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## SCO and the South Asia Diplomacy

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### Abstract

*The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as a significant multilateral platform influencing regional dynamics in South Asia. Originally formed to address security concerns and foster economic cooperation among Central Asian states, the SCO's expansion to include South Asian powers like India and Pakistan has transformed its strategic contours. This paper examines the evolving role of the SCO in shaping South Asian diplomacy, highlighting its impact on regional security architecture, counterterrorism efforts, and economic integration. It explores how the platform has both facilitated dialogue and underscored geopolitical rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan. Additionally, the abstract assesses China's central role and Russia's balancing act within the SCO, and how smaller South Asian states perceive the organization. While the SCO offers a unique venue for regional engagement, its effectiveness remains challenged by internal contradictions and divergent national interests. The analysis concludes by evaluating the SCO's potential as a diplomatic bridge in South Asia's complex geopolitical landscape.*

**Keywords-** Geopolitics, Economy, BRI, SCO, SAARC, CASA, South Asia, Central Asia, China, Diplomacy, Terrorism,

### Introduction

The SCO was originally established by China, Russia and Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan. And the purpose of formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is to ensure security and maintain stability across the vast Eurasian region. Where India and Pakistan are full-fledged member of the SCO from June 2017 and Nepal, Sri Lanka are 'dialogue-partner' as well as Afghanistan holds as 'observer state'. More or less, we can say that SCO is an organization of South and Central Asian countries. Central Asia has a major geographical impact on South Asia. Three Central Asian states have border with Afghanistan. The region serves as a gateway to Russia and to the Middle East, both of which are critical areas for many South Asian states. But The permutations and combinations that abound in the SCO are dominated mostly by the interests of the 'big-four' players namely China, Russia, India and Pakistan. China is a giant that none of the members can afford to slight. The configuration of every member's dynamic with China can arguably be taken as the foundation of the SCO, but the introduction of India and Pakistan has not only equalized the balance in Russia's favor but makes it more focused towards South Asia. The SCO and its primary objectives of counter-terrorism and economic cooperation can prove to be fertile ground for an intensification of bilateral ties.

As South Asian countries has minimal resources in energy and economy sector, as well as internal and external conflict. Meanwhile, the Central Asia is a key source of energy imports, remittances, and other support, especially for India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. It makes sense, that Central Asia has become a new battleground for South Asian countries' competition, especially because of the region's oil and gas reserves. Shifting geopolitics in South Asia has increased the likelihood that Central Asian states take on a greater diplomatic and commercial role, especially in Afghanistan. Contrary to predictions, China, Russia, and Iran have each taken a cautious approach and limited their footprints in Afghanistan since the U.S. forces withdrawal. Geographical location of Central Asian countries not only attracts super powers as Russia, China, US, and India but also reflects the geopolitical engagement among these countries. All this means Central Asia has an opportunity to step up its game. The geopolitics of South Asia shouldn't just be seen through the familiar lenses of India-China, India-Pak and Russia-U.S.-China competition.

### **Research Objectives**

- To analyze the strategic significance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the context of South Asian regional diplomacy.
- To examine the role of India and Pakistan within the SCO framework and how their participation influences regional diplomatic dynamics.
- To assess the impact of SCO's political, economic, and security agenda on bilateral and multilateral relations among South Asian countries.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of SCO as a diplomatic platform for conflict resolution and confidence-building measures in South Asia.
- To explore how major power such as China, and Russia influence South Asia's diplomatic landscape through their leadership roles in the SCO.
- To investigate the opportunities and challenges that SCO presents for enhancing regional cooperation, connectivity, and integration in South Asia.
- To provide policy recommendations on how South Asian countries can better leverage the SCO for advancing regional peace, stability, and development.

### **Research Methodology**

The study is based on secondary data. Both published and unpublished sources of data are used. The data is mainly collected through various online and offline sources viz., Uncomradely, World Bank, UN Publications, Economic survey of India and through various Books, Periodicals and Journals. The present paper attempted to analyze role of SCO in as a bridge of South and Central Asian states as well as balancing act between India-China, India-Pakistan, Russia-China and other Asian states.

### **Research Questions**

- Does SCO have strength to become a platform to counteract emerging challenges in South Asia?
- Can India be able to counter China's influence in this region? Or,
- India, China and Pakistan, use it as another forum to display their acrimony?
- What does India and Pakistan's membership in the SCO mean for South Asia?

## Review of Literature

Several scholars have explored the SCO's institutional framework and its guiding principles. **Stephen Aris (2009)**<sup>1</sup> argues that the SCO's consensus-based approach and emphasis on state sovereignty have enabled it to accommodate diverse political systems and strategic priorities. This has allowed the organization to evolve without strong formal enforcement mechanisms, making it flexible but sometimes ineffective in resolving member-state tensions. **T. Ambrosio (2008)**<sup>2</sup> offers a realist interpretation of the SCO's function, suggesting it operates as a counterweight to Western alliances like NATO and serves to challenge U.S. unipolarity, especially in Central Asia. This geopolitical dimension has significant implications for South Asia, where strategic competition is also defined by great power rivalries.

The inclusion of India and Pakistan into the SCO has been the subject of extensive academic analysis. According to **Pradeep Taneja (2019)**<sup>3</sup> the expansion marked a shift in the organization's focus from Central to South Asia, bringing new geopolitical dynamics and challenges. The historic rivalry between India and Pakistan poses a unique test to the SCO's conflict-averse and consensus-driven model. Scholars like **Matthew Southerland (2020)**<sup>4</sup> suggest that while the SCO may not be able to directly mediate conflicts like the Kashmir issue, it provides an indirect channel for dialogue and confidence-building.

Studies by **Athar Zafar(2024)**<sup>5</sup> underline the growing economic agenda within the SCO, particularly in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, view SCO as a means to deepen economic ties with China and Central Asia. However, India's cautious approach to BRI has created a strategic divergence within the organization.

In terms of security cooperation, **Roy Allison (2021)**<sup>6</sup> emphasizes the SCO's role in counterterrorism and intelligence sharing through mechanisms like the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). This is particularly relevant for South Asian states, which face various internal and cross-border security challenges. However, differences in threat perception and political priorities often limit the effectiveness of joint operations.

Several analysts view the SCO as a venue for soft diplomacy. **W. C. Chao (2022)**<sup>7</sup> argues that participation in the SCO summitry allows South Asian leaders to engage in side line diplomacy, reducing bilateral tensions through informal dialogue. Moreover, the SCO provides an alternative multilateral platform to the Western-led order, which resonates with South Asian states seeking strategic autonomy.

Despite its growing prominence, the SCO faces criticism for its limited ability to enforce collective decisions or address deep-rooted conflicts. **James Mac Haffie, (2021)**<sup>8</sup> critiques the SCO as being more symbolic than substantive in addressing South Asia's core diplomatic issues. The organization's preference for non-intervention and unanimity often dilutes its potential for conflict resolution.

## SCO's Approach Towards South Asia

South Asia is a region known for its rich cultural diversity, vibrant economies, and historical complexities. However, it is also a region marked by geopolitical rivalries, longstanding conflicts,

and developmental challenges. Diplomacy plays a crucial role in South Asia, offering a pathway towards resolving disputes, fostering regional integration, and promoting peace and stability. However, India's ability to contribute to peace and prosperity in Eurasia is constrained by geography. India does not have direct physical access to the region. And its future Eurasian role is entirely dependent on developing connectivity to Central Asia.<sup>9</sup>

South Asia's history is intertwined with colonialism, partition, and subsequent conflicts. The legacy of these historical events continues to shape the region's dynamics and diplomatic relationships. The partition of British India in 1947 gave birth to India and Pakistan, setting the stage for long-standing tensions and territorial disputes. In addition, the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan remains a major obstacle to regional cooperation and has resulted in diplomatic challenges.

The inclusion of Pakistan and India in the organization in 2017 can be considered a watershed moment in the history of the SCO, for it brought three geographical neighbours (India, China and Pakistan) who have been witness to varying degrees of hostility marking their relations together. India and Pakistan had previously been observer States at the SCO along with neighbouring Afghanistan. India rallied for entry in 2012 on the grounds of reaching out to its neighbours and extended neighbours.<sup>10</sup> India and Pakistan's membership status had to be elevated simultaneously. Both Russia and China were pitching India and Pakistan as potential members respectively in order to increase their area of influence in the SCO.

The inclusion of India and Pakistan as full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has brought both opportunities and challenges to the organization and the South Asian region as a whole. Russia has supported the inclusion of new members (e.g. India) to dilute SCO's Central Asia focus.<sup>11</sup> The presence of these two nuclear-armed nations with a history of tensions has added complexity to the SCO's dynamics and its efforts to promote regional stability and cooperation.

On one hand, SCO membership offers India and Pakistan a platform to engage in dialogue and cooperation on various issues. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) provides a valuable mechanism for both countries to collaborate in combating terrorism, which is a common challenge they face. Sharing intelligence, conducting joint counter-terrorism exercises, and coordinating efforts can enhance security in the region and help build trust between India and Pakistan. 'Regional integrity' is the only solution to end India-Pakistan rivalry or ameliorate it at least and this integration could be realized through economic and cultural normalization as strategically they cannot come on single point.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the SCO's economic initiatives offer opportunities for India and Pakistan to enhance their economic ties with other member countries. The SCO's Economic and Trade Cooperation Committee facilitates trade promotion, investment, and the development of infrastructure projects. By participating actively in these initiatives, both countries can strengthen their economic integration with the region and expand their markets. However, the presence of India and Pakistan in the SCO also brings challenges that can potentially impact the organization's effectiveness. The long-standing and complex disputes between the two countries, particularly regarding Kashmir,

pose a significant hurdle to the SCO's efforts to promote regional stability.<sup>13</sup> Bilateral tensions and occasional border skirmishes can strain the SCO's objectives and divert attention from its core agenda.

The SCO's principle of non-interference in internal affairs further complicates its role in addressing India-Pakistan disputes. While the organization encourages dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflicts, it lacks the authority to mediate or impose solutions on member states. It is primarily a platform for dialogue and cooperation rather than a conflict-resolution mechanism. To fully utilize the SCO's potential for regional diplomacy, India and Pakistan must show a willingness to engage constructively within the organization. They should use SCO forums as opportunities for dialogue, confidence-building measures, and fostering greater understanding between their respective governments. This requires a commitment to addressing their differences through peaceful means, including bilateral negotiations, while respecting the SCO's principles of sovereignty and non-interference.<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, the SCO's success in promoting regional stability and cooperation hinges on the willingness of its member countries, including India and Pakistan, to prioritize dialogue, mutual trust, and common interests over historical animosities. By leveraging the SCO's mechanisms effectively, both countries can work towards resolving their disputes, enhancing economic cooperation, and building a more stable and prosperous South Asian region. India expects that its membership would help in tackling "threats of radical ideologies, of hate, violence and terror."<sup>15</sup> In 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will host the leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for its 23rd Summit. Since India joined as a full member in 2017, at the Ufa Summit in Russia, PM Modi has attended the Qingdao Summit in China in 2018 and the Bishkek Summit in 2019. The 2020 Summit hosted by Russia was held in virtual mode due to the Covid Pandemic. The Heads of Government Council (HoGC) meeting of the SCO was chaired by our Vice President on 30 November 2020. The 2022 Summit of the SCO will be hosted by Uzbekistan in Samarkand. In 2023, India will be hosting the SCO Summit for the first time. It will also be hosting the G20 Summit during the year, a mark of India's increased stature in the international community.<sup>16</sup>

### **Dimension and Scope of South Asia Diplomacy in the SCO**

**Regional Security Cooperation:** One of the central aspects of the SCO's role in South Asia diplomacy is its focus on regional security cooperation. With a shared goal of countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism, the member states engage in joint military exercises and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. This has been particularly significant in combating the threats posed by various terrorist organizations operating in the region.

**Economic Integration:** The SCO provides a platform for its member states to enhance economic cooperation and trade ties. By facilitating connectivity and infrastructure development projects, the organization aims to promote economic growth and stability in the region. For South Asian countries, this cooperation opens up opportunities for greater regional trade and investment prospects.

**Conflict Resolution:** The SCO has taken on an active role in mediating and resolving disputes among its member states. For instance, the organization has played a crucial role in facilitating dialogues between India and Pakistan, two countries with a history of strained relations, particularly over the issue of Kashmir. While the SCO may not have the power to enforce solutions, its involvement encourages dialogue and helps build confidence between the conflicting parties.

**Cultural Exchange and People-to-People Contacts:** Another important dimension of the SCO's involvement in South Asia diplomacy is promoting cultural exchange and people-to-people contacts. Through initiatives like educational exchanges, cultural festivals, and tourism promotion, the organization fosters mutual understanding and appreciation among member states, contributing to regional harmony.

### **Challenges to South Asia Diplomacy**

Despite its achievements, the SCO faces certain challenges in its engagement with South Asia. One of the major hurdles is the long-standing territorial disputes between India and Pakistan, particularly regarding the region of Jammu and Kashmir. These disputes have strained the relations between the two countries and hindered their active participation in the SCO's initiatives. However, the SCO has demonstrated its commitment to facilitating dialogue and de-escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan, providing a platform for constructive engagement.

**Territorial Disputes and Security Concerns:** The territorial disputes in South Asia, such as the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan, the border disputes between India and China, and the water-sharing conflicts between India and Bangladesh, pose significant challenges to diplomacy. These disputes often lead to strained relations, military standoffs, and hinder regional cooperation. South Asia has been plagued by terrorism, with various extremist groups operating in the region. Cross-border terrorism, particularly between India and Pakistan, has strained diplomatic ties and hindered efforts towards peace and stability. Cooperation and intelligence sharing among South Asian nations remain crucial in combating this common threat.

**Socio-economic Disparities:** South Asia is home to a significant population living in poverty, with socio-economic disparities prevailing across the region. Addressing these disparities requires concerted efforts and diplomatic engagements to promote inclusive growth, trade, and investment. Diplomatic initiatives like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) have aimed to foster economic integration and cooperation but have faced challenges due to political differences.

**Limitations in Conflict Resolution:** Member states of the SCO have varying geopolitical interests and priorities, which can sometimes lead to divergent approaches to regional issues. Balancing these interests and fostering a unified approach can be complex. While the SCO has played a role in facilitating dialogues, it lacks enforcement mechanisms for conflict resolution. As a result, its ability to bring about substantial changes to longstanding conflicts is limited. With the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the region faces uncertainties and security challenges. The SCO will need to adapt to the evolving situation in Afghanistan to effectively address security concerns.

### **Building Bridges through Diplomacy**

Track II Diplomacy: Track II diplomacy, involving non-governmental actors such as scholars, think tanks, and civil society organizations, has played a vital role in building bridges and fostering dialogue in South Asia. Forums like the Islamabad SAARC Summit and regional conferences provide opportunities for informal talks, people-to-people exchanges, and trust-building measures.

Economic Cooperation: Diplomatic efforts to enhance economic cooperation have gained prominence in recent years. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China aims to promote connectivity and infrastructure development across the region. Initiatives such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project highlight the potential for regional economic integration.

Regional Organizations: Regional organizations like SAARC and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) have been instrumental in fostering regional cooperation. However, these organizations face challenges due to political differences and bilateral tensions. Strengthening the functioning and effectiveness of such organizations can contribute to resolving conflicts and promoting diplomacy.

Confidence-Building Measures: Confidence-building measures, including people-to-people exchanges, cultural exchanges, and sports diplomacy, can contribute to enhancing trust and reducing tensions in South Asia. Initiatives like the India-Pakistan cricket diplomacy, which use sports as a diplomatic tool, have shown the potential for fostering goodwill and creating a conducive environment for dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has made significant contributions to South Asia diplomacy. Its focus on security cooperation, economic integration, and cultural exchanges has enhanced regional stability, facilitated economic growth, and fostered mutual understanding among its member countries. While challenges remain, the SCO's continued engagement with South Asia holds great potential for promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. The SCO has emerged as a crucial player in South Asia diplomacy, offering a platform for cooperation, dialogue, and conflict resolution among its member states. South Asia diplomacy faces significant challenges due to historical conflicts, territorial disputes, and geopolitical rivalries. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for dialogue, cooperation, and trust. Through its initiatives in security cooperation, economic integration, and cultural exchange, the organization continues to contribute to regional stability and development. However, challenges remain in balancing diverse interests and effectively resolving long-standing conflicts. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, the SCO's ability to adapt and address emerging issues will determine its future impact on South Asia diplomacy.

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