

Journal of Religion & Society (JR&S)

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>

Print ISSN: [3006-1296](#) Online ISSN: [3006-130X](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

**Pakistan's Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO):
Strategic Gains or Diplomatic Tokenism**

Asifa Zafar

Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern
Languages Islamabad

azafar@numl.edu.pk

Nasra Batool

PhD Scholar at the National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam
University, Islamabad

nasrabatool572@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines Pakistan's role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), assessing whether its participation has yielded strategic gains or remains symbolic. Pakistan joined the SCO as a full member in 2017, leveraging the platform to enhance regional connectivity, counterterrorism cooperation, and economic integration, particularly through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The SCO provides Pakistan with opportunities to diversify its foreign policy, strengthen ties with China and Russia, and address energy security through projects like the TAPI pipeline. However, Pakistan faces significant challenges, including limited influence in SCO decision-making dominated by China and Russia, lack of tangible economic benefits, and persistent tensions with India that hinder multilateral cohesion. The article highlights Pakistan's achievements, such as participation in joint military exercises and contributions to regional stability dialogues, while also addressing criticisms of "diplomatic tokenism" due to its peripheral role in shaping SCO policies. A comparative analysis with India's more assertive SCO engagement further underscores Pakistan's constraints. The study concludes with policy recommendations for Pakistan to maximize its SCO involvement, emphasizing economic integration, conflict resolution, and soft power diplomacy.

Keywords: Pakistan, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Strategic Gains, Diplomatic Tokenism, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Regional Connectivity, Counterterrorism, India-Pakistan Tensions, Multilateral Diplomacy, Soft Power.

Introduction

In 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became an important regional organization, which was transformed from the Shanghai Five adopted in 1996 between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to resolve border conflicts and establish trust between each other (Alimov, 2018). The entry of Uzbekistan in 2001 saw the group evolve to the SCO, which is characterized by the charter that focuses on security and economic integration as well as cultural exchange (Khan, 2013). The main functions of the organization can be explained by the need to fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism which are also known as the three evils alongside the effort to establish stability in the region and economic cooperation (Fayyaz, 2019). In the long run, the SCO began to work not only in the sphere of energy coordination, infrastructure building, but multilateral diplomacy, as it attempted to present itself as the counterweight to Western-led blocs (Zeb, 2006).

The entry of Pakistan into the SCO started in 2005 when the latter acquired an observer-level status, which was due to its strategic interest in foreign policy diversification outside the U.S. centric alliances (Rehman, 2014). Its motivation to join as a full member in 2017 was to increase regional connections, especially in projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and improve its counterterrorism cooperation (Fayyaz, 2019). The geopolitical importance of Pakistan as the connecting point between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East further enhanced the importance of the country to the SCO (Katara & Naveed, 2014). The strategic situation at the time of accession of Pakistan was characterized with rising U.S. Pakistan tension over Afghanistan and the increased influence of India and it is this situation that made Islamabad to find alliances with China and Russia through the SCO (Michael, 2007). Pakistan reasons behind joining SCO as a full member were various. Economically, it wanted to use the platform of the organization to raise investment, improve trade with Central Asian states and solve energy shortages by means of projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline (Rehman, 2014). On the political front, SCO provided Pakistan with an opportunity to oppose Indian isolation policies and promote issues related to Kashmir disputes (Khurshid, 2017). In terms of security, Pakistan was

interested in taking advantage of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) to fight against local extremists and enjoy access to the joint military exercise, including the Peace Mission drills (Fayyaz, 2019). Accession was also in line with the overall objectives of Pakistan which was to minimize reliance on western aid and creation of a multipolar world order (Zeb, 2006).

This article will examine the role of Pakistan in SCO, assessing the issue of whether involvement in this organization has brought any strategic benefit to this country or it is still apparent. The article can present a balanced view by reviewing Pakistani success in military cooperation and economic partnership and challenges such as little influence in decision-making process and Indo-Pak tensions (Fayyaz, 2019). It goes to the extent of comparing it with the SCO involvement in India and policy suggestions towards Pakistan to enjoy maximum benefits in the organization (Rehman, 2014).

Strategic Objectives of Pakistan in the SCO

The country of Pakistan is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which plays a key role in the overall strategic objective of the country which is regional connectivity and economic integration. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a major initiative in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) highlights Pakistan as a strategic hub in linking Central Asia with the world markets. The SCO helps create a smooth flow of goods within the member states, increase trade connections, and make sure that the development of infrastructure including roads, railways, and ports provides the development of the economy (Shahzad, Khan, Khan, & Haider, 2024; Khetran, 2017). The benefit of this trade connectivity is directly related to Pakistan as it serves as the major transit hub to landlocked countries of Central Asia that rely on the availability of deep-water ports in Pakistan to access the international markets (Shahzad et al., 2024). The infrastructure projects under the SCO will in the long run substantially increase exports, particularly of agricultural and manufactured commodities, in Pakistan because of the enhanced market access into Central and South Asia (Shahzad et al., 2024).

The improved cooperation in the area of counterterrorism is another important point in the Pakistani strategic goals in the SCO framework. Because Pakistan became a full member of the SCO, it has used this organization to conduct combined counterterrorism

operations with other member nations. Through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO, which is oriented primarily at the exchange of intelligence, conducting joint military exercises, and capacity-building in the struggle against terrorism, Pakistan will have a considerable benefit in its unceasing struggle against the extremist forces in its country (Khetran, 2017). Such initiatives are especially relevant due to the historical problems of Pakistan with terrorism and extremism, especially in the border areas with Afghanistan. Being involved in the collective counterterrorism activities of SCO, Pakistan is also enhancing its relationships with the most important actors on the region, including China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics, making the region more stable (Rauf, 2019).

The fact that Pakistan has joined the SCO is part of a strategic decision to change its foreign policy where Pakistan stops depending on the traditional U.S.-centered alliances. As China and Russia continue to gain influence in the SCO, Pakistan has also positioned itself as an ally in the Eurasian geo-political field, as opposed to being a dependent country of the West. The fact that Pakistan joins SCO will enhance its bilateral relationship with China and Russia, providing Pakistan with new frontiers of security, energy, and economic collaboration without being restricted by Western-led institutions (Khetran, 2017). This diversification will reduce the risks of relying too much on a single world power, and it will bring the foreign policy of Pakistan closer to regional needs, including energy security, infrastructural development, and trade facilitation (Rauf, 2019). The non-interference in the internal affairs principle of SCO also gives Pakistan an accommodating platform to address its internal and regional concerns, especially with the neighbor, India (Shahzad et al., 2024).

One of the main challenges, which Pakistan faces, is energy security, and the SCO provides multiple possibilities to handle this problem with the help of strengthening the relations with the Central Asia, Russia, and China. The energy-rich Central Asia offers great prospects to Pakistan in accomplishing its energy requirements via the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission line (CASA-1000). The SCO framework of cooperation aids these projects by making the participating member states to coordinate on the matters of energy security, thus

enabling Pakistan to fulfil its increasing energy needs (Khetran, 2017). Moreover, Pakistan is strategically positioned, and therefore they offer a critical passage of energy in Central Asia to South Asia and beyond. Not only does that mitigate energy shortages in Pakistan, but it also makes the country a key figure in regional energy trade (Shahzad et al., 2024).

Pakistan's Achievements in the SCO: Strategic Gains

Pakistan's engagement in the SCO military exercises, especially the "Peace Mission" drills, is a significant achievement in terms of regional security cooperation. The first "Peace Mission" exercise was held in 2005, and Pakistan has actively participated in these joint military exercises, fostering greater military collaboration with SCO members. In 2018, Pakistan participated in a major SCO military drill in Russia, marking a significant step toward building trust and improving military ties with regional powers, particularly China and Russia. This participation not only strengthens Pakistan's military capabilities but also contributes to regional peace, as these exercises are designed to address common security threats such as terrorism, extremism, and separatism. These drills have facilitated deeper defense ties and enhanced the collective security framework in the region (Ali, Ali, & Ullah, 2019; Khan, 2013).

Pakistan's role in SCO has been pivotal in addressing regional stability, especially regarding Afghanistan. The SCO's Afghanistan Contact Group was established to engage in dialogue on matters concerning terrorism, security, and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Pakistan, along with other SCO members, has contributed to discussions on counterterrorism efforts, regional stability, and the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The SCO's ability to bring together stakeholders from South Asia, Central Asia, and beyond, including Russia and China, provides Pakistan with a platform to influence the peace process in Afghanistan. Given Pakistan's historical involvement in Afghanistan's stability, its participation in SCO initiatives aimed at conflict resolution in Afghanistan is crucial for the region's long-term peace (Mustafa, 2021; Shahab Ahmed, Ahmed, & Bhatnagar, 2019).

SCO has also been the means of boosting the economic and cultural cooperation between Pakistan and its neighbors in the region. As part of SCO regional cooperation system, Pak has gained the opportunity to look into new trade routes and economic

alliances especially in energy and infrastructure. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been one of the major factors in the Pakistani involvement in the SCO as the country is seen as a hub in the region in terms of energy transportation and trade. Moreover, SCO has enhanced cultural exchanges, which lead to understanding and collaboration among different cultures of the region. This not only strengthens the Pakistani economy in the region, but also increases the soft power of the country to the cultural diplomacy (Khan, 2013; Ali et al., 2019).

The improvement of the relations of Pakistan with Russia and the Central Asian republics can be viewed as one of the most important advantages of the participation in the SCO. In the past, Pakistan and Russia had a poor relationship mainly because of the Cold War forces and the affiliation of Pakistan to the Western powers. Nonetheless, Pakistan has much enhanced relations with Russia under SCO format with the two countries engaging in collaboration on regional security matters, joint energy and infrastructure projects. In the same manner, Pakistani membership of SCO has enabled it to work more closely with Central Asia, which is an energy rich region and strategic to Pakistan. The economic integration within the region is an issue that SCO has been investing in due to the fact that it has allowed Pakistan access to markets and energy resources of the Central Asia, as well as establishing itself as a factor of Eurasian geopolitics (Mustafa, 2021; Ali et al., 2019).

Limitations and Challenges: Signs of Diplomatic Tokenism

The lack of Pakistani control over the key decision-making procedures in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which mostly revolves around China and Russia is one of the major issues that Pakistan has to deal with in the SCO. Although the SCO is based on a multilateral format, China and Russia have the power of influence because of their economic and military potential. The lopsided structure of power sometimes sidelines the smaller member nations such as Pakistan and they have little or no chance in contributing to major policies and strategic plans. The asymmetry in the power structure of the region is exemplified by the fact that the decision-making process in the SCO is dominated by China and Russia as the regional powers whose interests of smaller countries like Pakistan are disregarded or subservient to their priorities (Norling & Swanstrum, 2007). Despite the observer

status in the organization, Pakistan does not play a significant role in determining the major strategic, economic, and political outcomes in the SCO despite the fact that it takes part in the activities of the organization. This influence is absent, which according to some analysts may be considered a form of diplomatic tokenism, whereby the Pakistan membership offers symbolic value and little decision-making authority (Ali, Ali, & Ullah, 2019).

The second significant constraint of Pakistan involvement in the SCO is the absence of any practical economic deliverable or actual trade deliverable. Although the SCO has focused on promoting the regional economic cooperation, a lot of its economic potential has remained unrealized in the form of direct benefits to Pakistan. The organization has encouraged different economic projects like enhancements in connectivity, trade agreements and promotion of infrastructure development, but none of these activities have resulted in huge economic benefits to Pakistan. Economic gains that were to be achieved through SCO have been slow to materialize as majority of trade among the member states is still laden with bureaucratic inefficiencies, infrastructure shortages as well as political blockades (Norling & Swanström, 2007). Specifically, the economic ties between Pakistan with other members of the SCO, in particular, the Central Asian republics, have failed to achieve the desired levels and the trade agreements have in many cases been non-binding or not specific enough to create actual economic activity. Inability of the SCO to achieve real economic results to the members including Pakistan compromises the validity of the economic activities of the SCO and strengthens the argument that Pakistan is more of a target of the economic activities of the SCO but not the active beneficiary of it (Khan, 2013).

Another issue that has threatened the position of Pakistan in SCO is the age old rivalry between Pakistan and India, a factor that also affects the cohesiveness of the organization. The tensions between India and Pakistan, especially, the Kashmir issue and cross-border terrorism offsets the very purpose of the SCO which is to develop regional cooperation and dialogue. Although the SCO is oriented toward countering terrorism, security, and regional stability, the India/Pakistan confrontation tends to transfer to the organization, making it difficult to create a common position on the major debates (Shahab Ahmed, Ahmed, & Bhatnagar, 2019). This two-

sided tussle does not encourage efficient multilateralism in the SCO structure, with the two nations likely to pursue their national interests at the expense of regional interests. The strained bilateral relations between Pakistan and India can easily be characterized by failure to cooperate on common security issues like terrorism, regional volatility and illicit drug trafficking. Moreover, the SCO can do little in the way of mediating or decreasing tensions between India and Pakistan which constrains the overall effectiveness of the organization in terms of peace and stability in the region. This persistent competition will help to disintegrate the SCO, reducing the prospects of collaborative work in the field of regional security and economic growth (Ali et al., 2019).

Though Pakistan is an active member of SCO, its contribution to the development of key initiatives and refinements of the organization agenda is insignificant. China and Russia are major drivers in key decisions, particularly on infrastructure projects, security policies, economic cooperation and so on. Both nations possess the economic and geopolitical power to direct the organization into the arrangements that suit their strategic interests, and Pakistan will have little opportunity to affect the bigger ambitions of the SCO (Khan, 2013). As an example, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an important bilateral project but it is mostly a Chinese initiative and is not a wider initiative of SCO which can benefit other member states in the region. Moreover, China and Russia have been the key contributors to the SCO regional security system and anti-terrorist policies without making much use of Pakistan, a strategically located country in South Asia. The uneven distribution of power in the SCO has triggered criticisms about the fact that Pakistan mainly serves symbolic purposes and the organization has been used as a diplomatic tool by China and Russia to spread their influence in the region, instead of being a genuinely multilateral institution of regional cooperation (Ali et al., 2019; Shahab Ahmed et al., 2019).

The net effect of these restrictions and obstacles is the so-called diplomatic tokenism of the participation of Pakistan in the SCO that can bring only symbolic benefits, rather than actual political, economic and strategic influence. Although Pakistan has joined the SCO and can now be able to position itself as a key player in the region and enhance the relationship between the country and China and Russia, the lack of influence in the decision-making

process, failure to realize significant economic advantages, and the conflict existing between Pakistan and India all negate the prospects of the SCO to offer tangible benefits to Pakistan (Norling & Swanström, 2007). Such a scenario is indicative of the larger issue of the SCO and its ability to attain its regional objectives, especially where regards to the development of true multilateral collaboration. As the organization keeps serving the interest of its two dominant members, Pakistan may be left on the periphery of regional developments and would not be able to take full advantage of the strategic opportunities that the SCO may offer. In order to address these issues, Pakistan will have to improve its standing in the SCO by exercising more diplomatic power, promoting more inclusive economic and security policies, and identifying the means to reduce its current conflict with India (Shahab Ahmed et al., 2019).

Comparative Analysis

Pakistan's engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) significantly contrasts with India's involvement, reflecting different levels of diplomatic influence, economic outcomes, and strategic alignments. While Pakistan has made notable contributions in the areas of security cooperation, such as participation in counterterrorism efforts and military exercises, its economic and strategic gains from the SCO have been relatively limited. India, on the other hand, has been able to leverage its growing economic and political clout to secure a stronger position within the organization, particularly after gaining full membership in 2017. India's engagement with the SCO has largely been centered around enhancing its trade relations with Central Asia, improving regional security cooperation, and balancing its ties with both China and Russia (Shahab Ahmed, Ahmed, & Bhatnagar, 2019). The economic potential of the SCO for India is evident through its efforts to connect to energy-rich Central Asia via Iran's Chabahar Port and regional trade routes, which have facilitated enhanced economic cooperation in areas such as energy security, infrastructure development, and transportation (Mustafa, 2021).

In contrast, Pakistan's economic engagement with the SCO has not yielded the same tangible results, despite its strategic location as a gateway to Central Asia. While the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a major bilateral initiative with China, it has

not been integrated into the SCO's broader economic framework, limiting Pakistan's ability to extract broader regional benefits from its membership (Norling & Swanström, 2007). Furthermore, Pakistan's relationship with India within the SCO is marked by competition rather than cooperation, particularly on issues such as counterterrorism and regional security. The longstanding Kashmir conflict and cross-border tensions between the two nations have often overshadowed efforts for multilateral collaboration, creating a situation where Pakistan's role in SCO remains overshadowed by India's more assertive diplomacy and stronger economic engagement (Khan, 2013).

Pakistan's role in the SCO, though significant, pales in comparison to that of smaller Central Asian states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. These countries, which share geographical and historical ties with Russia and China, have been able to secure more active roles in shaping the organization's initiatives, particularly in the areas of regional security and economic cooperation. For instance, Kazakhstan, which is rich in natural resources and strategically positioned between Russia and China, has used its SCO membership to enhance its diplomatic standing and attract foreign investments, particularly in energy and infrastructure projects (Norling & Swanström, 2007). These Central Asian states also have direct and beneficial engagements with China through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has resulted in increased connectivity, economic development, and trade.

Pakistan, although a bigger and more important state in terms of its strategic location, is having difficulties when it comes to exerting its influence in the SCO framework. The smaller populations and economies of the Central Asian republics have been more nimble-footed in obtaining comfortable economic arrangements and playing their card in SCO to win investment, mostly Chinese and Russian. An example is that Uzbekistan has enjoyed strong Chinese investments in its infrastructure and Kazakhstan has become a major partner in Chinese regional energy (Ali, Ali, & Ullah, 2019). Pakistan's more turbulent relations with India, its domestic security issues, and its dependence on bilateral projects such as CPEC have constrained the country in taking full advantage of its membership of the SCO. Thus, although Central Asian countries have had an opportunity to build a closer relationship with the powerful SCO members, the

activities of Pakistan have been less active and were mostly limited to the topics of security and counterterrorism, without any significant achievements in economic cooperation (Shahab Ahmed et al., 2019).

The structure of the SCO with the consensus value of decision-making capabilities greatly restricts the potential of any member state, even Pakistan itself, to follow an aggressive policy or even set an agenda of the organization. Although the consensus-based model encourages cooperation and mutual respect, the model tends to lead to slow decision-making and compromising of the effectiveness of the activities of the organization. This is especially so in the context of addressing some of the complex issues affecting the regions such as terrorism, trade facilitation and political instability. China and Russia are the superpowers in the SCO and tend to influence the results of the discussions and initiatives, whereas smaller countries, such as Pakistan, should find their way through diplomatic limitations to protect their national interests (Norling & Swanström, 2007). The necessity of the unanimity in the SCO implies that the ambitious diplomatic initiatives are not common because every member of the organization can block the option that does not serve its interests. This consensus requirement is a two-edged sword to Pakistan. On the one hand, it offers a platform of dialogue and cooperation in the region, especially on the security and counter terrorism front. Conversely, it cramps the capacity of Pakistan to pursue its strategic interests in the larger context of SCO. As compared to India, which has been in a position to use its economic prowess to its strategic advantage as far as the organization is concerned, the economic influence of Pakistan and disputes with other countries in the region, particularly India, do not enable it to take its full position in the formulation of the SCO policies (Khan, 2013). Although this structure does not leave any member marginalized, it also implies that the role of Pakistan is limited and often decisions are made by compromising instead of strong, aggressive diplomacy.

Pakistan's Future in the SCO: Policy Recommendations

To make the best of its potential in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a more specific and strategic approach towards its participation is necessary. Pakistan seems to be losing its cohesion on its interaction with the SCO currently; its

interaction seems to be only on security cooperation and counterterrorism. Nonetheless, in the long-term benefit, Pakistan requires a sophisticated SCO engagement plan, which not only works on the security and defense compliance but also on economic cooperation, facilitation of the trade, and regional connection. Pakistan as a regional power in the making should identify its interests with the overall agenda of the SCO, like economic integration, regional security, trade and infrastructure (Mustafa, 2021). The obvious plan of action should first be putting into use what SCO has to offer in areas that are of utmost national interest to Pakistan, most specifically energy and infrastructure that offers a lot of potential. Such a proactive engagement policy would also enable Pakistan to better manage the balance of power in SCO especially the role of China and Russia and at the same time improve its ties with smaller nations of Central Asia. This can be achieved by pinpointing areas of interest where the Pakistan participation can be beneficial like energy connectivity, cooperation in counterterrorism and trade in the region Pakistan can assert itself as a major player in the future of the SCO. Moreover, the definite plan will assist Pakistan in focusing its interests in the organization and diminish the possibility of being marginalized in the multilateral discourses. This simply means that Pakistan should project its long term interests in its interaction with the SCO, with the view that its contributions are not undermined and its interests are in line with regional and global processes (Norling & Swanström, 2007).

Pakistan ought to prioritize multilateral diplomacy as well as regional integration initiatives to establish itself more powerfully in the SCO. Such a strategy would not only increase the power of Pakistan within the SCO but also provide a possibility of cooperation in such spheres as trade, infrastructure, and the stability of the region. Pakistan has the potential of being a key player in the creation of regional connectivity, a central objective of the SCO, by ensuring the development of projects that improve cross-border infrastructure and trade routes. As an example, the participation of Pakistan in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) may be combined with the general efforts of SCO to enhance regional connectivity, which will benefit not only Pakistan but the Central Asian republics as well as Russia. Such projects may also comprise transport corridors connecting the

Indian Ocean to Central Asia and augment the exchanges between China and Europe (Shahab Ahmed, Ahmed, & Bhatnagar, 2019).

When it comes to multilateral diplomacy, an investment in the SCO would mean that Pakistan would need to strive to achieve a resolution of regional conflicts that exist to hamper economic cooperation and regional integration processes. Since the issue of the conflict with India presents a still serious obstacle to the successful multilateralism in the SCO, Pakistan would do well to utilize the platform to engage in dialogue, de-escalating the tensions and developing the trust with India. This is a long-term process, but the creation of the atmosphere of cooperation and mutual understanding within the SCO may assist Pakistan in acquiring a more central position in the organization, functioning as the leader of the integration process in the region and contributing to a more stable economic situation. By establishing itself as one of the leaders in regional integration, it will help Pakistan to expand its diplomatic power within the SCO and facilitate economic growth and stability in the South and Central Asia region (Mustafa, 2021).

Pakistan has significant untapped potential to use cultural and educational diplomacy as tools of soft power within the SCO framework. While security and economic concerns often dominate the SCO agenda, cultural and educational exchanges can play a key role in improving Pakistan's diplomatic relations with other SCO member states, particularly in the context of building long-term ties with countries like China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. By investing in initiatives that promote cultural understanding and academic collaboration, Pakistan can build stronger people-to-people connections and enhance its image in the region. Pakistan could initiate or expand educational exchange programs, collaborate on regional research projects, and create cultural platforms that allow SCO members to engage with Pakistan's rich history and heritage. These cultural and educational exchanges can help soften Pakistan's image in the region, especially among the Central Asian states, where cultural and historical ties may not be as pronounced. Additionally, soft power in the form of academic collaborations on subjects like regional security, economic development, and environmental sustainability could position Pakistan as a thought leader within the SCO. Such initiatives would not only boost Pakistan's diplomatic influence but also foster goodwill among SCO member states, enhancing its

role in shaping the future direction of the organization (Ali, Ali, & Ullah, 2019).

One of the most critical challenges Pakistan faces within the SCO is balancing its multilateral commitments with its strong bilateral partnerships, particularly with China, Russia, and Iran. While the SCO offers a platform for regional cooperation, Pakistan's close ties with China (through CPEC), Russia (through defense cooperation and energy projects), and Iran (through energy and security collaborations) sometimes limit its ability to assert an independent voice within the SCO framework. Pakistan must carefully navigate these relationships to ensure that its commitments to the SCO do not undermine its bilateral ties with these countries, all of which play crucial roles in Pakistan's economic and security strategies.

As a case in point, the strategic ties between Pakistan and China, especially on economic growth through CPEC, tend to overlap with the SCO objectives of regional integration and connectivity. Pakistan however should make sure that its close relations with China do not overshadow its relations with other members of the SCO especially Russia and Central Asian nations, which might view such a relationship as too much to their disadvantage. On the same note, although Pakistan is strengthening its relationship with Russia, especially in the energy sector, it is important that Pakistan balances these with the SCO obligations lest it gets entangled with others as being dependent on one power. Furthermore, Pakistan and Iran have a long relationship in the context of which the former developed its energy policy, which also needs to be addressed carefully in the framework of the SCO's regional security negotiations where Russia and China play an important role. In this respect, Pakistan is supposed to provide a separate diplomatic policy in the SCO but use its bilateral relations to strengthen its powers in the organization (Shahab Ahmed et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The involvement of Pakistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a multi-dimensional picture of strategic benefit and diplomatic constraints. On the one hand, the Pakistani membership in the SCO has helped it to strengthen the regional connectivity, especially with such projects as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that makes Pakistan a key transit point between South and Central Asia. SCO has also offered

Pakistan a platform to enhance its counterterrorism policies through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) as well as with joint military drills that have helped to draw Pakistan closer to its major stakeholders such as China and Russia. Besides, the role of Pakistan in SCO discussions on Afghanistan and regional stability has increased its diplomatic presence providing a platform where it can discuss security issues and pursue its geopolitical interests. The accomplishments of the SCO highlight the usefulness of the organization as an interstate platform through which Pakistan can branch out its foreign policy beyond its traditional Western allies and find a place with the new Eurasian powers in a changing world order.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Pakistan and the SCO is not devoid of major setbacks. China and Russia still control the decision-making processes in the organization, which prevents Pakistan from influencing essential policies and getting any concrete economic returns. Although the SCO has focused much on regional economic integration, Pakistan has had difficulties in converting its membership into either large trade or infrastructure benefits, and projects can be easily dominated by bilateral programs such as CPEC. Moreover, the ongoing hostilities with India in the SCO framework do not contribute to the well coordinated multilateral cooperation, when political rivalries are prioritized over the common regional interests. Such restrictions point to the danger of diplomatic tokenism as the role of Pakistan in SCO seems more symbolic than actual. Pakistan should be more active and strategic in its SCO engagement in the future, where it should focus on economic integration, conflict resolution, and soft power diplomacy to make its membership more efficient and productive in the long-term perspective..

References

- Ali, R., Ali, I., & Ullah, S. (2019). SCO as a passage to regional security: Future developments and opportunities for Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal*, 3(1), 19-29. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/3.1.3>
- Alimov, R. (2018). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 114–124.
- Fayyaz, S. (2019). Pakistan and the SCO – aspirations and challenges. *Journal of Political Studies*, 26(1), 95–102.

- Khan, Z. A. (2013). Pakistan and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: An analysis. *Journal of International Relations*, 57, 57-76.
- Khetran, S. (2017). Pakistan's strategic importance in the SCO framework. *South Asian Affairs*, 6(2), 22–40.
- Mustafa, G. (2021). Pakistan and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): An analysis. Government College University.
- Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352258850_Pakistan_and_Shanghai_Cooperation_Organization_SCO_An_Analysis
- Norling, N., & Swanström, N. (2007). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, trade, and the roles of Iran, India, and Pakistan. *Central Asian Survey*, 26(3), 429-444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930701702779>
- Rehman, S. U. (2014). Significance of Shanghai Cooperation Organization – Pakistan's perspective. *Margalla Papers*, 1–20.
- Shahab Ahmed, Z., Ahmed, S., & Bhatnagar, S. (2019). Conflict or cooperation? India and Pakistan in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. *Pacific Focus*, 34(1), 5-30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12134>
- Zeb, R. (2006). Pakistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute*, 4(4), 51–60.