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TRANS-REGIONALISM, REGIONALISM, AND REALISM ARE WHAT EXPLAIN INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS UNDER THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

Regionalism, along with realism and trans-regionalism, has largely shaped relations between India and Pakistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This paper seek to analyze how the three theoretical perspectives have influenced the interaction between India and Pakistan within the context of the SCO. India and Pakistan joined the SCO as member states from the South Asian region. As a trans-regional organization, the SCO has provided both countries with an opportunity to engage in multilateral diplomacy and discussions. This has enabled both countries to be in a position to deal with common interests and factor areas of interaction apart from the prevalent tension. It has also compelled India and Pakistan to play the regional cards, though they cooperate and compete with each other in the organization to define their regional power in the SCO. Realism, a tradition of inter-state interests and power balance, has played a significant role in the India-Pakistan relationship within the SCO. Both countries have utilized the SCO to further their strategic and security interests, thus showing cooperation along with potential competition.

Keywords: India-Pakistan relations, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, trans-regionalism, regionalism, realism, regional security, conflict resolution.

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Introduction

India and Pakistan have had conflicting relations since the partition of British India in 1947. The partition caused mass displacement, sectarian violence, and left unresolved the territorial status of Jammu and Kashmir. The Princely state, though Muslim-majority, was ruled by a Hindu Maharaja who initially sought independence but later acceded to India with military assistance against tribal forces from Pakistan. This decision sparked the first Indo-Pakistan war (1947-1949), which ended with a United Nations-brokered ceasefire and the creation of the Line of Control (LOC).¹ Since then, India and Pakistan have fought three additional wars: 1965, 1971, and 1999, while the 1971 war concluded in the creation of Bangladesh.² After India conducted nuclear tests in 1974, and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in 1998, the competition became nuclear as well. The water share, minority treatment and cross border accusations of sponsoring terrorism all remain out of the Kashmir region. There are still tensions even with the efforts by diplomacy to strengthen the ties which include Simla Agreement (1972) and Lahore Declaration (1999).³

The group that initially was established in 1996 under the name of the “Shanghai Five” and subsequently the SCO in 2001 has evolved to being no longer involved in resolving border disputes but instead focusing on further cooperation in trade, energy, security, culture, and regional integration.⁴ The guiding spirit of Shanghai, which is called the “Shanghai Spirit”, insists upon mutual trust, cultural diversity, and tolerance, as well as collective development.⁵ Besides collaborating on infrastructure, energy and economic integration initiatives, members also organize counterterrorism activities using the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). The result of the SCO is both a limitations and an opportunity to India and Pakistan: on the one hand, it prohibits an open conflict within the territory of the SCO, on the other; it provides a limited foothold to negotiate and limited collaboration.⁶

¹ Sumantra Bose, *Kashmir at the Crossroads: Inside a 21st-Century Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 45.

² Sumit Ganguly, *Deadly Impasse: Indo-Pakistani Relations at the Dawn of a New Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 88–90.

³ C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 132.

⁴ Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Regionalism in the World of International Organizations: Global Perspectives and the Eurasian Enigma* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 59.

⁵ Stephen Aris, *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 27.

⁶ Bobo Lo, *Global Order in the Shadow of the Superpowers: Russia, China and Eurasia* (London: Chatham House, 2019), 74.

The official organization of the SCO is the Council of Heads of State (the supreme decision-making institution), the Council of Heads of Government, and regular meetings on security, foreign policy and defense at the level of ministers. Decision making by consensus therefore means that any member can effectively derail outcomes. The SCO does not have a centralized large budget like the EU or NATO, but instead depends on volunteer efforts and the donations of member state resources thus limiting the material resources at its disposal and at times generates accusations of it being a mere diplomatic talk shop. Yet the organization has developed permanent bodies such as the RATS, headquartered in Tashkent, which coordinates intelligence-sharing, maintains a database of extremist organizations and individuals, and conducts joint counter-terrorism exercises. SCO documents report that RATS has helped prevent planned attacks and facilitated arrests of militants across member states. However, while cooperation on terrorism has been tangible in terms of collective security exercises and information exchange, it has not extended to resolving the mutual accusations of terrorism support between India and Pakistan. In this sense, the SCO has built a mechanism with measurable outcomes against transnational terrorism, but its ability to transform bilateral security rivalries among its members remains limited.

Key issues for India and Pakistan within the SCO framework include terrorism, the Kashmir, border, security, and regional connectivity. Both countries continue to accuse each other of sponsoring militant groups, yet they also participated in SCO counter-terrorism exercises under RATS. Similarly, while the organization promotes economic integration and infrastructure projects, bilateral mistrust has limited trade and connectivity gains. The unresolved Kashmir dispute and entrenched security dilemmas remain particularly challenging. Thus, the core analytical question becomes not only whether India and Pakistan can cooperate within the SCO, but how far the organization can manage these persistent issues between two of its most hostile members.

This raises the central analytical question of this study: How does SCO membership affect India-Pakistan bilateral relations? To address this, the paper employs three theoretical perspectives: realism, regionalism, and trans-regionalism. From a realist perspective, SCO forums may simply reproduce competitive signaling and zero-sum behavior. From a regionalist lens, institutionalized cooperation, especially on counterterrorism and border security, has the potential to reduce tensions. From a trans-regionalist view, the SCO's linkages with other regional projects and organizations can promote functional cooperation in trade, energy, and culture that might indirectly improve bilateral ties. Yet the enduring Kashmir dispute and the rooted security dilemmas suggest that the SCO's impact may remain partial and uneven. By analyzing India-Pakistan interactions within the SCO since

their accession in 2017, this paper explores the extent to which multilateral regionalism can shape, constrain, or redirect a deeply conflictual dyad.

This paper argues that the SCO provides India and Pakistan with a multilateral forum that discourages open confrontation and enables limited cooperation, particularly on counterterrorism and dialogue. However, it remains constrained in addressing deep-rooted disputes such as Kashmir and mutual terrorism accusations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

India and Pakistan's enmity is the mainly due to Kashmir issue. Despite efforts like the Shimla Agreement and the Lahore Declaration, these attempts have failed due to political factors and the role of armed forces in Pakistan.⁷ The 1947 partition fostered nationalism on both sides, which made them unable to forget the past and work for peace.⁸ The media in both countries have played a role in fuelling the tension by shaping public opinion. Pakistan also faces regional challenges⁹ with India's power threatened by China, a close ally of Pakistan. The United States has been attempting to mediate between the two, but often its actions are apparent as preferring one side. With both countries owning nuclear weapons, tensions have increased.¹⁰ Moreover, shared allegations of backing terrorist groups hinder cooperation in fighting terrorism. Scholar has applied multiple theoretical lenses, Realism, Regionalism, and Trans-regionalism to explain this rivalry.

Originally the SCO was a regional security organization in Central Asia but now covers the members of South Asia and other regions. Mutual trust, non-interference and respect of sovereignty are the founding principles that are associated with the trans-regionalist approach. The organization works to counter terrorism, separatism and extremism using the collective tools such as RATS¹¹ and also fostering economic connectivity through such programs

⁷ Saima Parveen, "South Asian Conflicts and Regional Security in the Context of Pakistan-India Relations: A Political Analysis," *Regional Lens* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1-10.

⁸ Ejaz Hussain, "India-Pakistan Relations: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2019): 82-95.

⁹ S. R. T. P. Sugunakararaju and Shabnum Akhtar, "India-Pakistan Relations: Challenges and Opportunities," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 20, no. 12 (2015): 07-12.

¹⁰ Hussain, "India-Pakistan Relations", 91.

¹¹ Antonio Giustozzi and Anna Matveeva, "The SCO: A Regional Organisation in the Making," *Crisis States Working Papers Series*, 2 (2008): 39.

as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹² Scholars believe that the SCO is a transition to multipolarity and a new form of governance.

Theoretical Perspectives

Trans-regionalism takes collaboration and integration outside specific regions, with countries in one region linked to those in another region and new relationships and institutions formed.¹³ The examples are the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and projects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁴ In the SCO, economic cooperation and infrastructure, and collective security responses are also aspects of trans-regionalism.¹⁵ **Regionalism** refers to the political, economic as well as social integration of states in a geographical region.¹⁶ This can be the European Union (EU), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹⁷ In South Asia, South Asian Association of regional Cooperation (SAARC) tried this role but it failed because of mistrust between Indo-Pakistan. In the SCO, there is encouragement of regionalism by collaboration in security and trade, although there is tension. **Realism** emphasizes state power, national interest, and survival in an anarchic international system. From this lens, Indo-Pak behavior in the SCO can be understood as competitive signaling and power balancing, where national interests may block deeper cooperation.¹⁸ These perspectives are used in this study as analytic frames to interpret and explain state behavior, rather than as paradigm concisely adopted by decision makers.

¹² Haffiza Syeda Azkia, "SCO in an Era of New Regionalism," *Modern Diplomacy*, (January 29, 2023), <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/01/29/sco-in-an-era-of-new-regionalism/>

¹³ Matthias Middell, "Transregional Studies: A New Approach to Global Processes," In *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies* (Routledge, 2018), 1-16.

¹⁴ Jurgen Ruland, "Inter-and Transregionalism: Remarks on the State of the Art of a New Research Agenda," made available in DSpace on January 05, 2011, <https://hdl.handle.net/123456789>.

¹⁵ Gulnur Sufiyanova and Ekaterina Muslimova, "The Regional World Order. Transregionalism, Regional Integration, and Regional Projects across Europe and Asia: Alexei D. Voskressenski & Boglárka Koller (eds), Lanham, MD & London: Lexington Books, 2019, xiv+ 244pp.,£ 73.00 h/b," (2021): 961-962.

¹⁶ Arvind Panagariya, "The regionalism debate: an overview," *The World Economy* 22, no. 4 (1999): 455-476.

¹⁷ Louise Fawcett, "Exploring Regional Domains: A Comparative History of Regionalism," *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 429-446; Panagariya, The regionalism debate.

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

Analyzing Indo-Pak within the SCO requires applying the paradigms. Trans-regionalism cooperation across regions, regionalism emphasizes cooperation within South and Central Asia, and realism points to security dilemmas and rivalry. Both countries hold opposing strategies and ideologies, but the SCO still serves as a platform for limited dialogue, counterterrorism, and economic initiatives.

India and Pakistan under the Auspices of the SCO

The admission of both India and Pakistan into the SCO has strategic consequences for the region. The SCO currently has 3 billion people and a quarter of the global economy.¹⁹ SCO benefits from its memberships through regional integration, counterterrorism measures, and economic cooperation. Their role supports its goal of fostering peace, stability, and cooperation, while providing a forum for communication, dispute settlement, and regional security integration.²⁰

Both India and Pakistan joined the Organization in 2017, looking forward to economic integration and cooperation. The SCO, led by major countries like China and Russia, aims to create a stable region through cooperation. India and Pakistan's membership has empowered bilateral trade in their own currencies, agricultural cooperation, and the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises. The SCO provides a format to restore and continue bilateral trade in spheres of agriculture, textiles, and energy to reduce dependence on the Western financial system.²¹ The SCO can contribute to the development of transport corridors to enhance connectivity, such as the Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline, ensuring energy security and interdependence.²² Enhancing connectivity

¹⁹ Farhat Akram Mughal, "Pakistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 58, no. 2 (2021): 16; Neelam Sethi, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and India," *Members' Reference Service Larrdis Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi*, 2017, https://loksabhadocs.nic.in/Refinput/New_Reference_Notes/English/The_Shanghai_Cooperation_Organization.pdf

²⁰ Seyma Kizilay, "SCO Influence on India-Pakistan Relations," *Ankara Center for Crises and Policy Studies*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.ankasam.org/anka-analizler/sco-influence-on-india-pakistan-relations/?lang=en>

²¹ Syed Basim. Raza, "The SCO Meeting in India: A Chance for India and Pakistan to Turn a New Page?," *The Diplomat*, April 29, 2023, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2023/04/the-sco-meeting-in-india-a-chance-for-india-and-pakistan-to-turn-a-new-page/>; Dr

Muhammad Saif ur Rehman, "Significance of Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Pakistan's Perspective." *Margalla Papers* (2014).

²² Amjad Abbas Khan, "Security Environment in South Asia: The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)," In *China and South Asia* (Routledge India, 2021): 97-107.

through transport could increase trade and economic relations. However, there is concern about the extent of security risks, including cross-border terrorism and instability in Afghanistan.²³

These concerns can be tackled collectively within the SCO framework, adopting an environment conducive to economic cooperation. The recent meeting of the SCO's foreign ministers in India with Pakistan's Bilawal Bhutto Zardari also shows a possibility of dialogue and cooperation in economic relations under the SCO.²⁴

Competition and cooperation have risen since India and Pakistan became members of the SCO. The SCO provides a forum to discuss regional issues without focusing on bilateral conflict. Its principles of non-interference and mutual respect offer for deal with common problems such as terrorism and economic growth. The recent meeting of the SCO and thus seems willing to interact.²⁵ The SCO's objectives of regional stability are important for both countries due to threats such as terrorism or instability in Afghanistan.²⁶ Dialogue within the SCO framework could minimize the impact of bilateral controversies on regional stability. Future meetings offer exposure to more engagement and pave the way for specific inter-state talks.²⁷ Experts supposed the SCO could result in a stabilization of relations and an increase in cooperation in the economic sector.

India and Pakistan have cooperated in countering terrorism within the SCO's RATS, despite the bilateral clash. Both nations faced terrorism threats that endangered regional security. Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar highlighted the essence of this cooperation, while Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari asserted Pakistan's commitment to being an active participant in SCO counter-terrorism measures. The two countries finalized a plan in August to conduct joint military drills under the SCO in the Ural Mountains of Russia. Kamal Dawar, the founder of India's

²³ Raza, The SCO Meeting in India; Ur Rehman, Significance of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 71-73.

²⁴ Sarwat Rauf, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Opportunities for Pakistan." *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* (2019): 16-27.

²⁵ Hafsa Adil, At SCO summit, India, Pakistan Squabbles over Kashmir, 'Terrorism'," *Aljazeera*, May 08, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/8/at-sco-summit-india-pakistan-squabble-over-kashmir-terrorism>

²⁶ Sarwat Rauf and Maira Tariq. "The Bilateral Engagement of India and Pakistan at Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects and Challenges," *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* (2024): 20-33.

²⁷ Raza, The SCO Meeting in India.

defense intelligence agency, stressed that the role of Pakistan should not be only ceremonial: 'It will be useful to restore communication.'²⁸

Taken together, these paradigms help explain why the SCO has succeeded in fostering limited cooperation but failed to overcome the structural obstacles that define India-Pakistan rivalry.

Key Issues in India-Pakistan Relations

Security Dilemma

The term security dilemma is widely used in international relations theories. It describes a scenario where two or more states strive to increase their own security while simultaneously reducing that of others. After the division of India, the ongoing competition and shifting power dynamics between India and Pakistan can be described as a security dilemma. In the South Asian system, both countries fear subjugation, domination, or incorporation by the other. This fear drives each to enhance its capabilities and power to ensure national security, even if it worsens insecurity for the other.

Because of the division of British India, the conflict over Kashmir, and many wars, India and Pakistan see one another as security threats. India considers Islamabad's nuclear capabilities to be a danger and sees Pakistan as a hostile state that supports terrorism, especially in Kashmir.²⁹ India's military buildup is partially a reaction to Pakistan's alleged threat. Pakistan, on the other hand, views India as a hegemonic force competing for supremacy in the area. India's conventional military dominance, which the Pakistani government mostly uses as India continues to increase its military might, is essentially the reason behind Islamabad's development of nuclear power.³⁰

The conflict between India and Pakistan remains a persistent source of tension and an ongoing arms race. Under the Modi government, India has increasingly positioned itself as a global power, aspiring to lead the South Asian subcontinent and play a significant role on the world stage. Modi's vision of making the 21st century "the century of India" has driven efforts to enhance India's military capabilities. As of 2019, India ranks as the fourth most powerful military globally, while Pakistan ranks seventeenth,

²⁸ Dinakar Peri and Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Pakistan to Join Closing Ceremony of SCO Anti-terror Exercise Hosted by India," *The Hindu*, October 10, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pakistan-to-join-closing-ceremony-of-sco-anti-terror-exercise-hosted-by-india/article65993621.ece>

²⁹ Inderjit Panjra, *Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Giving the devil more than his due?* (Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, 2018).

³⁰ Muhammad Ali and Syed Mussawar Hussain Bukhari, "Indian Military Doctrine and Its Impact on South Asia's Strategic Stability," *Margalla Papers* 26, no. 1 (2022): 74-84.

according to global firepower indices.³¹ The following table shows the relative power of their armed forces:

Table 1: Military Might Comparison between India and Pakistan in 2019

Subjects	India	Pakistan
Total Military Personnel	1,400,000	654,000
Defense Budget (USD)	74 billions \$	10.4 billions \$
Total Aircraft	2,263	1,531
Total Tank and Armor	4,616	3,742
Total Naval Assets	267	96
Helicopters	729	400
Railway Coverage (km)	63974	7791

Sources: <https://armedforces.eu/compare/country> India vs Pakistan

The numbers in the table clearly indicate India’s superior firepower over Pakistan. The Modi government has prioritized enhancing India’s military capabilities, with the defense ministry consistently receiving a larger share of the budget compared to other ministries. This has heightened Pakistan’s concerns about India’s ambitions to maintain regional hegemony in South Asia and the growing disparity in their military strength.

Effects of Nuclear Capabilities on Stabilization of a Region

Both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons, and they have destabilized the peace in South Asia. They have sufficient quantity and quality of nuclear weapons to prevent full-scale war; however, constructing more weapons, power, new technology, and a variety of war strategies in the region is making it insecure.

India and Pakistan face challenges with nuclear doctrines, proportionality, and escalation management.³² India appears to favor

³¹ Liliang You, "Looking at the" Security Dilemma" between India and Pakistan from Structural Realism," In *3rd International Conference on Economics and Management, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (EMEHSS 2019)* (Atlantis Press, 2019): 114-118.

counterforce targeting, pressuring Pakistan to enhance its nuclear capabilities.³³ Meanwhile, Pakistan's 'full spectrum deterrence' doctrine allows nuclear response to low-scale conventional conflicts.³⁴

With a focus on below-nuclear threshold strategies, India and Pakistan are advancing technologies against each other's defenses.³⁵ India is developing counterforce nuclear assets, including tactical delivery systems, MIRV, and BMD. Pakistan has introduced short-range tactical nuclear weapons like the Hatf IX Nasr and nuclear-capable cruise missiles.³⁶ The internal political setting in both countries may influence the ability to command and control nuclear weapons. In Pakistan, political instability, such as Pakistan's conflict between Imran Khan and the military, may impact nuclear command and control.

The Lahore Declaration and the Agreement on Pre-notification of Ballistic Missile Tests show that India and Pakistan's nuclear confidence-building measures remain underutilized. Strengthening trust requires broader NCBMs and genuine attention to public concerns.³⁷

Economic Cooperation and Competition India and Pakistan have had tense relations, especially in trade. After India changed Jammu and Kashmir's status in August 2019, Pakistan halted imports, move critics saw as economically harmful to both nations. Despite being major South Asian economies, political tensions limit trade.³⁸ However, recent reports indicate significant growth in bilateral trade. In the first eight months of this year, India's exports to Pakistan rose 72% to \$205 million, while Pakistan's

³² Antoine Levesques, "India's Fraying Restraint," in *Survival: April–May 2024*, (Routledge, 2024): 63-71.

³³ Mubeen Ashraf and Syed Saif ul Haq, "Strategic Transformations: India's Pursuit of Counterforce Targeting and Regional Stability," *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 2 (2023): 14-26.

³⁴ Debak Das, "The State of Nuclear Instability in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and China," *Law Fare Media*, September 03, 2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-state-of-nuclear-instability-in-south-asia-india-pakistan-and-china>

³⁵ Ashraf, Strategic Transformations.

³⁶ Das, The State of Nuclear Instability in South Asia.

³⁷ Haleema Saadia, "Nuclear Risk Reduction between India and Pakistan," *Stimson*, May 22, 2014, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/nuclear-risk-reduction-between-india-and-pakistan/>

³⁸ Raza, The SCO Meeting in India.

exports to India reached \$17.6 million. Most of India's imports from Pakistan arrived via tankers.³⁹

At the 2021 SCO meeting, India and Pakistan expressed willingness to cooperate. Indian PM Narendra Modi discussed regional integration, stating India could work with Pakistan under favorable conditions. Pakistani PM Imran Khan also emphasized the need for regional cooperation, highlighting trade and connectivity as key SCO goals. He recently stated that Pakistan seeks trade ties with all SCO members, including India, for mutual benefit.⁴⁰

Challenges Posed by Historical Animosities India and Pakistan have always had differences, and this makes it difficult for them to cooperate on economic issues. The Kashmir dispute, with both nations seeking full control, has led to wars and military confrontations, fueling distrust and hindering economic integration.

Official statements from both nations confirm ongoing tensions. At a recent SCO meeting, Indian PM Narendra Modi stated, 'Negotiations and terrorism cannot go hand in hand,' referring to Pakistan's alleged support for terrorism. Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Zardari emphasized the need for internal stability before improving ties with India.⁴¹

External Influences The involvement of superpowers like China, Russia, and the United States heavily influences India and Pakistan's relations, often complicating efforts for cooperation between the two nations.

As a strategic partner, China significantly influences South Asian geopolitics. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has strengthened economic ties and provided China with vital access to the Arabian Sea. India views this partnership as a threat to its regional dominance. While the SCO promotes Chinese relations with both India and Pakistan, it also creates a dilemma for India, particularly in its conflict with Pakistan.⁴²

Russia plays a key role in the SCO, maintaining neutrality between India and Pakistan while encouraging communication. However, its growing defense and energy cooperation with Pakistan has caused discomfort for

³⁹ "GT Voice: Will India, Pakistan Grasp Chance to Improve Economic Ties at SCO?" *Global Times*, September 12, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202209/1275101.shtml>.

⁴⁰ "SCO Summit 2021," *Sects SCO*, September 17, 2021, <https://eng.sectsc.org/>

⁴¹ Abdul Ahad, "To Revive Relations with India, Pakistan must put its Own House in order first," *Dawn News*, June 23, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1758274>.

⁴² Kizilay, SCO Influence on India-Pakistan; You, "Looking at the" Security Dilemma, 115-116; Jefferson E. Turner, "What is Driving India's and Pakistan's Interest in Joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?" *Strategic Insights* 6, no. 8 (August 2005).

India. While Russia's mediation within the SCO presents an opportunity, it also gives the impression of bias toward Pakistan, influencing India's strategy. Historically, Russia has been an ally of India but has provided arms and support to Pakistan, especially when the U.S. accused Pakistan of supporting terrorism. Russia's primary goal is to challenge the U.S. in the region, rather than resolve India-Pakistan issues.⁴³

The U.S. has developed strong ties with India, particularly in defense and trade, while its relationship with Pakistan remains complex due to counter-terrorism concerns. Although the U.S. seeks to promote communication between India and Pakistan, its actions sometimes fuel further hostility.⁴⁴ U.S. involvement in South Asia, especially post-Afghanistan War, shifted regional power dynamics, intensifying rivalry between India and Pakistan. While the U.S. previously supported Pakistan in fighting terrorism, this assistance was often self-serving. Under Trump, the U.S. bolstered its alliance with India, deepening the power gap between New Delhi and Islamabad. U.S. actions are driven by strategic interests, which can conflict with the SCO's vision for regional stability.⁴⁵

Trans-Regionalism in the SCO

Cooperation and connectivity between various global areas are referred to as trans-regionalism. Because they encompass more nations and span wider geographic regions, trans-regional organizations are larger than regional ones like the EU or ASEAN.

Frameworks that cross regional borders are used to implement trans-regionalism. The SCO promotes collaboration, discussions, and exchanges on a range of topics by uniting Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), South Asia (India, Pakistan), East Asia (China, Russia), and North Asia (Russia). The SCO is a unique forum for trans-regional cooperation because of its diversified membership.

⁴³ Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Sarfraz Ahmed, and Stuti Bhatnagar, "Conflict or Cooperation? India and Pakistan in Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Pacific Focus* 34, no. 1 (2019): 5-30; Alexei Kupriyanov, "The SCO and the Conflict between India and Pakistan," *Observer Research Foundation*, December 08, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/sco-conflict-between-india-pakistan>; You, "Looking at the" Security Dilemma, 115-116.

⁴⁴ "U.S. encourages India and Pakistan to Resolve their Issues through Dialogue: Official," *The Hindu*, April 09, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/us-encourages-india-and-pakistan-to-resolve-their-issues-through-dialogue-official/article68046202.ece>.

⁴⁵ Catherine Putz, "India-Pakistan Tensions Flare Up Within SCO," *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/india-pakistan-tensions-flare-up-within-sco/>.

Although the SCO's trans-regional possibilities are still developing, they give optimism for bettering India-Pakistan ties. The SCO interacts with India, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan on matters that go beyond direct security challenges by encouraging cooperation beyond regional borders. This would make it possible for India and Pakistan to advance bilateral issues and work together on SCO initiatives with other regional organizations.⁴⁶ In the end, trans-regional integration hinges on both nations' will to abandon a competitive, realist worldview.

Mechanisms of Trans-Regional Cooperation in the SCO

Membership and Structure: By 2023, the SCO had grown from six to nine member countries, encompassing most of Europe and a sizable portion of the world's population. It was founded in 2001. China, India, Pakistan, Russia, and a number of Central Asian countries are among its members, and they collaborate to solve regional problems. The RATS, which focuses on security among the member nations, and the Heads of State Council, which convenes yearly to establish priorities, are two components of the SCO's governance.⁴⁷

Security Cooperation: The SCO places a high priority on security, especially in the fight against extremism, separatism, and terrorism. The establishment of Rat's 2004 shows the SCO's commitment to joint security by promoting intelligence sharing, military training, and coordinated anti-terrorist activities. This partnership reduces the likelihood of competition and encourages regional stability.⁴⁸ Indian External Minister S. Jaishankar, during the meeting of the SCO foreign ministers, emphasized the importance of working together to fight terrorism. On the other hand, the continuous bilateral conflict continued, and Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was admitted to Pakistan.⁴⁹

Economic Connectivity: Economic connectivity: In addition, the SCO gives priority to economic integration, focusing on investment and trade among its member countries. Another important aspect is socio-economic cooperation, in which the SCO Business Council and the SCO Intercool

⁴⁶ Raza, The SCO Meeting in India.

⁴⁷ Saeed Azizi, "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): The Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Geopolitical Security and Economic Cooperation," *Open Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2024): 111-129; Huaxia. "Xinhua Commentary: SCO Champions Connectivity, Cooperation for Shared Future," *English News*, July 02, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240702/5b300166c0074675baea5fb6e53d5187/c.html>.

⁴⁸ Giustozzi, The SCO: a regional organization; Huaxia, Xinhua Commentary.

⁴⁹ Abhinav Mehrotra and Biswanath Gupta, "SCO Summit and Power of India's Growing Influence," *The Daily Guardian* (2023).

consortium are important. The SCO also supports the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), which connects the members and expands infrastructure to strengthen their economy. 'The SCO is now a gathering voice for collaboration, and for Xi Jinping, openness and inclusiveness,' said Chinese President Xi recently, emphasizing the organization's goal of cooperation and connection and expressing his ability to address mutual issues.⁵⁰

Cultural and Educational Exchange: Cooperation in education and culture is appreciated by SCO as mutual as a mutual method for promoting. Projects like SCO University promote professional and academic cooperation, create a favorable attitude and permanent relations for future generations.⁵¹ Cultural activities of the SCO promote social relationships and peace among the member countries. Participation of the SCO can improve relations between India and Pakistan by encouraging both countries to deal with common regional issues, including terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan.⁵²

Regionalism and the SCO's Role in South Asia

Regionalism plays a crucial role rather quietly in India-Pakistan ties within the SCO, owing largely to their mutually hostile history. SCO offers a forum for integration and cooperation between the two countries, encouraging cooperation on shared economic security concerns fairly effectively.⁵³ In the face of increased tensions, India and Pakistan may resolve problems in a regional setting through recent the SCO conferences. Although SCO encourages regionalism, it can also rapidly increase confidence and lessen conflict among its member nations.⁵⁴ The unresolved Kashmir issue is where problems are most evident, and both countries frequently see SCO actions through a prism of rivalry and self-interest.⁵⁵

Some of the regional initiatives that SCO is engaged in promote stability and collaboration with the neighbors. Nevertheless, due to the strained bilateral relations, the RATS program assists India and Pakistan to exchange counterterrorism intelligence. Economic cooperation is of high priority to the SCO given that programs such as the SCO Development Strategy 2025 seek to enhance commerce between member-states. Besides the efforts to

⁵⁰ Azizi, China's Belt and Road Initiative.

⁵¹ Huaxia, Xinhua Commentary.

⁵² Rauf, The Bilateral Engagement of India and Pakistan, 29-32.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mariam Akhtar and Afifa Kiran, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Conflict Resolution: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and India Bilateral Relations," *NDU Journal* (2018).

⁵⁵ Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*.

promote better understanding among the different communities, the organization promotes interpersonal relationships and intercultural interactions. To become more stable and unite the region, the SCO remains a crucial mechanism of enhancing inter-member relations among its members, including India and Pakistan.⁵⁶

SCO has supported some projects in the region including India as well as Pakistan but the relation between the two has not changed much over the years. The most notable cases are the 2018 SCO Summit in Qingdao, where Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain surprisingly expressed their willingness to cooperate despite the difficulties, and the joint counterterrorism exercise in Russia in the framework of the SCO in 2019. The Kartarpur Corridor became operational in November 2019, at the same time when the SCO noted a greater focus on the idea of dramatically growing the connectivity between various countries in the region. With continued political struggle that curtails trade, efforts of forging business connections are crippled by terrorist accusations and lack of trust. The presence of the foreign minister of Pakistan at the SCO meeting in May 2023, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, could be a sign that the tensions in the region will shift to diplomatic offers.⁵⁷

Realism and Power Politics in the SCO

The causes of the disagreement between India and Pakistan, which are rapidly heightening geopolitical relations, prove that SCO is more of a realist paradigm. Striving to achieve their self-interest, countries often cause security dilemmas in a way that affects other states adversely. In the SCO, there is a complex relationship of opposing interests between India and Pakistan. As India dominates the SCO, Pakistan aims to balance China's expanding influence by stimulating its ties with China and Russia. Realists argue that both countries joined the SCO to advance their own interests and acquire regional influence, not to foster unity. The security challenge is made worse by historical tensions, particularly those surrounding Kashmir, which result in shared acts. Their strategic objectives are in line with larger international alliances: Pakistan and China want to counterbalance each other's power, while India and the United States do the same. At the official level, these tensions are apparent as Pakistan accuses India of meddling and

⁵⁶ Ayjaz Ahmad Wani, "Decoding India's Priorities at the SCO: Connectivity, Counterterrorism, and Afghanistan," in *Decoding India's Priorities at the SCO: Connectivity, Counterterrorism, and Afghanistan* (New Delhi, India: Observer Research Foundation, 2023).

⁵⁷ Shalini Chawla, ed. *"India's Neighbourhood: Challenges and Opportunities, (2023);* Wani, *Decoding India's Priorities.*

India accuses Pakistan of aiding terrorists.⁵⁸ Since the SCO's principles of sovereign equality and non-intervention restrict its ability to directly address bilateral conflicts, the realism perspective also emphasizes the organization's incapacity to settle the India-Pakistan conflict.

In order to counterbalance the U.S. presence in the area, the SCO brings together important powers, particularly China and Russia, to influence power dynamics in South Asia. These countries coordinate military operations and policy inside the SCO, influencing the balance of power in the area. China's BRI, which aims to improve economic relations throughout Asia, including South Asia, and strengthen ties between China, Russia, and Central Asia, is a crucial component of this balance. India takes the rising power of SCO with some threat and sees it as a challenge to its long established position as a regional powerhouse. SCO programs like economic cooperation and counterterrorism may heighten or ease tensions among member nations depending on their behavior. The influence of power in the SCO may affect the stability in the region because India and Pakistan have different interests and actively advance their own agendas. The two-fold agenda of stability and development of the SCO molds power dynamics in the South Asian region in an indirect way under the open official statements.⁵⁹

The effectiveness of the SCO is influenced by relations with foreign partners as well as sociopolitical cooperation within member nations. While attempting to forge a partnership, China and Russia frequently battle over national interests in Central Asia. Strong pressures from countries like the US and EU, which discreetly have significant global influence, muddies SCO relations. The SCO was created in part as a response to perceived Western hegemony, providing its members with a covert forum to set their own goals and resist outside influence.⁶⁰

The table below summarizes the key security issues that the SCO has addressed, the mechanisms that have been used, the results in terms of

⁵⁸ Hossein Aghaie Joobani, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Light of Organization Theory," (2013); John J. Mearsheimer, "The inevitable rivalry: America, China, and the tragedy of great-power politics." *Foreign Aff.* 100 (2021): 48; Adrian Eugen Preda, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization a Defensive Realist Analysis," *Analele Universitatii „Constantin Brancusi” din Targu Jiu–Seria Litere si Stiinte Sociale* 02 (2022): 111-120.

⁵⁹ Joobani, The Shanghai Cooperation Organization; Preda, Shanghai Cooperation Organization a Defensive.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

regional cooperation, and the implications for India-Pakistan ties in order to synthesize the discussion.

Security Threat	SCO Response	Outcome / Assessment
Terrorism (general)	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), joint exercises, intelligence-sharing	Some plots foiled, militants arrested, improved coordination across Central Asia
Extremism & Separatism	Common declarations, security drills, legal frameworks	Limited success; cooperation stronger in Central Asia than South Asia
Cross-border militancy (Indo-Pak)	Forums discourage open confrontation; both participate in RATS	No real resolution; mutual accusations continue
Border security	Confidence-building measures, military cooperation exercises	Partial improvement among Central Asian states; little impact on Indo-Pak border disputes
Cyber & information security	Joint working groups, declarations	Early stage; modest cooperation
Drug trafficking & organized crime	Regional action plans, intelligence exchange	Some cooperation, but uneven enforcement
Kashmir conflict	Not directly addressed (considered bilateral by SCO principles)	Remains unresolved; SCO avoids mediation

As the table indicates, the SCO has achieved tangible results in areas such as counterterrorism coordination through RATS and intelligence sharing across Central Asian states. However, when it comes to bilateral disputes, particularly cross-border militancy, and Kashmir, the SCO has been limited, largely avoiding direct involvement due to its consensus-based decision-making and principle of non-interference. This shows that while the SCO has functioned as a useful multilateral platform to prevent escalation and promote dialogue, it has not transformed the fundamental security dilemmas between India and Pakistan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds that the SCO acts as a stabilizing multilateral framework that constrains conflict escalation and fosters limited

cooperation between India and Pakistan. Yet its capacity to resolve their enduring disputes remains minimal, as realism continues to shape their core security behavior. To explain the understanding of the relations of India and Pakistan in SCO, realism, regionalism, and trans-regionalism have to be considered. Realism justifies why India and Pakistan cannot cooperate within the SCO due to security issues, mostly because of anarchic systems and power struggles. To create a working SCO, Pakistan and India should set aside their different priorities and concentrate on common goals like fighting terrorism with much vigor in the SCO cooperation systems. Consequently, SCO must preferably encourage Confidence-Building Measures in a gradual, stepped approach through divergent joint projects that evolve silently with mutuality over time. Nonetheless, it is not that all is lost, as long as both parties make proper use of the SCO framework, gradual improvement can be expected.

India-Pakistan cooperation in the context of SCO can be improved through various approaches: Frequent high-level dialogues conducted on agreed discussion platforms can resolve the conflicts and instill self-confidence. This tension can be lessened through collaborating in such fields like security, counter-terrorism, and infrastructure development. Exchange programs and joint military exercises can be added to the security riddle to solve it. The SCO should also assume the initiative in mediating the disputes by acting as a neutral facilitator in order to encourage more communication and collaboration among its members.

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