



**THE FIRST ENLARGEMENT OF SHANGHAI
COOPERATION ORGANIZATION
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

NABILA JAFFER

INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES, ISLAMABAD

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THE FIRST ENLARGEMENT OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

NABILA JAFFER*

Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded on 15 June 2001, originally included China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The organization was established primarily to address the common concerns of terrorism, separatism, and extremism in the member states, particularly in Central Asian Republics (CARs). The organization announced its first-ever and long-awaited enlargement after 14 years of formation on 10 July 2015 during 15th summit in Ufa, Russia. It officially received India and Pakistan as members and upgraded Belarus from dialogue partner to observer status. It also added Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia and Nepal as new dialogue partners joining Turkey and Sri Lanka. Before becoming full members, however, India and Pakistan will have to fulfil certain statutory and legal obligations. Previously, Pakistan and India have been enjoying observer status in SCO since 2005. Pakistan had applied for full membership in 2006 while India formally placed application for the same at the 14th summit of SCO held in Dushanbe in 2014.¹ The 14th summit also resulted in signing of key documents that set out procedures for accepting new members including a set of requirements that acceding states need to fulfil in order to achieve full SCO member status.²

Admission of new members was a long process in which Russia was keen to admit India, and China was advocating for the admission of Pakistan.³ Besides,

* Ms. Nabila Jaffer is Research Analyst at Institute of Regional Studies.

the SCO also approved a development strategy until 2025 during the 15th summit, which set detailed targets and tasks for the organization's development in the coming 10 years, based on a thorough analysis of global and regional development trends. The 15th summit of SCO marked the announcement of expansion with a commitment towards deepening economic cooperation and a resolve for closer coordination in security, which is expected to lift the SCO cooperation to a new high.⁴

Within this context, this paper aims to analyze future implications of SCO's expansion to South Asia. Broadly, the paper is divided into three sections: The first section gives an overview of the origin, formation, and development of the SCO. This section helps in analyzing the implications of the expansion in the context of the underlying principles and goals of the organization. The second section helps in understanding the scenarios and determinants of SCO expansion. The third section explores how this enlargement can boost the global outreach of the SCO and how it is perceived in the global context. It also examines the implications of SCO enlargement in regional context by focusing on what potential opportunities and challenges new members would bring to the organization in the context of adverse bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. Another important aspect of the paper is to examine how the new expansion of SCO is relevant to the stability in Afghanistan in the wake of the drawdown of US forces from the country.

The evolution and development of SCO

The origin of the SCO is found in the cooperation and understanding developed over the years among the members of the 'Shanghai Five' mechanism. The Shanghai Five mechanism was created in 1996 to demilitarize and resolve border issues between China, Russia, and the three Central Asian Republics (CARs): Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁵ The forum successfully

resolved a 3,000 km border issue along the former Soviet borders in a short span of a few years, which had caused turbulence for centuries.⁶ Besides, the process also helped the members to develop a common approach of cooperation through mutual trust, mutual respect, consultation, and equality that is often referred to as ‘Shanghai Spirit’.

The newly independent states of Central Asia were confronted with many challenges because of their structural dependence on Soviet system in the past. Issues of border demarcation, growing instability, surge in terrorism, and formation of Taliban government in Afghanistan in 1996 had increased the concerns of the countries of the region.⁷ The major threats identified in CARs were terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism, which exacerbated with the instability in Afghanistan. Moreover, drugs and illicit arms trafficking—and its link with corruption, crime, insurgency, and terrorism—were posing a threat to the very fabric of Central Asian society.⁸

The common understanding developed on the maintenance of border security and the need for collective approach on growing security threats in CARs motivated the members to upgrade the forum into a formal regional body. The Shanghai Five was renamed as Shanghai Cooperation Organization after Uzbekistan joined it in 2001. The Declaration on the Creation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization was signed on 15 June 2001 in which the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism was adopted. With this, the process of institutionalization of cooperation commenced against common concerns such as cross-border smuggling, terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism. The last three are also termed as the ‘three evils’ in SCO framework. The Charter of SCO was adopted by the six participating states in Saint-Petersburg on 7 June 2002, which defined the principles, purposes, and structure of the organization.⁹ The charter espoused the Shanghai Spirit by translating it into SCO principles such as respect for sovereignty and

independence, territorial integrity and border stability, non-aggression and non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas, and equality of all members.¹⁰ Hence, it lists several basic principles of international law as the foundation of the organization.¹¹ Although the SCO has not created any counter-narrative to global events, politically “the SCO member states are resolute supporters of a multi-polar world, the system of international law that took shape after World War II and the leading role of the UN Security Council.”¹²

The institutionalization of the multilateral forum allowed its members to enter into various political agreements to promote good neighbourly relations.¹³ The charter also maps out the major goals which include strengthening of mutual trust, friendship and good neighbourliness between the member states, maintenance of peace, security and stability in the region through jointly countering terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations, and fighting against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking. At the global level, it calls for a democratic, fair, and rational international political and economic order. The charter encourages efficient regional cooperation in such spheres as politics, trade and economy, defence, law enforcement, environmental protection, culture, science and technology, education, energy, transport, credit and finance, and other spheres of common interest to facilitate comprehensive and balanced economic growth, as well as social and cultural development in the region.¹⁴ The SCO attaches great importance to cooperative security based on state-to-state relationship built upon mutual trust and partnership instead of alliance. It also stresses on non-interference in internal affairs, which makes this organization different.¹⁵ Many analysts also believe that this trait of the SCO makes it attractive for many countries to join.¹⁶

The SCO operates through two of its permanent coordinating bodies: the secretariat based in Beijing for the administrative and technical support led by a

Secretary-General, and a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent. The SCO's current official languages are Chinese and Russian.¹⁷ But with the accession of India and Pakistan, the organization would require the translation of all the existing documents into English, and it is expected that English would become the third official language of SCO.¹⁸

With primary focus on security of the region, SCO member countries organize joint anti-terror military drills, share information and intelligence reports through RATS mechanisms to prevent terrorist acts, and also collaborate in anti-narcotics campaigns.¹⁹ Despite increasing military cooperation, the SCO does not work as a military-political bloc like the NATO. There is already a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for military purposes led by Russia in the Eurasian region that also includes few members from Central Asia.²⁰

Apart from collaborating against the three evils, SCO members also attempted to benefit from the collective economic potential of its member states. The organization had approved a formal economic programme in 2003, potentially aimed at making free movement of goods, capital, services, and technologies a reality within two decades. But it has not been implemented due to the diverging national interests of SCO members and the lack of effective joint funding mechanisms.²¹ For this purpose, two non-governmental structures named Business Council and SCO Forum were created in 2006 to coordinate economic cooperation among the business communities of the member states.²² From 2007 onwards, economic cooperation among SCO members has increased, but progress has not been very significant under the SCO framework. Most of the economic projects are handled through bilateral agreements. The SCO framework mainly focuses on regional security, but critics argue that the organization's potential to stabilize its volatile regions remains essentially theoretical with no tangible achievements.²³ There is no denying the fact, however, that joint efforts of SCO

anti-terrorist structures have successfully prevented many terrorist attacks in the region since its establishment.²⁴

Scenarios and motivations for enlargement

SCO in the post-9/11 scenario

With the changing dynamics of regional security after the formation of international coalition against terrorism in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the security configuration of Central Asia and adjacent countries was greatly challenged with the spillover effects of terrorism stemming from the next door Afghanistan.²⁵ As a result of the global war on terror, relations between the US and Russia were improved initially. The US received bilateral cooperation from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan for the war as well.²⁶ The presence of the US and allied forces in Afghanistan had initially eased tensions of the CARs, Russia, and China about the spread of negative effects of terrorism from Afghanistan.²⁷ But the increasing influence of the US in the region under the pretext of war on terror soon raised Chinese and Russian reservations. In order to emphasize the viability of SCO as a regional security organization, they reiterated their commitment to fighting against regional terrorism by issuing a joint statement in SCO foreign ministers' meeting in 2002, and highlighted SCO's farsightedness for its pre-9/11 decision to focus on fighting against the 'three evils'.²⁸ According to former Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan, the SCO was the first international organization that set counter-terrorism as its target.²⁹

China was the major driver behind the development and strengthening of this organization. In addition to China's reservations about the increasing influence of the US in the region, Beijing's primary concerns were also connected with the security and development in Xinjiang (northwestern part of China sharing 2,800 km border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). This part of China is vulnerable to the situation in Afghanistan and political instability in

Central Asian countries. Due to the fear of separatist movements and infiltration of terrorists into Xinjiang, China was keen to accelerate security cooperation under the SCO framework.³⁰

SCO in the post-withdrawal scenario

In contemporary scenario, the SCO members, particularly China, are concerned about the negative consequences of the departure of international and US forces from Afghanistan. China is, therefore, focusing on combining regional cooperation in both security and economic development. China's interests in the stability of the post-Soviet Central Asia are also connected with its economic gains in the resource-rich region from where it hopes to meet its growing energy demands.³¹

It is feared that the withdrawal will bring instability and put serious strains on the security situation in the region with repercussions for all major regional stakeholders, which include CARs, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia.³² The neighbouring states are raising concerns about the resurgence of extremist and terrorist forces after the complete withdrawal of the US forces.³³ Moreover, it is also understood that Afghanistan has peculiarities that deeply connect its fate to Central and South Asia. One, for instance, is that its internal groups involved in terrorism and drug trafficking have trans-national connections to other groups in and around the region.³⁴ Within this context, it is acknowledged that the SCO can provide a regional framework to intensify cooperation amongst neighbouring states including India and Pakistan to cope with the negative consequences in the post-withdrawal scenario.³⁵ It is also the reason for the recent upgrade of SCO's mandate to make it more comprehensive and multi-dimensional.³⁶

Motivations for enlargement

Despite the growing relevance of the SCO in tackling the trans-nationally connected 'three evils', the organization maintained its original membership for a

long time. Many countries, including India, Iran, and Pakistan, had expressed their desire to become full members, but there was little consensus among the member states with regard to its expansion. The organization was young and its membership mechanism was also not developed. The SCO lifted moratorium on membership in 2010 and opened doors for the admission of new members after approving regulations in the Council of Heads of States' meeting in Tashkent.³⁷ The consensus on the recent enlargement developed due to multiple factors.

The uncertain future of Afghanistan could be regarded as the single most important factor that led to the enlargement of SCO. There are many other aspects, however, which prompted the expansion of the organization towards South Asia. One major interest behind the expansion could be the strengthening of SCO to deal with regional security challenges and to better utilize the interlinked regions for common economic development. With this realization, the SCO needed to bring such countries under its umbrella which would serve those interests.

The new threats of international terrorism with the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) could be considered another aspect that necessitated the SCO enlargement. ISIS got a lot of attention during the 15th summit of SCO aimed at saving the region from further menace of terrorism. The group has been declared more dangerous than Al-Qaeda by SCO officials. The links of ISIS in Afghanistan are identified as another major challenge to the peace and security of the entire SCO region. The solution to this problem is also connected to peace and stability in Afghanistan, and to developing rapid exchange of information between the competent authorities of the neighbouring states. Therefore, the SCO members want to expand cooperation to observer states to jointly coordinate in preventing the citizens of each state from taking part in radical movements in Syria and Iraq.³⁸

Apart from the new security threats and the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan, some analysts view the expansion as also motivated by Russia's pursuit of new friends and strategic partners following friction with the West over Ukraine. Russia's attempt to look towards East is aimed at decreasing its dependence on the West. Likewise, China's 'marching west' strategy is linked with the emerging Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project. These are considered as crucial geopolitical and economic factors behind this decision.³⁹

Moreover, agreement on the enlargement was also reached because of Russia's flexibility towards the economic ambitions of China in the region. The diverging interests of China and Russia were the main obstacle in the development of crucial transport and infrastructure facilities for regional connectivity in Central Asia.⁴⁰ In the past, Russia had reservations over the ambitious infrastructure projects of China in Central Asia because of the fear that they could undermine its economic interests, which it advances through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Because of its changing approach towards regional infrastructural development, from which it also wants to benefit, Moscow now wants to facilitate economic integration with China through EAEU. In this regard, the SCO could become a platform for developing linkages between them through a consultative mechanism within the SCO framework.⁴¹ Russia has always been conscious about preserving its traditional power and standing in the region. Earlier it was believed that Russia would appear as a competitor if China would aspire for a dominant role in the regional and global politics. Accommodative approach on the part of China has helped in this regard though. It is trying to maintain a delicate balance to avoid undermining Moscow's political interests in Central Asia. Moreover, due to the growing mutual concerns about the security-related issues, both countries are trying to complement each other's national interests in the region. Both have already emerged as partners in bridging the security gaps in Central Asian region. Balancing their interests in economic

sphere has now helped them agree on important matters in SCO, including the expansion of the organization.⁴²

The deepening ties between Russia and India over the decades and improvement in relations between Russia and Pakistan could also be considered reasons for SCO enlargement. Russia's support for inclusion of India was aimed at further strengthening its relations with the latter, because the SCO can provide another platform for the two countries to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation. India is looking to achieve more secure and diversified energy sources, and Russia is looking for new energy export markets beyond Europe. Russia's support for Indian entry into the SCO was also aimed at counterbalancing too much influence of China in the organization. By adding India, Russia was interested in taking the organization out of Central Asia and onto the world stage;⁴³ whereas China's support for the admission of Pakistan was crucial for Beijing's fight against religious extremism both within the country and the region, as well as because of Pakistan's geographical significance for regional connectivity.⁴⁴

Implications of the SCO enlargement

Uplifting international standing of SCO

The enlargement of SCO would substantially strengthen its global standing by giving it fresh impetus to develop further with its increasing geopolitical outreach. The new members would add weight to the prestige and international visibility of the organization. The SCO covers one quarter of the world's population with its six members and is considered one of the world's largest regional organizations in terms of population represented (21.8 per cent of the world's total population, and 19.6 per cent of the global land).⁴⁵ Its members and observers collectively possess 17.5 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves, almost 50 per cent of known natural gas reserves, and some 45 per cent

of the world's population.⁴⁶ The combined geopolitical strength of the SCO was considered impressive even prior to the expansion with its geographic reach from the South and East China seas up to the Arctic and across to the Caspian Sea and Eastern Europe (see map below).⁴⁷ Now, with the inclusion of the two largest South Asian countries, its population, territory, and share of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will increase further. It is considered a turning point in SCO's history of development. With the inclusion of Pakistan and India, it will become much bigger and will move beyond the Central Asian region.⁴⁸

Moreover, the newly enlarged SCO will seek to extend its interests to the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and potentially to the Levant through Iran.⁴⁹

The addition of two new members will not only result in expanding the geographical reach of the organization, but also change its overall configuration and balance of power. More importantly, two founding members of SCO, Russia and China, are nuclear weapons states and permanent members of the UN Security Council. The organization will now have four nuclear weapons states with the inclusion of India and Pakistan that will attract general attention to it.



Source: www.globalresearch.ca

One school of thought believes that with the accession of India, which is considered the largest democracy, the existing perception that SCO belongs to the authoritarian states will be changed. But this expansion would also be perceived as the consolidation of the non-Western countries in support of a multi-polar world. From this perspective, the SCO would be considered a club of countries drawn together—despite their existing disagreements—on the basis of a shared interest in avoiding Western dominance.⁵⁰ With this belief, it is also speculated that further enlargement of this platform could even offer a Eurasian alternative to Western Europe. Some analysts maintain that if BRICS (group of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is about to become an alternative to the Group of Seven and the Group of Twenty, the SCO could assume the role of a second, non-Western centre of gravity in Eurasia as a counter-weight to Western Europe.⁵¹ While BRICS is not a formal organization, the SCO has a well-constituted

structure, which can play its role in this regard. Western analysts maintain that if the EAEU would come up with an economic alternative to the EU, the SCO could emerge as a political and ideological alternative. If it happens, the SCO would lay down the foundations of a multi-polar world as envisioned by Russia and China.⁵²

But these speculations are challenged by arguing that the alternatives offered by BRICS and SCO may not be confrontational because SCO upholds its special nature through promoting constructive cooperation in the region and internationally. It is expected that the organization would continue to add all the leading non-Western powers of Eurasia among its members. Many experts believe that Chinese commitment towards non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries will continue making this attractive for non-Western, non-democratic countries. The inclusion of India and Pakistan, however, will help in neutralizing its image of promoting a non-Western global order because both India and Pakistan have post-colonial Western-inspired political systems.⁵³

Increasing economic strength of SCO

China and Russia are considered the strength of SCO, the former because of its economic significance, and the latter due to huge post-Soviet political and industrial legacy along with immense energy resources. Likewise, the Central Asian member states of the SCO like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan possess approximately 40 per cent of oil and natural gas resources of the world. In addition to this, the acceding members, India and Pakistan, will multiply its strength through economic, political, industrial, military, and many other opportunities. It will pave the way for increasing the volume of trade among the members and with other regions through expanded regional connectivity and infrastructural development.⁵⁴ The predictions about the enlargement in which India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan were all expected to join would have turned this group to control 20 per cent of the world's oil, half of all global gas reserves,

and to represent about half of the world's population. This dream could be realized in the not so distant future. With the resolution of Iran's nuclear issue, its full membership in the organization is also expected in the upcoming summits.⁵⁵ If it happens, the combined economic power of the SCO will expand significantly, as the energy resources of Iran will add to the already substantial reserves in the SCO.⁵⁶

It is expected that the inclusion of India and Pakistan will give a boost to SCO's economic projects especially in Central Asia.⁵⁷ India is the world's ninth largest economy, while Pakistan sits on the crossroads of the SREB and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). In this regard, SCO can play a more substantial economic role after enlargement.⁵⁸ Pakistan can become an energy and trade corridor for SCO countries with the development of Gwadar Port. Pakistan is already developing connectivity infrastructure with assistance from China.⁵⁹ Now through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, Kashgar (in northwest China's Xinjiang province) will be connected with Gwadar Port (southwest of Pakistan) through a 3,000 km network of roads, railway lines, and pipelines. It is a major project proposed by China under 'One Belt One Road' initiative that refers to SREB and MSR collectively. The projects were proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 for reviving the ancient trade routes that crisscrossed Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁶⁰ Pakistan can provide an opportunity to connect Central Asia with the Gwadar Port to supplement SCO's efforts for creating trans-continental overland connectivity. In this regard, Pakistan can become an important gateway to the Middle East for China and Central Asia with shortest land and sea routes. Through increasing regional connectivity and economic development, Pakistan will also be enabled to diversify its foreign policy and play a more effective role in the region and beyond.⁶¹

Historically, the Silk Road trade from China to India and Persia passed through parts of what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Reconnecting this region

through economic integration can help in resolving conflicts peacefully as espoused by the SCO. It will also help in reviving and strengthening cooperation in energy trade via Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipelines as already under consideration. The inclusion of India and Pakistan will also help Russia expand its network to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean through Central Asia and Pakistan. It is argued that this increasing connectivity will pave the way for economic integration in Eurasia by accelerating the trans-border economic cooperation.⁶²

The inclusion of India and Pakistan will also help in reconsidering the joint financial institution under SCO framework. China advocates for SCO's own development bank, because lack of joint development funds is viewed as a major obstacle in the way of committing it towards development projects in the SCO region. Moreover, Moscow's idea of an Energy Club could also be revisited along with the possibility of creating a free trade zone in the SCO region.⁶³

Impact on the relations between SCO members and the West

The strengthening of SCO is particularly observed with regard to its impact on the relationship between Russia and the West. Russia explicitly expressed its interest in looking towards East for economic partners during the 14th summit of SCO. The change in Russia's behaviour is watched through its growing bilateral economic cooperation with China as well in which a \$400 billion gas deal, agreed in May 2015, was prominent along with the increasing military-to-military cooperation. Russia's 'eastern pivot' gives the impression that it is not isolated as it was perceived in Europe and the US.⁶⁴ Russia's growing tilt towards the East could also be considered a response to the Eastward expansion of NATO and EU that created discontent in Moscow.⁶⁵ Despite denials of SCO member states, many analysts believe that it plays the role of a counter-weight to NATO, and have also termed it as NATO of the East based on their thinking that

the organization would someday transform into a military alliance. Such speculations are mainly because of the increasing cohesion among the members pursuing a different international order and their large-scale joint counter-terrorism military exercises, which get a lot of attention in Western media.⁶⁶ Moreover, the fear that the increasing military strength of SCO would serve the interests of Moscow and Beijing may raise security concerns in the Euro-Atlantic region.⁶⁷

Against this backdrop, the Central Asian SCO members do not want to antagonize the West, despite growing doubts by Western analysts. The President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, who has replaced the Russian president as one-year rotating chair in SCO for the 2016 summit, has shown his discomfort with the development of strong multinational institutions in the post-Soviet region. It shows that the CARs are not in favour of making SCO an anti-Western tool of Beijing and Moscow.⁶⁸ The CARs are aware of the strategic significance of Central Asia but they are also concerned about the political fragmentation of the region because of growing competition among major powers in the resource-rich region.

The enlargement is perceived differently by Central Asian members of SCO. Central and South Asia are home to numerous interlinked extremist groups yet there was no regional organization with a geographical ambit that would have coped with transnational threats. Moreover, there was no organization that could politically coordinate the extensive ongoing and upcoming transnational infrastructure projects in the region. For CARs, expansion was motivated by two major interests: to cope with growing security needs, and realizing the regional economic potential. Taking this into account, in the short- to medium-term, SCO members would neither be willing nor able to launch a coordinated opposition to NATO or stand in the way of US interests. Moreover, it is expected that the new members already enjoying friendly relations with the West would not cause any

major change in the political agenda of SCO, which is committed to fighting the common threats of separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism.⁶⁹

Challenges and opportunities in the context of India-Pakistan rivalry

It is expected that the enlargement will raise SCO's regional and international profile but it will also bring new challenges to the organization. The SCO expansion will inevitably lead to a new balance of power within the organization after the inclusion of India. As of now, the SCO is believed to be heavily dominated by Russia and China despite advocating for and backing the principles of equality.⁷⁰ The six founding members of SCO are considered highly unequal in terms of their resource capacities and international standing. The inclusion of India and Pakistan will give a fresh look to its overall configuration in terms of strength and capacity.⁷¹ Moreover, Pakistan is affiliated with China, while India is mostly understood as a close ally of Russia. These specific affiliations would have its own dynamics in the SCO and would reflect in its future policies due to unfriendly relations between the two neighbours.⁷²

India and Pakistan have unstable and conflicting relations since independence. Apart from other issues, the dispute over Kashmir is the major cause of turbulence in their relations. Both have fought major wars and continue to face problems like cross-border terrorist activities, infiltrations, cross-border firing, and persisting mistrust.⁷³ The Line of Control is a de-facto border between the two countries dividing the disputed territory of Kashmir into Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and the Indian-held Kashmir (IHK). Against this backdrop, the criteria for SCO membership underline that the members should not have any major inter-state conflict. In order to complete the statutory and legal obligations to become full members, India and Pakistan would need to improve relations, especially related to maintenance of border stability. Border stability between the

two states is also important to conform to the origin of cooperation among SCO members that commenced with demilitarization of borders.

Apart from interstate conflict between India and Pakistan, Indian experts are also sceptical about collaboration between the two countries under SCO framework against the alleged terrorist groups involved in acts of terrorism in India.⁷⁴ Cooperation under SCO framework obliges the member states to terminate on their territories all attempts to prepare and carry out acts of terrorism, including those directed against the interests of other states, and to hand over such persons if asked by another state of the SCO in strict accordance with the laws of the member states.⁷⁵ It would be a challenge to the organization, however, to bring India and Pakistan on the same page against the common concerns of terrorism if differences continue to prevail between them.

It means that if the differences between India and Pakistan are brought to the forum, it would make it less effective like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It is widely believed that if both countries do not improve their mutual relationship even under the SCO, there is a high possibility for the organization to suffer from Indian-Pakistani contradictions and conflicts because of its consensus-based decision-making process. According to Hu Shisheng, Director at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and South Asia expert, “They cannot bring bilateral differences (to SCO). Otherwise, the group will become dysfunctional. The focus should [be on] adding value to the forum. Not the other way around. That is the genuine hope of the old members.”⁷⁶ Keeping in view the SCO’s limited scope in terms of resolving inter-state conflicts between the member states, tensions between India and Pakistan would drag the organization into a new scenario.

Notwithstanding the challenges both countries would pose to the organization, India and Pakistan would have little to lose and more to gain from the membership. The SCO would provide an opportunity to India and Pakistan to

bridge their differences in the required areas for full membership. They can also harmonize their interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia under SCO framework. As noted by Ishtiaq Ahmad, the SCO has helped in harmonizing political ties among its members, particularly between the two dominant ones: Russia and China.⁷⁷ The SCO provides a platform to the leaders of the member states to interact regularly to try to build consensus, reduce conflict of interests, and realize mutual advantages of increased cooperation. China and Russia had serious issues of mutual conflict during the Cold War period, now they are partners after resolving border issues through a comprehensive agreement in 2004. The SCO has played a vital role in increasing trade relations between them.⁷⁸ China has become Russia's largest trading partner with bilateral trade reaching \$95.3 billion in 2014.⁷⁹ While looking at Indo-Pak interstate conflict, many analysts believe that the SCO would serve as a neutral platform for Islamabad and New Delhi to discuss their border disputes and other issues of mutual interest. Being members of the SCO, India and Pakistan would have the opportunity to interact in another forum after SAARC and, through reviewing the potential opportunities of economic cooperation, both countries can achieve the shared objectives of peace, prosperity, and development in the region. It is also hoped that SCO might be able to play a facilitating role in dealing with the Kashmir dispute. Although the SCO cannot get directly involved in the inter-state conflicts of member states because its mandate does not cover the resolution of conflicts between the member states, the SCO's insistence on promoting good neighbourly relations would oblige them to improve their relations.

The analysts believing in the vision that economic connectivity can play a more positive and stabilizing role in the Eurasian region give optimistic views on the inclusion of India and Pakistan.⁸⁰ It is argued that increased economic cooperation under the SCO forum can help in creating a more collaborative environment in the region. India and Pakistan would have the opportunity to

benefit from the economic potential generated by China's 'march west' policy and closer ties to energy-rich Central Asia.⁸¹ It can also result in the removal of India's perception about China's encirclement policy.

Similarly, the entry of India and Pakistan into the SCO could be viewed as a positive step for the two countries to improve their domestic security situations challenged by terrorism, separatism, and extremism. In this connection, Pakistan can leverage support from the SCO to counter extremism and terrorism. Over the past decade, the SCO has been making combined efforts to combat mounting security threats in the region through creation of trans-national anti-terror agencies and staging of joint multinational military exercises. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) would be extended to India and Pakistan through coordinated activities such as information sharing, staging anti-terror exercises, and confidence building against the 'three evils' under SCO framework. It would thus provide them a broader platform for security cooperation in Eurasia.⁸²

Impact on stability in Afghanistan

As a regional security organization, security issues are at the top of the SCO agenda since its formation. In recent summits, the main focus of the organization remained on counter-terrorism and Afghanistan's stability. It could be the reason that a major step was taken for expanding its regional clout by accepting two new members. There would be three major challenges with regard to the role of expanded SCO in Afghanistan's stability: the resurgence of local international terrorist groups in Afghanistan after the complete withdrawal of US forces, intensification in cross-border smuggling, and the conflicting interests of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan.

Due to close geographical proximity, the drawdown of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan has greater political, strategic, and security implications for Pakistan than any other country of the

region. The 2,200 km border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, called Durand Line, is a source of tensions between the two countries because of cross-border infiltration of militants, and smuggling. Control over this border is weak, and most parts of it remain porous. Both sides of the border have become sanctuaries for foreign and local militant groups. Most parts of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the semi-autonomous border region with mountainous terrain, fell under control of militants after they took refuge there following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. It became a hub of terrorists also with the emergence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007. The presence of safe havens on both sides of the border is exploited by terrorists to plot attacks in both countries.⁸³ Therefore, Pakistan—as a front-line state in the global war on terror and a country that faces direct repercussions of conflict in Afghanistan—would be at the forefront of any regional cooperation mechanism to stabilize Afghanistan.⁸⁴

Against this backdrop, Pakistan does not enjoy friendly relations with Afghanistan, despite historical, religious, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic linkages between the two countries. The strained relations revolve around multiple complex problems.⁸⁵ For instance, in spite of sharing the common problem of terrorism on both sides of the border, Pakistan and Afghanistan are haunted by persisting mistrust; notwithstanding the fact that trans-national connections of terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan require mutual consultations and coordinated efforts. The unstable political and security situation in Afghanistan also makes individual state efforts less effective on the part of Pakistan. In this scenario, the SCO framework would help Pakistan to enhance anti-terror cooperation with Afghanistan. In order to save the region from the negative consequences of the drawdown of ISAF, Pakistan would get support from SCO to cope with fresh resurgence of militant groups in the border region with Afghanistan. It is already understood that if stability of Afghanistan is

compromised, there are ample reasons to believe that eastern and southern Afghanistan, which borders Pakistan, will become the hub of militancy. In such a scenario, terrorism will hit both Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as regional and international states.⁸⁶

Taliban have already started gaining control in the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Reports show that after the drawdown in the number of US and NATO forces, the Taliban are gaining ground once again. Moreover, news reports indicate that ISIS has also steadily expanded its presence in Afghanistan.⁸⁷ Most of the Central Asian experts consider Taliban as a local movement that would not be interested in going beyond the borders of Afghanistan. But the presence of other affiliated terrorist groups in Afghanistan like Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and ISIS can pose a threat to the security of the entire region.⁸⁸ Political instability, in the wake of increasing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, can give rise to the presence of other transnational terrorist groups. Besides that, Afghanistan produces around 90 tonnes of heroin every year which is transported through Central Asia, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).⁸⁹ Analysts argue that there is a high potential of upsurge in drug trade in case of the outbreak of a civil war in Afghanistan.⁹⁰ In this connection, the countries bordering Afghanistan would need to intensify efforts under SCO framework to settle issues related to border management including border surveillance, information sharing, and also security arrangements to control the infiltration of militants, and cross-border smuggling of arms and drugs.

Contrary to the unstable relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, India's involvement in Afghanistan has been steadily growing in the post-Taliban era. Afghanistan is of immense importance for India from economic, political, and strategic point of view. India is hugely involved in construction and infrastructure development apart from its assistance in training the Afghan security forces. India

has given nearly \$300 million in aid to Afghanistan over the past four years, after signing a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011. India has funded construction of dams and roads, and is currently investing on south-western Afghanistan to connect it with Chabahar Port in Iran. It would allow the landlocked Central Asian countries that border Afghanistan access to the Chabahar Port. Afghanistan is also crucial to India's energy security, as a pipeline from Turkmenistan to India, the TAPI project, will pass through Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan could offer huge investment opportunities for Indian companies in several sectors as the country is home to resource deposits worth one trillion dollars, according to the US Geological Survey.⁹¹ Indian companies are already involved in mining in Afghanistan.⁹²

Being the fifth-largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan with over \$2 billion in a pledge to support Afghanistan's stability,⁹³ India aspires for a greater role in the country. India is not just interested in stability; its inroads into Afghanistan are also aimed at countering Pakistan's influence. Indian actions indicate that it has growing tendency to project itself as a regional power beyond the confines of South Asia. From economic perspective, India needs stable and long-term relations with Afghanistan and CARs to secure economic, trade, and security interests in the region. Peace and stability in Afghanistan is also vital for India's safe access to natural and mineral resources found in abundance in CARs and Afghanistan to meet the growing demands of its industry and energy security.⁹⁴ The reason for India's efforts to dilute Pakistan's role in Afghanistan is its persistent security concerns with respect to Afghanistan and Pakistan. India believes that most of the militant groups that are allegedly involved in terrorism in India since the early 1990s—like Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)—have linkages with Afghan Taliban.

On the other hand, the increasing engagement of India with Afghanistan through help in its economic development in the wake of the departure of ISAF from Afghanistan is seen with great suspicion by Pakistan. Pakistan has increasing concerns over the growing role of the Indian consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat in destabilizing Pakistan, especially in fuelling violence in its south-western Balochistan province. Pakistan's reservations are based on the apparent support of the Indian intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), for insurgency in Balochistan and FATA.⁹⁵ India, however, defends its continuous role in Afghanistan under the pretext of Indian expertise in democracy, economics, and civilian security. Indians argue that Pakistan should not object to an enhanced role of India without Indian troops on Afghan soil.

The clash of interests and mistrust between India and Pakistan can hinder SCO's efforts to bring stability in Afghanistan in the post-withdrawal scenario. Afghanistan's future hinges on the convergence of interests between international and regional players, particularly the US, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan. It appears that the US will continue supporting Afghanistan, and the current security situation will determine the potential presence of the US forces in Afghanistan. But analysts maintain that for any realistic and sustainable solution for Afghanistan, there has to be a level of agreement among the key regional players. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan could offer considerable advantages to all regional players, particularly India and Pakistan.⁹⁶

Moreover, stability in Afghanistan is in the interest of all stakeholders including CARs, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Both countries have strategic interests in developing alternative routes via Afghanistan to South Asia to help decrease their dependence on northern neighbours, Kazakhstan and Russia. Successful completion of most of the projects already in the pipeline like

Central Asia and South Asia (CASA) power transmission project and TAPI depends on the security and stability of Afghanistan.⁹⁷

The SCO had little involvement in Afghanistan in the past. The major motivation comes from China among all SCO members, presumably due to China's eagerness to see regional players, led by the SCO, handle regional security issues; eliminating the need for extra-regional actors. Chinese leadership has expressed its desire that SCO members "should take it as [their] own responsibility to safeguard regional security and stability, enhance [their] ability to maintain stability, continue to boost cooperation on law enforcement and security, and improve the existing cooperation mechanisms."⁹⁸ China as an influential member of SCO is also determined to play a greater role in stabilizing Afghanistan to protect its investments. Currently, China is the largest SCO investor in Afghanistan, with projects such as the \$3 billion contract to develop the Aynak copper mine.⁹⁹ China is also playing an active role in the efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan through seeking political solution to the problem. In this quest China participated in the first-ever declared direct contact between the Taliban and Afghan government held in Murree, Pakistan, in July 2015.¹⁰⁰ The dialogue was facilitated by Pakistan and backed by two global powers, China and the US. The peace process, however, is disrupted for now due to the increasing fragmentation of the Afghan Taliban after the disclosure about the death of Mullah Omar. Apart from the unilateral and bilateral efforts for bringing stability in Afghanistan, the results of the cooperation are yet to be realized in an expanded SCO.

The lack of involvement of SCO members in Afghanistan is also because of the inability of the organization to finance economic projects and the lack of the political will among SCO members to seriously engage in Afghan affairs. The post-withdrawal scenario and enlargement will motivate the SCO to revisit its institutional capacity for bringing stability in the region by giving more attention

to Afghanistan. Otherwise, it could be argued that the SCO's role would remain defensive with no long-term solution to the Afghan problem.¹⁰¹ Although SCO cannot get militarily involved inside Afghanistan due to its commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the organization has the capacity to accelerate efforts to prevent terrorist infiltration from Afghanistan into SCO members and also play a facilitating role in the political stability of the country.¹⁰²

Impact on the effectiveness of the organization

Apart from the political, economic, and security implications of enlargement of SCO, its administrative effectiveness in the post-enlargement setup is also extensively debated. Opponents of the SCO's enlargement argue that more members in the organization will make it more difficult to run, and thus the administrative apparatus will become less efficient.¹⁰³ These arguments refer to South Asia and Central Asia as two different regions with strong contradictions and complex problems.¹⁰⁴ The leaders of Central Asian countries have also expressed their reservations with regard to the new power balance in the organization. Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, expressed his fears that if India and Pakistan would become full members along with Russia and China, the influence of other smaller members would substantially diminish.¹⁰⁵ While showing his concerns, President Karimov said that the addition of India and Pakistan would add two more nuclear weapon states to the organization.¹⁰⁶ Since four of the six founding members of the SCO were part of the recognized nuclear weapon-free zone, the addition of India and Pakistan—both non-signatories of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)—could affect the organization's commitment towards nuclear non-proliferation.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, it is also feared that India and Pakistan as big countries have the potential to divert the group's focus to South Asia while overshadowing the importance of Central Asian states.¹⁰⁸

Already considered as less cohesive, the inclusion of India and Pakistan could affect the decision-making of the organization due to its consensus-based decision-making mechanism.

The views regarding the negative impact of enlargement are contested though. It is argued that the SCO's administrative apparatus has not been very efficient from the very beginning and it is hoped that its enlargement can provide an impetus to its reforms. The organization has already improved with the consensus on membership criteria and the increasing balance of interests between Russia and China. It is believed that the admission of other countries would instigate some changes in the SCO's conduct, and a fresh look at the SCO's standing bodies.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Apart from the diverging opinions on the pros and cons of SCO enlargement, it is likely to have more positive than negative implications. First of all, the expansion shows the inclusiveness of the SCO. According to Sergey Luzyanin, Deputy Director of the Far East Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, it proves that the organization is increasingly strengthening its abilities in new fields and towards new directions.¹¹⁰

Because of SCO's rhetoric in favour of a multi-polar world, the recent enlargement will get more attention at global level. The SCO's charter—that emphasizes mutual respect, equality, and non-interference—is at the centre of its distinct outlook in the world, but it also brings this organization under strong criticism from its western counterparts. The principles of equality and non-interference which are presented loudly in this organization are widely taken as against the Western-dominated world order which focuses more on promoting democracy and human rights. They are also considered responsible for the ineffectiveness of organization. But the inclusion of India and Pakistan would not

necessarily be taken as anti-West, because politically and intellectually India is more inclined towards the West.¹¹¹ The SCO's expected role in the stability of Afghanistan is also seen positively in the West. A stronger SCO would be in a position to play a more effective role in the stability of Afghanistan. Since stability in Afghanistan is crucial for all stakeholders, the SCO would prove to be a strategic partner of the West in the wake of the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan.¹¹²

The organization's overall performance is not viewed positively by most of the experts. However, the trans-national character of common threats exacerbated by the Afghanistan situation continues to make this organization relevant in regional stability. Security issues—including terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism—will remain the primary focus of SCO, but economic cooperation will get more prominence in the years to come. The organization has not achieved much in economic field due to the diverging interests of its two large members, Russia and China. The recently growing understanding between the two could, however, give impetus to economic cooperation and further expansion of the organization. The growing realization of the shared benefits of regional connectivity through increased economic cooperation would also help ensure stability in the region.

Due to India-Pakistan rivalry and the clash of interests between major stakeholders in Central Asia and Afghanistan, the enlargement is critically analyzed. It involves both positive and negative outcomes. It is argued that the SCO's original mission to combat the common threats of terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism within the region would be strengthened further with this expansion because Pakistan is at the front-line of all the battles against these challenges. In this connection, Pakistan and other SCO members can share experiences and stage joint military exercises aimed at counter-terrorism.¹¹³ Conversely, the diverging policies and lack of cooperation on the issue of

terrorism in the context of mistrust between India and Pakistan can pose a threat to the cohesion of the organization. This problem would emanate from the inter-state conflict between India and Pakistan. Therefore, contrary to the SCO's limited mandate, China and Russia would need to play their role at bilateral level to improve relations between the two countries for the sake of an integrated approach against terrorism, extremism, and separatism. In order to make the organization more effective, the SCO members will also need to upgrade the SCO mandate for resolving inter-state conflicts between member states. It would be crucial for SCO to influence the peace process between India and Pakistan to avoid any negative impact on the performance of the organization. Pakistan and India would also need to uphold the 'Shanghai Spirit' of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, and pursuit of common development, as called upon by Chinese President Xi Jinping after announcement of the expansion.¹¹⁴

To sum up, the SCO is at a crossroads. Overall, with its expansion programme, the SCO is now set to become an Asia-focused organization with sufficient space to consolidate and improve its performance in areas of non-traditional security including climate change adaptation, disaster management, and disease mitigation in Asia. In the long term, it could be expected that the organization can develop further even to set up an Asian Parliament and a conflict resolution mechanism.¹¹⁵

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