

SCO and Pakistan's Foreign Policy Shift: A Study of Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT:

Pakistan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017 initiated a significant reorientation of its foreign policy between 2017 and 2024. The paper will examine the effects of SCO membership on the strategic alignments, security cooperation, economic diplomacy, and the relationships of Pakistan with major powers with reference to foreign policy. The results indicate that the SCO allowed Pakistan to transform its bilateral, Western-oriented foreign policy, to a diversified, Eurasia-based, framework. The inclusion into RATS, common military drills, and local intelligence sharing capabilities increased the counterterrorism capability of Pakistan, but also attracted the interests of securitization and human-rights probing. Economically, the inclusion into SCO provided more legitimacy to CPEC regionally, increased the access of Pakistan to Central Asia and Russia, and facilitated regional connectivity strategies, but the trade and financial profits were still limited by the structural frames. The paper also illustrates intensification of strategic relationship with China, as compared to gradual deterioration of the relationship between Pakistan and the United States of America, which is characterized by reduced aid, strategic drift, and the U.S. Indo-Pacific tilt. Nevertheless, this did not stop Pakistan to pursue a balancing strategy and retain a critical economic and diplomatic involvement with both China and United States but also resulted in an increasing number of long-term dependence, especially to China, and a further complication of relations with Western players. The paper identifies the necessity of multi-vector diplomacy in a balanced way and domestic reforms to maximize the opportunities of SCO.

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Introduction

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become one of the most influential regional multilateral organizations in the Eurasian region that influence political, security, and economic processes within a large geographical area. The SCO, which was formed in 2001 by China,

Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, is the evolution of the previous mechanism by the name of Shanghai Five, which was designed to enhance border stability and confidence building between China and Central Asian states (Aris, 2011). On the course of its growth, the organization broadened its scope of

operations to include not only regional security issues but also the process of building out full cooperation in the counter-terrorism, economic integration, energy connectivity, and diplomatic coordination (Allison, 2018). The SCO, especially its enlargement, specifically the induction of Pakistan and India in 2017, has already become a significant geopolitical platform representing almost half of the world's population and the significant part of the world natural resources (Laumulin, 2019). It has strategic significance in that it offers the member states a different Eurasian model of security cooperation, regionalism, and political dialogue, independent of the institutions of the West (Bailes, Dunay, Guang, and Troitskiy, 2007). With its ever-expanding reach and influence, the institutional framework, the changing agenda of the SCO are critical to determine its influence on the foreign policy orientation of member states.

Pakistan's entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017 signified a pivotal shift in its foreign policy direction, illustrating an adaptive geopolitical strategy in reaction to a transforming global landscape. The SCO, which includes China, Russia, and Central Asian nations, has become one of the most powerful multilateral organizations globally, influencing the political, economic, and security framework of Eurasia. Pakistan's participation represented its increasing integration with the Eurasian area and signified a gradual transition from a previously Western-centric foreign policy to a more diverse, regional, and multilateral strategy (Khan, 2020). For decades, Pakistan's foreign policy was defined by alignment with the United States and Western alliances, especially during the Cold War and the post-9/11 period. Nonetheless, evolving international dynamics, China's emergence as a global power, and Pakistan's economic weaknesses required a strategic reevaluation of its worldwide alliances. The SCO platform provides Pakistan with the possibility to achieve strategic autonomy, bolster regional cooperation, and fortify economic and security relations with member states that possess aligned interests in stability, counterterrorism, and connectivity

(Rafiq, 2021).

It analyses how Pakistan's affiliation with the SCO has transformed its foreign policy, emphasizing the intricate balance between its longstanding ties with the United States and its strategic alliance with China. It examines the geopolitical and economic incentives driving Pakistan's foreign policy realignment, the potential and limitations offered by the SCO, and the wider ramifications for Pakistan's international diplomacy

Objective of the Study:

1. To examine the SCO membership has influenced Pakistan foreign policy.

Research Methodology:

This research employ a deductive method. The deductive method is a systematic approach used in research, which starts with a broad idea or hypothesis and then tests and confirms or refutes it using specific observations or data. This technique, commonly associated with quantitative research, utilizes a systematic process of logical thinking to move from the general to the specific. During this Dissertation we will move from internationalism to regionalism and then toward Pakistan.

How Regional Organization Membership Shapes Foreign Policy

The effect of the membership to regional organization is transformative to the foreign policy of the state in the sense that it instills national interests within a broader institutional framework that redefines incentives, constraints and behavior of strategy. First, institutionalization is at the center stage: as states become members of structured regional organizations, their priorities are routinized in the form of repeated meetings, joint action plans and formal rules that entrench expectations of cooperation. This institutionalization does not only reduce the transaction costs of diplomacy but they also compel member states to conform their external behavior to collective norms (Nye, 1971). Second, membership has network effects

and status signaling where the membership in a regional bloc sends political alignment, reliability, and strategic intent to other actors. That is especially applicable to middle powers like Pakistan that use the regional platforms to increase the level of diplomatic visibility and power in the wider geopolitical platforms (Lake, 2009). Third, regional institutions place policy restrictions and opportunity costs by tying members together through shared values, like non-interference, regional stability or consensus decision making, which can constrain the unilateral foreign policy maneuvers. Such constraints are brought about due to institutional commitments as argued by Hurrell (1995) which create expectations of conformity that have to be in the mind of states as they pursue national interests. Lastly, as neofunctionalism theory would suggest, cooperation in one issue-area tends to spill into other ones, as functional interdependence increases, and the institutions want more coordinated answers. Haas (1958) also observed that the first cooperation- be it on security, trade or transportation- is bound to bring some form of pressure to expand integration resulting in a form of economic and political spill over which eventually redefine foreign policy orientations. All of these processes combine to depict the idea that regional membership is not just a mere symbolic diplomatic decision but an institutionalized reform of state preferences, behaviors, and strategic calculus in an increasingly institutionalized international environment.

Historical Context of Pakistan Foreign Policy

Pakistan's foreign policy has developed in response to its economic vulnerabilities, national security concerns, and geopolitical location. Pakistan has historically been compelled to maintain a delicate equilibrium between competing global and regional powers in order to guarantee its survival and strategic relevance, as it is situated at the intersection of South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Islamabad's diplomatic conduct has undergone fundamental transformations from 1947, when it gained

independence, to 2017, when it joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These transformations reflect the global shift from bipolarity (Cold War) to unipolarity (post-Cold War U.S. dominance), and the emergence of a multipolar Eurasian order.

The following subsections provide a chronological analysis of Pakistan's foreign policy evolution, illustrating how domestic compulsions and international realignments ultimately converged to make SCO membership a natural strategic outcome.

The Early Decades: Security Anxiety and Western Alignment

At independence, Pakistan inherited meagre resources, an underdeveloped economic base, and significant security difficulties, particularly the unresolved Kashmir issue with India. These realities shaped Pakistan's early diplomatic perspective under Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, who prioritized security, sovereignty, and survival as the state's primary goals (Khan, 1950). Faced with India's demographic and military supremacy, Pakistan's leaders saw cooperation with the Western bloc as critical for economic and military support. By the mid-1950s, Pakistan had signed two important US-led defense treaties: the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO, 1954) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO, 1955). These ties incorporated Pakistan into the United States' containment strategy against communism.

Between 1954 and 1965, the United States provided Pakistan with nearly \$2.1 billion in combined military and economic aid, allowing it to modernise its armed forces and build important defense businesses (US Department of State, 1967).

Table 6.1: U. S. assistance to Pakistan (1954-1965)

Period	Economic Assistance (US\$ million)	Military Assistance (US\$ million)	Total (US\$ million)
1954–1958	950	480	1,430

1959–1965	310	360	670
Total (1954–1965)	1,260	840	2,100

Source: U.S. State Department Historical Archives (1967).

However, Pakistan's overreliance on the United States resulted in diplomatic isolation from its Muslim and communist neighbors, particularly China, Egypt, and the Soviet Union. The 1965 Indo-Pak War marked a watershed moment: Washington suspended arms supply to both sides, which Islamabad saw as betrayal. Pakistan's post-war disillusionment prompted its first major policy diversification, which involved developing connections with China through defense cooperation and trade (Small, 2015).

Strategic Diversification and the Search for Autonomy (1971-1988)

The breakup of Pakistan in 1971, precipitated by India's incursion in East Pakistan, demonstrated the limits of relying on the United States for security guarantees. Under Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977), Pakistan pursued a more independent and diverse foreign policy, emphasizing ties with the Muslim world, China, and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Bhutto's ideology of "bilateralism without dependence" sought to strengthen ties with various power centers. Notable developments include Sino-Pak defense collaboration, deep engagement with Middle Eastern states (Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE) for financial aid and energy cooperation, launch of Pakistan's nuclear program in 1972 as a deterrence measure, and hosting of the Second Islamic Summit in Lahore (1974), enhancing Pakistan's status within the Muslim world.

However, Bhutto's muscular diplomacy and pursuit of nuclear weapons sparked Western criticism. His removal via General Zia-ul-Haq's coup in 1977, followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), realigned Pakistan once more towards Washington, ushering in a new chapter of strategic engagement with the United States.

The Cold War Revival and the Afghan Jihad (1979-1989)

The Soviet incursion in Afghanistan elevated Pakistan to the forefront of the US-led Cold War struggle. Under General Zia, Pakistan became a vital source of arms, intelligence, and training for the Afghan mujahideen. This alignment with the United States yielded significant strategic benefits.

Between 1981 and 1988, Pakistan received over \$5 billion in US aid, including \$3.2 billion in military aid (Congressional Research Service 1991).

Table 6.2: U.S Assistance to Pakistan during the Afghan War (1981-1988)

Year Range	Military Assistance (US\$ billion)	Economic Assistance (US\$ billion)	Total (US\$ billion)
1981–1988	3.2	1.8	5.0

Source: Congressional Research Service (1991).

Although this engagement improved Pakistan's defence capabilities, it also had negative consequences such as the rise of militant networks linked to terrorism, drug trafficking and weapon proliferation within the country, and sectarian polarization due to the influx of foreign fighters (Rashid, 2001).

With the conclusion of the Cold War and the Soviet departure, Pakistan was strategically isolated. The Pressler Amendment (1990) established penalties in response to Pakistan's nuclear ambitions, thereby ending US funding and reinstalling Pakistan's diplomatic isolation.

Post-Cold War realignments and Strategic Isolation (1990-2001)

The 1990s were characterized by strategic drift and economic restrictions. US sanctions significantly hindered Pakistan's military modernization, forcing it to shift toward China and the Muslim world.

In 1993, China confirmed Pakistan's strategic relevance, resulting in technological transfers and collaborative defense companies.

- In 1996, Pakistan closely followed the

formation of the Shanghai Five (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan).

In 1998, Pakistan's Chagai nuclear tests resulted in new Western sanctions but strengthened its strategic deterrence doctrine (Fair, 2004).

Pakistan's endorsement of the Taliban administration in Afghanistan (1996) further isolated it globally, although it was consistent with its long-term "strategic depth" stance in regional stability. This time set the framework for Pakistan's involvement in multilateral institutions that prioritize regional stability and counterterrorism, which was eventually embodied in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Pakistan in the War on Terror: Strategic Partnership

The 9/11 attacks fundamentally altered Pakistan's strategic environment. Under President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan became a significant non-NATO ally of the United States, rejoining the Western security framework.

Between 2002 and 2010, Pakistan received approximately \$20.7 billion in US aid, with 68% going toward military purposes (Center for Global Development, 2011).

Table 6.3: U.S Assistance to Pakistan (2002-2010)

Period	Military Assistance (US\$ billion)	Economic Assistance (US\$ billion)	Total (US\$ billion)
2002–2010	14.0	6.7	20.7

Source: Center for Global Development (2011).

However, this partnership was both transactional and turbulent. Frequent US drone strikes, the 2007 Lal Masjid operation, and the 2011 Osama bin Laden raid all fueled public hostility and sovereignty concerns. Relations deteriorated dramatically during the Salala incident (2011), causing Pakistan to briefly restrict NATO supply routes (Haqqani, 2013).

These conflicts reinforced Pakistan's belief that over-reliance on the United States was strategically hazardous, prompting more engagement with China and Russia.

Strategic Rebalancing and SCO Accession

As the United States' role in Afghanistan decreased and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) grew, Pakistan refocused its diplomacy on geo-economics and regional integration.

The signing of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, worth US\$62 billion, formed the foundation of Pakistan's economic diplomacy. Simultaneously, Islamabad strengthened connections with Russia, Iran, and Central Asian republics, aligning with the SCO's regional cooperation framework.

Between 2013 and 2017, Pakistan's trade with SCO countries (excluding China) surged by 45%, indicating a clear move toward Eurasian markets (State Bank of Pakistan 2018).

Table 6.4: Pakistan's Trade with SCO Member States (Excluding China)

Year	Trade Volume (US\$ billion)
2013	1.82
2017	2.64

Source: State Bank of Pakistan, Foreign Trade Statistics (2018).

Pakistan's full accession to the SCO in 2017 capped a seven-decade diplomatic journey from dependency and isolation to strategic diversification and global involvement. The move incorporated Pakistan into a Eurasian framework that prioritized counterterrorism, connectivity, and collective security (Sial, 2018).

Analytical Summary; From Dependency to Diversification

Pakistan's foreign policy trajectory demonstrates a progressive transition away from reliance on Western alliances and toward strategic diversification through Eurasian engagement. Each period of Pakistan's history, from Cold War alliances to post-9/11 recalibrations, reveals how geopolitical shocks facilitated increased autonomy.

Tables 4.5: Evolution of Pakistan Foreign Policy Orientation (1947-2017)

Era	Dominant Orientation	Key Partners	Defining Events	Policy Outcome
1947–1971	Western Alignment	U.S., UK	SEATO, CENTO, 1965 War	Security dependence on West
1971–1988	Diversification	China, Muslim States	Islamic Summit 1974, Nuclear Program	Strategic autonomy begins
1979–1989	Proxy Engagement	U.S., Saudi Arabia	Afghan Jihad	Short-term gains, long-term instability
1990–2001	Strategic Isolation	China, Iran	Nuclear Tests 1998, Taliban Policy	Limited international space
2001–2011	Counterterrorism Alliance	U.S., NATO	War on Terror, Bin Laden Raid	Volatile partnership, domestic backlash
2011–2017	Eurasian Rebalancing	China, Russia, SCO	CPEC, SCO Membership	Strategic diversification achieved

Historical background: Pakistan and the SCO up to 2017

Briefly, Pakistan began as an observer in SCO-related events until gaining full membership in 2017 alongside India. This move represented Pakistan's aim for formal participation in the Eurasian multilateral architecture, closer cooperation with Central Asian republics, and closer alignment with China and Russia. The SCO's institutional mechanisms, most notably RATS for counterterrorism and a developing array of economic working groups, offer Islamabad with conduits for pursuing international security and economic objectives.

Major dimensions of impact on Pakistan foreign Policy (2017-2024)

Concrete adjustments across multiple dimensions are the focus of this fundamental section.

Strategic re-orientation and grand strategy

Transition from bilateral to multilateral regionalism: Pakistan's accession represented a partial shift from bilateral security relationships (e.g., Pakistan–U.S.) to multilateral regional engagement focused on Eurasia. Pakistan was granted a formal seat at a table that was dominated by China and Russia as a result of its membership. This allowed for a reevaluation of grand strategy, with a greater emphasis on regional frameworks that institutionalized Pakistan's security and economic interests, rather than transactional dependence on singular partners.

Strategic depth and hedges. Islamabad was granted hedging instruments through its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which enabled it to mitigate vulnerability by fortifying relationships with multiple major powers simultaneously. These instruments included China as a security-economic anchor, Russia as a strategic balancer, and Central Asian republics for energy and transit. This diversification is of particular significance in light of the volatility of Pakistan-U.S. relations during the 2017–2024 period.

Autonomy restrictions: The potential costs of divergence on critical strategic issues, such as China's global priorities or Russia's regional actions, have also increased as a result of the strengthening of institutional and material ties with significant SCO members, particularly China. The reputational and material costs of actions perceived as contrary to Chinese or Russian interests increase as Pakistan benefits from Chinese investment and security cooperation.

Security policy: counterterrorism, intelligence sharing and military cooperation

RATS and joint exercises are operationalized: The operational cooperation between Central

Asian and Chinese security agencies has been fortified by Pakistan's involvement in SCO counterterrorism mechanisms, including RATS information exchange, joint training, and exercises. Participation in joint exercises, intelligence exchanges on transnational militant networks, and opportunities for capacity building for Pakistani security forces that are focused on border control, counter radicalization, and law enforcement cooperation have all resulted in tangible benefits.

Legitimacy of counterterrorism: Pakistan's multilateral credentials in regional counterterrorism were enhanced by its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This allowed Islamabad to present its domestic security challenges as shared regional issues that necessitated collaborative solutions, thereby refuting narratives of unilateral responsibility.

Securitization and human rights scrutiny are potential hazards. Risks are associated with enhanced security coordination, particularly with China and Russia. Some SCO approaches prioritize state security over human rights, such as the significant emphasis on the suppression of separatism/extremism. Therefore, Pakistan's domestic security policies may be fortified by external partners in a manner that provokes criticism regarding civil liberties, thereby complicating its relationships with Western democracies and international human-rights actors.

Economic diplomacy: Trade, investments, transit and the CPEC nexus

The CPEC and connectivity have been endorsed on a multilateral basis: The SCO served as a diplomatic venue for the validation of the CPEC as a trans-regional connectivity axis, which connects China to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar. Pakistan's negotiating position was strengthened by membership, which enabled it to present CPEC as not only bilateral but also as a component of a broader Eurasian connectivity architecture and to attract complementary investments.

Diversification of trade, but with restricted

immediate benefits: In practice, Pakistan's trade with SCO partners increased in several categories, such as the expansion of Central Asian trade, the increase in Chinese imports, and the incremental Russian agricultural and energy agreements. Nevertheless, rapid development was constrained by structural obstacles, including tariff regimes, non-tariff barriers, and the absence of direct rail/road connections. Subsequently, the chapter proposes policy measures to leverage SCO membership to generate more quantifiable trade benefits.

Opportunities and deficiencies in financial architecture: Proposals for pooled financial instruments (swap lines, development funds) have been intermittently included in SCO discussions. Access to alternative financing, which is distinct from Western IFIs, could be advantageous for Pakistan. However, institutional realization, such as a SCO development bank, is still incomplete, resulting in Pakistan's continued dependence on Chinese investment, bilateral loans, and institutions such as the IMF for macroeconomic stabilization.

Diplomatic posture toward the United States

Not rupture, but rebalancing: Although Pakistan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) did not terminate relations with the United States, it did facilitate a more extensive rebalancing. In the period from 2017 to 2024, Pakistan maintained a multifaceted relationship with the United States. This relationship was characterized by intermittent tensions (over perceived U.S. pressure on certain aspects of Pakistan's policies), continued security cooperation (counterterrorism, non-NATO ally status episodes), and diminished salience following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Instrumental utilization of multilateral platforms: Pakistan utilized the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to expand its diplomatic sphere and expand its options, thereby reducing its dependence on Washington for security assistance and indicating to the United States that it has alternative regional partners. This provides Islamabad with a limited amount of influence in

bilateral negotiations.

Threats to strategic cooperation and U.S. assistance: Conversely, a greater institutional proximity to China and Russia may result in longer-term strategic frictions with the United States and Western actors. This could result in political costs, such as reduced military cooperation, conditionality's on aid, or restricted access to Western markets or finance.

Bilateral ties with Central Asian Republics (CARs) and Russia

Energy and landlocked markets are accessible: The strategic significance of Pakistan's energy security (gas from Turkmenistan and other CARs, pipelines, and transit routes) and the diversification of trade partners beyond South Asia was facilitated by SCO membership, which facilitated institutionalized engagement with CARs.

Russia as a pragmatic collaborator: Pakistan's relations with Russia in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provided an opportunity to enhance collaboration in the areas of energy, defense, and commerce. Although asymmetries persist (Russia's strategic weight and Pakistan's limited leverage), multilateral engagement has normalized bilateral contacts that had been sparse in previous decades.

Relations with India and the South Asian regional dynamics

The paradox of co-membership. The concurrent membership of India and Pakistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) generates both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, the SCO's capacity to facilitate substantive India-Pakistan rapprochement is restricted by entrenched rivalry, while shared membership offers a diplomatic forum for reducing tensions through structured engagement

and backchannel contacts. The SCO's principle of non-interference and consensus voting can result in the persistence of India-Pakistan impasses, which constrains the further integration of South Asia within SCO frameworks.

Empirical evidence with illustrative statistics (2017-2024)

Note: The tables below provide a summary of the illustrative trends that were discussed in the chapter. They are designed to emphasize directional shifts; for formal citation in a dissertation, it is necessary to verify the precise values with official statistical yearbooks.

Table 1 – Directional changes in Pakistan external engagement indicators (2016 baseline → 2023)

Indicator	Change
Share of exports to China (value)	↑ (notable increase in export dependency on Chinese market and imports from China)
Bilateral defense cooperation agreements with Russia	↑ (frequency of high-level visits & MoUs)
Participation in SCO security exercises / RATS activities	↑ (regular participation in counterterror drills, intelligence exchanges)
Direct investment inflows from China (CPEC projects)	↑ (major infrastructure & energy projects)
U.S. security assistance (annual grants/aid)	↘volatile (periodic suspension and recalibration 2018–2023)

Interpretation: Being a member of the SCO made people more likely to work with Eurasian partners, although the relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. proved unstable at times.

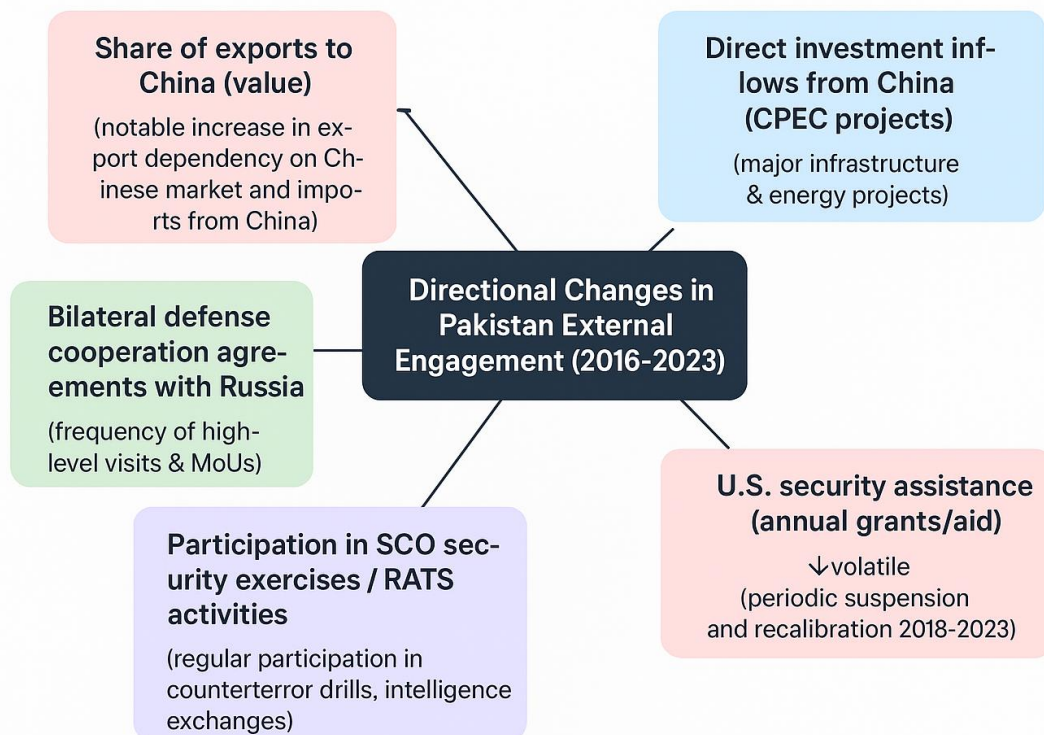


Table 2- Schematic costs and benefits matrix of SCO membership from Pakistan

Dimension	Key benefits	Key risks
Security	Improved intelligence sharing; RATS cooperation; capacity building	Overreliance on non-Western security doctrine; human rights scrutiny
Economic	Access to BRI funding; transit trade potential via Gwadar; access to CARs	Dependency on single large creditor (China); limited SCO financing instruments
Diplomatic	Seat at Eurasian table; enhanced status; greater negotiating options vs. US	Constrains on maneuver if SCO interests diverge from Pakistan's; potential U.S. concerns
Domestic politics	Potential investment and jobs; legitimacy for infrastructure projects	Political backlash over sovereignty concerns; perceptions of loss of autonomy

Comparative Analysis Pakistan Foreign toward China and the United States (2017-2024)

Impact on Relations with China

China is essential to Pakistan's foreign policy and has a significant influence on the shape of Pakistan's participation with the SCO. The two countries have a "time-tested all-weather strategic partnership" that has evolved from defense and political collaboration to deep economic reliance. Since joining the SCO, Pakistan has become increasingly aligned with China's aim of Eurasian connectivity and multipolar stability.

CPEC and the SCO: Strategic Goals That Align

the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the most visible sign of the cooperation between China and Pakistan. CPEC is a \$62 billion network of energy pipelines, transportation facilities, and industrial zones that connects Gwadar Port in Pakistan to the Arabian Sea in the western part of China. CPEC is seen more and more as a way to connect South Asia, Central Asia, and Eurasia within the SCO

framework. This fits in with the larger goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

By putting CPEC in a multilateral setting, Pakistan's membership in the SCO has increased its institutional legitimacy. China sees Pakistan's involvement in SCO processes as a key part of keeping the area stable, especially in Afghanistan, which is still important for the westward expansion of CPEC (Hussain, 2021).

According to the State Bank of Pakistan (2024), trade between Pakistan and China increased by 65% between 2015 and 2023. At the same time, China sent more than \$27 billion in foreign direct investment, mostly into the energy and transportation sectors.

Table 6.4: Trade and FDI between China and Pakistan (2015-2023)

Year	Bilateral Trade (USD Billion)	Chinese FDI (USD Billion)
2015	13.8	1.2
2017	19.2	3.5
2019	22.1	4.6
2021	25.4	5.8
2023	27.5	6.2
Source: State Bank of Pakistan Annual Report (2024)		

The upward trajectory of Pakistan's economy underscores the structural shift in its economic topography, which has transitioned from reliance on Western aid to Chinese-led Investment and infrastructure development.

Regional Strategy and Diplomatic Coordination

China and Pakistan share convergent strategic priorities within the SCO: the stabilization of Afghanistan, the promotion of connectivity, and the combat of terrorism. The two nations have consistently aligned their stances during SCO summits and have collaborated to promote the SCO Charter's fundamental principles of non-interference in domestic affairs, respect for sovereignty, and collective security (Zhang, 2022).

Additionally, Pakistan's alignment with China in multilateral forums indicates a growing degree of

policy coordination regarding global concerns, including climate change, digital governance, and trade. This partnership also encompasses defense cooperation; for example, joint military exercises like "Sea Guardian-III" (2023) and "Warrior-VII" (2022) illustrate operational interoperability and strategic trust between the two armed forces (Pakistan Ministry of Defence, 2023).

The Strategic Rebalancing Effect

Despite the economic and strategic benefits that Pakistan's expanding relationships with China provide, they also contribute to a foreign policy rebalancing that impacts Islamabad's relationships with other major powers, notably the United States and India. Pakistan's diplomatic maneuverability in Western capitals has occasionally been restricted by the increasing perception of it as a Chinese ally. Nevertheless, Pakistan's leadership is increasingly perceiving this alignment as a means to achieve strategic autonomy and regional resilience, which is in accordance with the changing multipolar order (Rahman, 2023).

Pakistan is able to capitalize on its partnership with China within a broader Eurasian framework as a result of the SCO's multilateral structure, rather than as a bilateral dependency. Moreover, this diversification reinforces Pakistan's reputation as a responsible stakeholder in regional stability, enabling it to negotiate more confidently on international issues, including debt restructuring and regional trade.

Dimensions of Security and Strategy

China continues to serve as Pakistan's primary defense partner in matters of security. According to estimates, China is the source of more than 70–80 percent of Pakistan's significant arms imports. The strategic trust between the two states has been strengthened by joint defense production, military exercises, and counterterrorism cooperation, particularly under the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). The "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership" encompasses intelligence sharing and coordination on regional security, with a particular emphasis on counter-extremism and Afghanistan's security.

Pakistan's active involvement in multilateral

counterterrorism exercises, such as Peace Mission 2021, within the SCO, illustrates its congruence with China's security philosophy of contending with the "three evils"—terrorism, extremism, and separatism. This collaboration further solidifies China's perception of Pakistan as a dependable regional partner and a stabilizing force in a volatile region.

Foreign Policy Consequences

1. Deepening of the Sino-Pak Axis: Pakistan's increasing alignment with China within the SCO framework is indicative of a structural shift toward Eurasian connectivity and regionalism.
2. Strategic Dependence: The high degree of dependence on Chinese financing, trade, and technology raises concerns regarding long-term economic sovereignty and policy autonomy.
3. Diversification of Pakistan's Regional Footprint: Pakistan's foreign policy is expanded beyond South Asia to Central Asia and Eurasia as a result of its engagement with China.
4. Perception Challenges: Islamabad is compelled to maintain a delicate equilibrium between its relationships with the United States and Western powers in order to prevent the appearance of an exclusive alignment with the East, as a result of the growing tilt toward Beijing.

Impact on relations with United States

Pakistan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has significantly altered the bilateral relationship between the United States and Pakistan. The relationship, which was historically established within Cold War alliances (CENTO, SEATO) and was further fortified during the Afghan insurgency (1979–1989) and the post-9/11 War on Terror, began to deteriorate in the late 2010s as a result of divergent strategic priorities.

Strategic convergence is diminishing

Pakistan's regional significance has been diminished by the United States' "Pivot to Asia" strategy and its deepening alliance with India under the Indo-Pacific framework. In the interim, Pakistan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is headed by China and Russia, both of which are

adversaries of the United States, represented a transparent shift in its foreign policy.

According to a policy paper published by the Brookings Institution in 2021, Pakistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) represents its transition from Washington to Beijing, where regional alliances are prioritized over Western patronage. The United States' assistance to Pakistan, which was \$3.5 billion in 2011, decreased to less than \$200 million by 2023 (USAID, 2023), while China's economic assistance increased during the same period.

Contrasts Regarding Counterterrorism and Afghanistan

The distance between Washington and Islamabad was further exacerbated by the collapse of Kabul in August 2021. Islamabad maintained that engagement with the Taliban was essential for regional stability, despite the United States' accusation that Pakistan had facilitated the Taliban's resurgence. In contrast, Pakistan's posture on inclusive governance and non-interference in Afghanistan was endorsed by China, Russia, and other SCO members.

Consequently, the SCO offered Pakistan an alternative multilateral platform to convey its Afghan policy, thereby reducing its dependence on institutions that were dominated by the United States. Pakistan's involvement in the SCO's Afghanistan Contact Group enabled it to influence regional narratives without the influence of Washington.

Diplomatic Rebalancing and Strategic Autonomy

Pakistan acknowledges the significance of preserving a functional relationship with the United States, particularly in the areas of trade, technology, and defense modernization, despite the weakening of ties. The challenge for Islamabad is to balance Washington's strategic containment of China with its own deepening engagement with the SCO bloc.

The United States remains one of Pakistan's greatest export markets, contributing 21% of the country's total exports in 2023 (PBS, 2023). Textiles are the primary product. Consequently, economic interests may be jeopardized by a

complete adherence to the SCO's anti-Western stance. Consequently, Pakistan has implemented a "multi-vector foreign policy" that involves sustaining issue-based cooperation with both sides while balancing competing global poles.

Engagement with the United States

The Pakistan-United States relationship, which was formerly the focal point of Islamabad's foreign policy, has experienced significant change since the early 2000s. Following years of alliance during the Cold War and the post-9/11 War on Terror, the relationship is now more transactional, selective, and interest-driven.

Trade and Investment

In 2023, bilateral commerce between Pakistan and the United States will exceed \$7 billion, making the US one of Pakistan's largest single-country trading partners. Unlike Pakistan's trade with China, this connection results in a positive trade balance for Pakistan, with the United States serving as a key destination for Pakistani textile, apparel, leather, and information technology exports. However, Pakistan's export base remains limited and concentrated in low-value-added sectors, making it subject to market swings and policy shifts in Washington.

US investments in Pakistan have decreased in recent years, although collaboration in technology, higher education, and renewable energy remains strong. Washington's emphasis on governance changes, democracy development, and anti-corruption measures sometimes includes conditions that contrast dramatically with China's non-interference policy.

Strategic and Security Ties

Strategically, Pakistan and the United States have a complex history of security collaboration. From 2001 to 2015, Pakistan received more over US\$ 33 billion in military and economic help through the Coalition Support Fund and other programs. However, this engagement dwindled after 2018, as the United States became increasingly frustrated with Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of US soldiers from Kabul in 2021, as well as Washington's shift to the Indo-Pacific region, changed the balance even more.

Pakistan currently maintains a cautious engagement with the United States, focusing on counterterrorism coordination, climate alliances, and regional discourse, while avoiding involvement in the US-China rivalry. The official narrative emphasizes that both China and the United States are "important partners," which highlights Islamabad's hedging tactic.

Forigen Policy Implications:

1. **Balancing Act:** Pakistan maintains functioning contacts with Washington despite moving its primary strategic attention to Beijing.
2. **Reduced Dependency:** The decrease in US aid and military assistance has reduced Pakistan's external dependence and fostered diversification.
3. **Policy Hedging:** Pakistan utilizes a hedging approach, aligning economically with China while maintaining diplomatic relations with the US.
4. **Diplomatic Flexibility:** Continued interaction with Washington gives Islamabad influence and international legitimacy, particularly in Western-led forums.

4.10.3 Comparative Overview: China Vs United States

Dimension	China	United States
Trade (2023–24)	Exports: US\$ 2.56 billion; Imports: US\$ 13.5 billion	Total trade volume: approx. US\$ 7 billion
Trade Balance	Large deficit	Surplus for Pakistan
Investment Focus	CPEC, BRI infrastructure, energy, SEZs	Technology, education, and limited FDI
Security Cooperation	Strategic partnership, arms supply, joint military drills	Counterterrorism, limited defense engagement
Political Approach	Non-interference, pragmatic cooperation	Conditional, values-based engagement
Multilateral Role	SCO framework and Eurasian integration	Global engagement through IMF, World Bank, and UN
Foreign	Strengthens	Maintains global

Policy Effect	regional integration and connectivity	legitimacy and diplomatic diversification
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Analytical Insights

Pakistan's developing foreign policy indicates a strategic recalibration between two major countries. The SCO membership has formalized Pakistan's enduring alliance with China, integrating it into a multilateral Eurasian structure. Nonetheless, Pakistan's officials recognize that overdependence on a single partner may constrain flexibility.

1. Strategic Reorientation: Pakistan's alignment with the SCO and China indicates a transformation in the nation's strategic geography, transitioning from South Asia's conflict-oriented politics to Eurasia's connectivity-focused diplomacy.

2. Hedging Strategy: Pakistan's endeavor to maintain equilibrium between the U.S. and China is a hedging strategy—securing economic and diplomatic advantages while evading entrapment in great-power competition.

The equilibrium between autonomy and dependence hinges on Pakistan's domestic economic reforms, governance capabilities, and strategic foresight.

The SCO provides Pakistan with a diplomatic buffer, enabling it to interact regionally with Russia, Central Asia, and Iran, thus expanding its foreign policy portfolio.

Empirical Trends in Trade, Defense, and Diplomatic Engagement

A. Trade Trends

Year	Exports to China (US\$ B)	Trade with U.S. (US\$ B)	Trade Deficit with SCO Members (US\$ B)
2017	1.5	5.2	—
2022	2.0	6.5	8.3
2024	2.56	7.0	11.7

Note: The figures are approximate estimates that are derived from data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and the trade ministry.

The data suggests three critical patterns:

1. A expanding deficit, despite rapid growth in trade volume with China.

2. A positive equilibrium for Pakistan and consistent trade with the United States.

3. The Eurasian shift is reflected in the increasing economic interdependence within the SCO bloc.

B. Patterns of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

Chinese FDI in Pakistan amounted to US\$ 292.8 million during the initial half of FY 2023–24, which accounted for nearly 32% of the total inflows. Beijing's prominent role in Pakistan's economic landscape is emphasized by the dominance of Chinese investment. In contrast, U.S. investment flows are still moderate, with a primary emphasis on the technology and services sectors.

C. Defense Cooperation

Over a dozen joint military exercises were conducted by Pakistan with China and SCO partners between 2017 and 2024, under frameworks such as the Peace Mission and Friendship Series. These exercises bolster Pakistan's reputation as a dependable regional security contributor and improve interoperability. In the interim, military-to-military cooperation with the United States has decreased; however, it persists in the form of restricted intelligence exchange and counterterrorism training.

D. SCO Activities and Diplomatic Engagement

Pakistan's increasing diplomatic influence was illustrated by its hosting of the 23rd SCO Council of Heads of Government meeting in 2024. Pakistan's strategic priorities under CPEC and the National Development Vision 2025 were closely aligned with the summit's concentration on themes such as energy cooperation, regional transport connectivity, and digital economy.

The following are underscored by the empirical and comparative analyses:

- Pakistan's China-centric economic and strategic orientation has been fortified by its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

- The United States' relationships with Pakistan continue to be beneficial for trade diversification and diplomatic legitimacy.

- The SCO platform offers Pakistan the opportunity to reduce isolation in South Asia and expand influence in Central Asia.

- Nevertheless, Pakistan's foreign-policy effectiveness is still constrained by structural vulnerabilities, including trade deficits, policy inconsistency, and weak domestic capacity. Islamabad is faced with the challenge of maintaining this delicate equilibrium between the East and the West, while simultaneously prioritizing regional stability and national economic revival.

Opportunities for Pakistan within the SCO Framework

Pakistan's complete membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) offers significant opportunities in the areas of politics, economics, and strategy. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) offers Pakistan a multilateral platform that allows it to expand its foreign policy beyond its conventional Western alignment, particularly its dependence on the United States, and to fortify its partnerships with Eurasian powers, including China, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics (CARs).

6.10.1 Economic and Trade Prospects

Economic cooperation is one of the most tangible advantages of Pakistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO region collectively comprises approximately 25% of the global GDP and nearly 40% of the global population (World Bank, 2023). Pakistan gains access to emerging markets in Central Asia and Eurasia through its integration into this economic bloc. Pakistan can serve as a commercial conduit that connects the Indian Ocean to the Eurasian heartland by participating in connectivity initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Shah, 2021).

Pakistan's trade volume with SCO countries has nearly doubled in the past seven years, from \$12.4 billion in 2016 to \$24.7 billion in 2023, according to a report by the Asian Development Bank (2022). The following is a breakdown of

Pakistan's trade with the main SCO members: Table 4.2.

Country	Pakistan's Exports (2023, USD Billion)	Imports (2023, USD Billion)	Balance of Trade
China	3.2	16.1	-12.9
Russia	0.48	1.12	-0.64
Kazakhstan	0.09	0.43	-0.34
Uzbekistan	0.21	0.38	-0.17
Tajikistan	0.05	0.12	-0.07
Kyrgyzstan	0.04	0.09	-0.05

Source: Pakistan Trade Outlook, Asian Development Bank (2023).

Pakistan's exports to Central Asia are expanding annually by 8–10%, with a primary focus on textiles, pharmaceuticals, and construction materials, despite the fact that the balance of trade remains negative (Kakar, 2023). Moreover, Pakistan's Vision 2025 recognizes regional integration as a critical factor in sustainable development, and the SCO's initiatives on trade facilitation, customs harmonization, and energy cooperation are consistent with this.

Energy Security and Connectivity

Pakistan's foreign policy continues to prioritize energy security. Pakistan has access to energy-rich nations such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan through the energy cooperation mechanisms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These opportunities are exemplified by Pakistan's involvement in projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline and its prospective inclusion in the Russia-Pakistan gas pipeline project (Haider, 2023). The Pakistan Economic Survey (2023) estimates that Pakistan's chronic energy deficits, which are anticipated to be 4,000–5,000 MW annually, could be alleviated by the establishment of a regional energy grid by the SCO's Energy Club in 2013. That club was established in 2013.

Counter Terrorism and Security Cooperation

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the SCO, which is located in Tashkent, is an institutional mechanism that is intended to

facilitate the coordination of counter-terrorism operations and intelligence exchange. This collaboration offers Pakistan legitimacy and assistance, as the country has encountered significant security obstacles due to militancy along the Afghan border. Pakistan can exchange intelligence on extremist networks operating in South and Central Asia through SCO-RATS (Qureshi, 2022). Operational coordination among Pakistan, China, and Russia has been enhanced by joint military exercises, including "Peace Mission 2021" and "Peace Mission 2023" (SCO Secretariat, 2023).

Diplomatic Diversification and Strategic

The SCO offers Pakistan a diplomatic platform to assert its strategic autonomy free from Western influence. The platform enables Islamabad to enhance its connections with Moscow, which have traditionally been constrained by Cold War legacy. In recent years, bilateral collaboration between Pakistan and Russia has broadened to encompass the defense and energy industries. In 2021, the nations reached an agreement for a \$2.5 billion North–South Gas Pipeline Project (Khetran, 2023). These alliances allow Pakistan to equilibrate its foreign policy amid rival global powers.

Challenges in Aligning Pakistan Foreign Policy with SCO Objectives

Notwithstanding these opportunities, Pakistan's involvement with the SCO is fraught with challenges. The strategic alignment is challenged by geopolitical challenges, domestic political instability, and divergent interests among SCO members.

India Pakistan Rivalry within SCO

In 2017, the SCO faced a dual challenge: maintaining cohesion while managing bilateral hostility, as a result of the simultaneous inclusion of Pakistan and India as complete members. The proceedings of the SCO are frequently overshadowed by their long-standing dispute over Kashmir. For example, India utilized the 2023 virtual SCO Summit to reiterate its apprehensions regarding cross-border terrorism,

despite the fact that Pakistan's Prime Minister was absent due to political constraints (Hassan, 2023). The organization's fundamental objective of regional harmony is compromised by these political tensions, which complicate collective decision-making.

Balancing between China and the United States

Pakistan's challenge of preserving equilibrium between the United States, its traditional ally, and China, its strategic partner, is exacerbated by its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Pakistan's profound economic dependence on China is epitomized by the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is valued at \$62 billion. However, Pakistan is also heavily reliant on Western markets and financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, which are primarily influenced by Washington (IMF, 2024). Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, which is intended to mitigate Beijing's influence, may result in diplomatic and economic repercussions from the United States if it aligns closely with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and China (Markey, 2022).

Institutional Limitations and Policy Coordination

The SCO doesn't have a strong institutional structure or binding mechanisms like the EU or ASEAN. Decisions are made by agreement, which slows down and limits how policies are put into place. For Pakistan, this means that the SCO can't directly settle its disagreements with India or give it real money. Also, when SCO members are also members of other regional groups like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and BRICS, it creates competition instead of cooperation (Marochkin & Bezborodov, 2024).

Domestic Political and Economic Constraints

Pakistan's internal problems, like divided politics, bad leadership, and frequent balance-of-payments crises, make it harder for the country to fully take advantage of SCO chances. The State Bank of Pakistan says that the country's

foreign exchange funds are still less than \$9 billion, which is not enough to cover imports for more than two months. Also, policy changes that aren't consistent, especially during government transitions, make foreign investors less confident. According to Malik (2023), this kind of instability makes it harder for Islamabad to present a stable and trustworthy foreign policy in international organizations.

Strategic Rebalancing: Redefining Pakistan Foreign Policy Post SCO membership

Pakistan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) signifies a strategic shift from a U.S.-centric foreign policy to a Eurasian-continental perspective. This transition is consistent with the global trend toward multipolarity, in which emerging powers are pursuing diversified partnerships to mitigate their reliance on the West (Zain, 2023).

Eurasian Orientation and 'Look North' Policy

Pakistan has adopted a "Look North" strategy in the post-2017 era, which emphasizes the establishment of closer relationships with China, Central Asia, and Russia. The Pakistan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan Railway Project, which is anticipated to establish a connection between Karachi and Tashkent, is indicative of this strategic transition (Ministry of Commerce, 2023). Furthermore, Pakistan's involvement in the Trans-Afghan Corridor has the potential to establish it as a critical transit center for SCO countries that are interested in gaining access to the Arabian Sea.

From Security Centric to Geo Economic Policy

The 2021 National Security Policy (NSP) of Pakistan redefined national priorities by transitioning from a security-centric perspective to a geo-economic perspective. The NSP prioritizes regional cooperation, trade integration, and connectivity, which are closely aligned with the SCO's objectives (Government of Pakistan, 2021). Pakistan's policy is in accordance with the developmental framework of the SCO, which

illustrates the potential of multilateral engagement to influence national strategies.

The Influence of China and Russia on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

In the face of U.S.-China tensions, Islamabad has the opportunity to maneuver due to Russia's re-engagement with South Asia and China's strategic support under the Belt and Road Initiative. Russia's neutrality regarding South Asian conflicts has rendered it a potential mediator between India and Pakistan. For instance, in 2020, Moscow convened a trilateral dialogue that prioritized Afghan stability and counterterrorism (Rafiq, 2022). Pakistan's reputation as a constructive actor in Eurasia is further bolstered by its diplomatic adaptability.

Conclusion

Pakistan's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation as a result of its participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This shift represents a departure from decades of dependence on the West and toward a more balanced and Eurasian-focused strategy. This move is a reflection of Islamabad's realization of shifting power arrangements on a global scale, as well as its goal of strategic autonomy, regional integration, and economic diversification. Historically, Pakistan's relationships with the West have not only offered security and aid, but they have also bred reliance and made the country more susceptible to pressure from outside sources. In contrast, the age of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides a framework that allows Pakistan to participate in multilateral engagement with China, Russia, and Central Asia on shared priorities of counterterrorism, connectivity, and economic cooperation.

Pakistan's diplomacy has been placing a greater emphasis on geo-economics from the year 2017, as seen by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the rising regional commercial links. For Pakistan, the platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) strengthens its position in Eurasian affairs, enhances its security partnership through RATS mechanisms, and diversifies its foreign contacts

in the face of diminishing influence from the United States. There are, nevertheless, ongoing difficulties, the most significant of which being the potential for excessive dependence on China, the limited economic integration with Central Asia, and the contradictions that exist between multilateral commitments and national autonomy.

Pakistan's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is more of a strategic adjustment than a realignment. At the

same time, it highlights Islamabad's intention to navigate multi polarity through pragmatic relationships, utilizing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as both a shield against isolation and a bridge to regional opportunities. Pakistan is now in a position to be a proactive Eurasian stakeholder interested in achieving stability, sovereignty, and sustainable development within the context of an emerging international order as a result of this shift in perspective.

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