *A History of Modern South Asia* is replete with details on the separatist movements in India: Tamil Nadu separatist movement in the South; separatist movements in Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland and Assam in the North-east; and Khalistan insurgency in the North-west.²⁰ Of all these separatist movements, the Kashmir insurgency in India has proven to be the greater challenge for India. Interestingly, New Delhi does not consider the Kashmiri uprising as one of separatist movement or insurgency. On the contrary, it tries to project Kashmiris' freedom struggle/insurgency as Islamabad sponsored terrorism.²¹ Therefore, in dialogues with Islamabad, it insists on discussing the Kashmir issue bilaterally within the framework agreed to in the 1972-Simla Agreement.²²

India has sold its narrative fairly successfully in the Western countries, including the United States (the constructivist school of thought). Various incidents of terrorism in India, in particular, the 2008-Mumbai attacks, have provided New Delhi to project Islamabad as sponsors of the cross-border terrorist attacks. The allegations have never been proven though in any court of law, and India, according to Pakistani authorities, has refused to cooperate on investigations of the incident. Beijing also faces separatist threats from Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. New Delhi's recent move to support Beijing on Tibet may be a move to placate China and expect support on India's stand on Kashmir as quid pro quo. After becoming a member of SCO, India may hope to get Kashmir issue recognized as a terrorist activity. As has been the case in the Sino-Indian history of dialogues over disputed territories, both the countries may at some point of time in the future agree with the

status quo in India's north-western (Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, etc.) and the north-eastern borders (Arunachal Pradesh) abutting China.²³

In addition, after the death of Dalai Lama, New Delhi may not be able to support the Tibetan separatism and may face the threat of militancy in its north.²⁴ Possibilities of cooperation against regional militancy may increase between India and China. Thus, it is also probably in this background that New Delhi may try to persuade Beijing and Moscow to treat Kashmir issue as one of terrorism and may ask Islamabad to agree on the status quo with New Delhi on that front, in addition to the demand of stopping support of the Kashmiri insurgency. There have been some precedents in the recent past, that lend support to this view. In the 2017 BRICS summit²⁵ and the grey-listing of Pakistan by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)²⁶ Beijing adopted and supported New Delhi's stance on some banned terrorist outfits allegedly operating from the Pakistani soil. Whether China may increase pressure on Islamabad on that issue is contingent upon future regional geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics and Pakistan's ability to strengthen its bargaining position in the emerging framework.

As mentioned before, India may take advantage of SCO platform to undermine the position of Pakistan on terrorism and the Jammu and Kashmir issue. However, Pakistan has successfully dealt with the menace of terrorism on its own territory, but it continues to face the challenge of cross-border terrorism as well as the support that Balochi insurgents receive through the western border from Indian intelligence agencies working there. It is no empty propaganda. One of India's serving senior naval officers, Kulbhushan Yadav, is in Pakistan's custody who confessed to Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) involvement in terrorism across Pakistan and fomenting insurgency in Balochistan province in particular.²⁷ Moreover, the presence of

some of the fugitive elements of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State in Afghanistan pose threats to Pakistan and the whole region in general. Thus, it is in great interest of Islamabad to seek cooperation of the regional countries at the SCO forum in tackling the threat of cross-border terrorism. The participation of the regional countries in the annual military drills is a right step toward sharing each other's counter-terrorism tactics, strategies and experiences. As regards the Kashmir issue, it is not Islamabad alone that is pointing out India's state oppression against the Kashmiri freedom fighters. The United Nations Human Rights Commission's report in 2018 about New Delhi's tactics in Kashmir²⁸ also reveal crimes Indian military is committing in suppressing the legitimate freedom struggle of the Kashmiris. Islamabad can raise its voice in SCO meetings, as it does in the United Nations,²⁹ against Indian oppression of Kashmiris. Pakistan also works with Russia, China, Central Asian republics, besides Iran and Afghanistan in countering the religious militancy and the threat of terrorism by the Islamic State. Thus, by joining SCO, Pakistan can contribute substantially toward securing peace and stability in the Eurasian region.

SCO's Charter: Theory Versus Practice

The principles and goals written in the SCO's charter arguably do not reflect the existing state of interstate relations between and among states in the Eurasian region. In theory, SCO demands of its member states to adhere to the principles of "mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of states and inviolability of state borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use...[and] peaceful settlement of disputes".³⁰ In practice, however, things are different. Territorial disputes between the SCO member states are major determinants in motivating the regional states to adhere to the principles of respect for sovereignty, independence and

territorial integrity. India and China, for example, faced a 73-days military standoff at Doklam Plateau in 2017.³¹

India continues to harbour Dalai Lama, the leader of the Tibetan separatist movement. He is allowed to organize an annual rally in New Delhi and government officials of India participate in it.³² Even when India and Pakistan were being given SCO's membership, the two countries continued exchanging fires and engaged in border skirmishes at the Line of Control—the line dividing two parts of Pakistan- and India-administered Kashmir.³³ These issues of high politics continue to rumble on in the bilateral relationship between both the neighbours, arguably for reasons already mentioned in the theoretical framework, such as little economic interdependence and connectivity and therefore fewer stakes in resolving these issues. Since annual trade is increasing between India and China and has reached over \$80 billion in 2017,³⁴ it is likely that with the growing volume of trade, these countries may not engage in conflict with each other in the future. However, trade between India and Pakistan is minimal and occurs through third parties such as the United Arab Emirates and Singapore.³⁵ Therefore, as the neo-functional theory of interdependence proposed, unless there is strong economic integration, the land will continue to be a problem between neighboring countries and conflict between them may be inevitable.

As for the goals of SCO, described in the Charter, one of the goals suggests promoting trust, friendliness and good neighbourly relations among the member states. Another goal of the organization is to promote multilateral cooperation in maintaining and strengthening “peace, security and stability in the region”. The third goal aims at countering extremism, terrorism and separatism in all its forms. Other goals are related to joint collaboration for trade and economic growth, human rights and fundamental freedom and calls for cooperation for preventing international

conflicts.³⁶ These goals are the fundamental pillars of Liberal school of thought. It may be true to suggest that the regional organizations such as SCO help in promoting cooperation among member states and the annual meetings are occasions to revive the commitment to the shared goals and objectives. Thus, through meeting annually at the SCO forum, the heads of state happen to reiterate their resolve to counter the threats of extremism, terrorism and separatism that member states are facing. These meetings also provide a forum for the heads of states of member states to understand each other and strengthen their resolve to achieve SCO objectives.

However, we do not find in any Declaration of the SCO issued at the end of the annual meetings whether the members discussed the resolution of territorial disputes among certain member states. Since, the reference point of this paper is 2017, when both Pakistan and India joined SCO, an analysis is made of the two declarations of 2017 and 2018. Both Astana and Qingdao Declarations of 2017 and 2018 respectively acknowledged that the expansion of SCO will be of great importance for “developing and enhancing the organization’s potential” and that both “quality and dynamics emerged in various fields of cooperation” between member states.³⁷ After the subcontinental states were included as members of the organization, the Astana Declaration, 2017, reemphasised the goals and principles of the SCO Charter already discussed above. It also stated that the SCO members “confirm their determination to strictly adhere to the Treaty on Long-term Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation...in order to...mak[e] the borders with each other into borders of eternal peace and friendship”.³⁸ This is as interesting as ambitious.

While these promises were being made in the SCO meetings, the Indian and Chinese forces were engaged in a military standoff on the Himalayan region at Doklam. *Reuters*, a London-based international news agency, noted that both the countries have not

been able to resolve their 3,500 km territorial dispute³⁹ and have recurrently engaged in border skirmishes since the 1962 war. *Reuters* also quoted the Chinese spokesman to have said that Beijing sought to teach New Delhi a lesson from this incident to “respect the historical boundary and the basic principles of international law”. He also reiterated that China will continue to “exercise its sovereign rights” to protect its territorial integrity.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, neither SCO nor any other member of the Organization took the initiative to reduce the war temperature between the two SCO member states. Both China and India withdrew troops and maintained the pre-fighting border status quo through bilateral talks. However, one thing is important to note. The heads of states of both the countries were to meet at the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) annual summit, in the following month.⁴¹ This may have been a factor that restrained the two countries from escalating the border clash and withdrawing to their original position. The purpose may be not to distract the BRICS focus from its agreed agenda.

Another point of the Astana Declaration was that the member countries would establish a “joint” mechanism for countering security challenges and concerns, “deepen dialogue and cooperation...primarily in fighting terrorism, including cyber-terrorism, separatism, extremism and cross-border organized crime,” among other things.⁴² The joint mechanism may be seen in establishing the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which aims at countering militancy and terrorism. Under this framework, the SCO members deploy their military forces at a particular location and carry joint military drills. The latest such drills, the Peace Mission 2018, Pakistani and Indian armed forces also joined.⁴³ As for the claim of promoting deepening dialogue and cooperation among member states, the Organization has been unable to promote dialogue between India and Pakistan. Mere statements issued in that reference do not make states adhere to

the principles in practice. But, as previously argued, institutions do not by themselves guarantee or compel states to implement the declarations in action.

People to people contacts can play an important role in bringing the two nations closer. Pakistan has made a sincere effort by Pakistan to open the Kartarpur corridor for facilitating the Sikh community in Indian Punjab to visit their religious and spiritual centres in Pakistani Punjab.⁴⁴ The Kartarpur corridor not only has religious connotations but also economic underpinning. It can prove a one step forward as a confidence-building measure between both the countries to initiate easy process of visa facilities, and encourage exchange of artists and sports persons. Although the Kartarpur corridor will not resolve bilateral disputes between New Delhi and Islamabad, as suggested by Aparna Pande, Director Initiative on the Future of India and South Asia,⁴⁵ it is a baby step toward that. It also manifests sincerity of efforts by Pakistan's civilian and military leadership to present an olive branch to Indian leadership.

In the context of Indian government's earlier refusal to engage in talks with Pakistan, Imran Khan has rightly pointed out that due to the approaching elections in India, the Indian leadership will not reciprocate Pakistan's initiative for peace as bashing Pakistan earns them votes in India. That is also one of the reasons that the BJP government commemorated the second anniversary of the falsely claimed surgical strikes. It will however be seen if the new government in India after elections move forward on resolving disputes and cooperating with Pakistan. Therefore, there are many factors working at domestic level and leadership level affecting the course of bilateral relationship between Pakistan and India.

Conclusion

Pakistan's and India's membership of SCO has indeed widened the scope of the Organization in countering transnational terrorism, separatism and extremism, and tackling the other regional challenges of climate change and human development. It also has the potential to expand economic cooperation among the regional countries. This paper has, however, proposed that member states need to match goals and principles of SCO with the nature of bilateral relations among the member states. Though institutional liberals rightly state that the regional institutions promote harmony of interest and expand cooperation among neighbour countries, this premise has limitations. SCO is considered by many analysts as a grouping of rival states with competing ideologies and ambitions. Pakistan and India have their own set of motivations, often competing, with regard to joining the SCO. As for the territorial disputes, though the Charter claims that the member states would adhere to the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, the incessant border skirmishes between India and Pakistan along the LoC, and the Sino-Indian border standoff at Doklam suggest the practice does not conform to set standards. While the claim by the (neo)functionalist theorists of liberal school of thought holds ground that economic interdependence generates cooperation and leads to peace, the premise flounders in the case of Pakistan and India. Both countries do not have much bilateral trade, their borders are sealed to movement of goods and people. Another problem is that the SCO does not have the mandate to mollify the grim situation between New Delhi and Islamabad. Still, as the history suggests, the nature of leadership in both New Delhi and Islamabad, the economic strength of Pakistan and the level of legitimacy its government enjoys, and equally importantly, the importance of Pakistan in the shifting global political order would

play a more significant role in encouraging India to hold dialogue with Pakistan on all outstanding issues.

End Notes

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