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Issue Brief

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Pakistan-India SCO Membership: Challenges & Opportunities

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Pakistan and India became full-members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on June 9, 2017 in Astana. This membership brings along with it challenges, and a lot of opportunities for both the countries.

Created as the Shanghai Five in 1996, the core objective of SCO was to ensure security and reduction of military forces at the borders of the core members. Under its umbrella, China had effectively stabilised its western border issues effectively. However, over the years, the SCO's core objective has expanded, and security emphasis has grown from resolving border disputes to fighting issues of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Yet, these undertakings have been relatively limited in scope and intensity, primarily due to the divergent interests of the members, which has prevented deeper cooperation.

In recent years, the SCO has emphasized more on economic issues. In 2015, the SCO had ratified a 10-year development strategy with a long list of objectives, including common development and security cooperation.¹ Initially, SCO had primarily been a Eurasian organization. With the inclusion of Pakistan and India, it is now expanding in South Asia. On the one hand, this addition means enhanced

¹ "SCO starts expansion, ratifies 10-year development strategy", July 11, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/11/c_134402104.htm

geographical outreach and on the other hand, it might be impacted by the on-going strife between Pakistan and India. This is already evident from the hung status of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

While cooperation opportunities lie ahead, the entry of the two countries into the SCO will also bring some of the following challenges for the organization.

First, there is a difference between the six old members and the two new ones. There is the issue of the existing differences between Pakistan and India, such as India's objections to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which India claims passes through a disputed territory. India is the only country in the SCO that has not endorsed China's BRI project.

Second, the SCO's major challenge will come from the prevailing situation along the borders of both the countries. While building up to the Astana Summit, the tensions mounted along the Line of Control (LoC) and only a day after the Astana Summit, Pakistan's army chief visited troops after reported violations along the Line of Control (LoC). Pakistan's Foreign Office summoned the Indian deputy high commissioner to protest the ceasefire violation. It was against this backdrop, that despite being under one roof, both Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi could not go beyond a customary greeting and have a one-on-one bilateral meeting.²

Third, for India, there is the problem of coping with a changing world while keeping the domestic scene as same as possible. The ruling BJP's target of changing the idea of India to its own conflicted ideology means that the domestic pot will keep simmering, even if it does not come to the boil.

However, despite the differences, the membership of countries in the SCO hold the potential of bringing them closer to address their differences and help in facilitating them to work for the benefit of the region to overcome common challenges for common development. Knowing such fragilities, China had already conveyed its desirable outcome even before the Astana Summit and hoped that Pakistan and India would improve bilateral relations after becoming full members of the SCO.³

In Astana also, President Xi Jinping echoed that security is essential for the development. He said that "Without security, there will be no development to speak of" and emphasized that inclusion of countries

² "India and Pakistan membership a challenge for SCO", *Global Times*, June 17, 2017.

³ "Pakistan's SCO membership: Domestic roadblocks ahead", *The International NEWS*, June 22, 2017.

as permanent members will enhance SCO's influence and "can contribute to finding settlements of the hot spot issues."⁴

Thus, SCO provides a multilateral platform where both Pakistan and India will have opportunities for interaction. No doubt, given their historical baggage, one must not expect their hostility level to come down immediately. But what does give hope is the fact that both the states will get a platform to resolve their bilateral issues effectively in the presence and guidance of regional countries who have a stake in a peaceful region. Moreover, it is strongly going to become a time of test for the SCO as an effective player to bridge the gap between India and Pakistan through a series of diplomatic moves that would urge both parties to bring an end to the historical disputes and hostility between the two neighbouring states. Such success at the part of SCO would be a historical landmark to its credit, and would encourage many others to consult the Organization for their issues and this will ultimately make the SCO an effective regional organization comparable to the United Nations in the international political arena. This, indeed, could be the biggest achievement not for the SCO itself, but also for a troubled South Asia, where, whether it is Afghanistan or Kashmir, the region needs peace to become a better place for generations.

Another significant pillar of SCO is increasing people-to-people contacts, among the youth in particular. China now aims to launch a China-SCO cooperation program in human resources development. Under this program, China intends to invite representatives from SCO states to seminars and workshops in China, and will also send Chinese experts to SCO states to give policy advice, carry out local training programs and provide government scholarships. This indicates that the SCO is not only emphasizing on security, terrorism and trade, but also long-term plan to influence the younger generations and unite them under a robust leadership.

Moreover, presence of other powers like Russia may add another angle to the Indo-Pakistan scenario. Thus, Pakistan and India's relationships with China and Russia could play a significant role in improving their bilateral relations.

For Pakistan, the goodwill and popularity that Pakistan enjoys among the Central Asian Republics (CARs) can be utilised by the country and it can cooperate with the SCO members in terms of counter-terrorism efforts, information sharing and joint security exercises more effectively. In a nutshell, SCO membership

⁴ "Xi: Security key to development" *China Daily*, June 10, 2017.

brings with it an opportunity for Pakistan to expand its political influence and economic footprints in the Eurasian region. However, this membership should not be seen only in terms of the annual visits. This is the time and opportunity for comprehensive engagements with all member countries, including India, that can raise Pakistan's international stature, both in qualitative and quantitative terms.