

PAKISTAN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCO COUNCIL OF FOREIGN MINISTERS MEETING IN GOA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



There has been much anticipation ahead of Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Foreign Ministers Meeting from 4-5 May 2023, in Goa, India.¹ The reason remains the prevailing deadlock between Pakistan and India, the two strategically important South Asian neighbours, which loomed large over the prospects of regional peace and development for decades. Particularly, after the BJP government's illegal and unilateral measures in the context of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) on August 5, 2019², the bilateral relationship hit a new low. Against that backdrop, a pertinent question arises: Why did Pakistan decide to send its Foreign Minister to the SCO-CFM in India, when the current Indian regime remains intransigent on Jammu & Kashmir dispute, continues to operate from an ultranationalist mindset, and makes an instrumental use of India's relations with Pakistan to accrue domestic political gains and electoral dividends?

Pakistan's decision to attend the SCO-CFM in-person is, evidently, a prudent diplomatic choice. It reaffirms, in the most unequivocal terms, Pakistan's unwavering commitment to the principles and objectives of SCO and the importance Islamabad attaches to SCO as a trans-regional Eurasian

¹ "SCO in Goa", *The Nation*, <https://www.nation.com.pk/21-Apr-2023/sco-in-go>

² "Article 370: India Strips Disputed Kashmir Special Status", *BBC*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49231619>

platform. This reflects Pakistan's long-term vision – which is cognizant of the evolving geopolitical realities ushering the world into a new era of alignments and re-alignments. As has been reported, following consultations among all stakeholders,³ the decision was for the Foreign Minister to attend the meeting personally and, thus, deliver a clear message.

To begin with, Pakistan assigns special importance to SCO and it was the first country that applied for membership after its establishment, which India followed later.⁴ Presently, SCO is an influential multilateral forum at the heart of Eurasia, founded by two major powers: China and Russia.⁵ As stated by the Foreign Office Spokesperson, Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, it is the multilateral context that stimulated Pakistan's participation in the SCO meeting instead of the bilateral ones.⁶ In his recent interaction with the Pakistani media, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto himself underscored that “we are committed to the SCO Charter and this visit should not be seen as a bilateral one but in the context of the SCO.”⁷ Contrary to some baseless reports in the Indian media, the official circles here made it clear, Pakistan neither asked for a bilateral meeting with India nor does it intend to seek it during the visit. The Foreign Minister would, of course, be meeting his other counterparts in SCO on the sidelines.

Secondly, in terms of Islamabad's strategic calculus, SCO holds high importance for Pakistan as it comprises its all-weather strategic cooperative partner, China, and Russia, which is another major power and engaging with SCO members including Central Asian States for regional peace, development and cooperation.⁸

Thirdly, SCO is a pertinent platform to promote Pakistan's vision of making itself the regional hub for trade and commerce, including through the China-led initiative of regional connectivity: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This is also in congruity with Pakistan's “Vision Central Asia.”⁹ Moreover, it can accrue benefits in terms of

³ Kamran Yousaf, “What Prompts Bilawal's Visit to India”, *The Express Tribune*, April 27, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2413982/what-prompts-bilawals-visit-to-india>

⁴ Amb. Aizaz Ahmed Khan, “SCO Summit in India: Calibrating Pakistan's Stance”, *Jinnah Institute*, May 1, 2023, <https://jinnah-institute.org/feature/sco-summit-in-india-calibrating-pakistans-stance/>

⁵ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Power Contest*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2012), PP: 74-96.

⁶ Ali Hussain, “Bilawal to Attend SCO Meet in India: FO”, *Business Recorder*, April 21, 2023, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40238372>

⁷ “Bilawal Bhutto to Visit India for SCO Moot in First Visit of Any Pakistani Foreign Minister in Over 12 Years”, *Pakistan Observer*, April 20, 2023, <https://pakobserver.net/bilawal-bhutto-to-visit-india-for-sco-moot-in-first-visit-of-any-pakistani-foreign-minister-in-over-12-years/>

⁸ Amb. Tehmina Janjua, “SCO Summit in India”.

⁹ “Joint Communiqué on Official Visit of President of the Republic of Tajikistan, H.E. Emomali Rahmon to Islamic Republic of Pakistan”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan*, <https://mofa.gov.pk/joint-communicue-on-official-visit-of-president-of-the-republic-of-tajikistan-h-e-emomali-rahmon-to-islamic->

tapping its economic potential with a major Eurasian player like Russia.¹⁰ In sum, all this is in sync with Pakistan's pivot to geo-economics.

Fourthly, India – an active U.S. partner in the evident bid to 'contain' China – has been seeking to use SCO – among others – as an avenue to project itself as a "major power" player.¹¹ India is trying to carve out a 'sphere of influence' in this area.¹² To many, Indian foreign policy precepts – from 'strategic autonomy' to 'multi-alignment' – would actually appear to be what prominent Indians regard as "Strategic Deception."¹³ For Pakistan, prudence demands not leaving the SCO spaces open for India to advance its particularly self-serving agenda.

Fifthly, India is making attempts to undermine Pakistan-China collaboration by poking the wheels of BRI and CPEC and seeking to sow a wedge between Moscow and Beijing as it is promoting the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), which terminates at Iran's Chahbahar port.¹⁴ Coupled with this are Indian attempts to make inroads into Afghanistan and also gain full transit trade rights. Pakistan has to ensure it is in the arena to safeguard its interests while issues of regional connectivity and economic integration are deliberated upon. In the 2021 SCO Council of Heads of Government meeting, the then Foreign Minister of Pakistan had stated: "Pakistan will continue to play its role to assist our Afghan brethren in their hour of need by contributing towards its socio-economic development as well as engaging with the regional and international partners to advance shared goals and objectives."¹⁵

Sixthly, security is among SCO's priorities, and obviously Pakistan has a vital stake in it. Given the new alignments and re-alignments in the regional and international arena, Pakistan has to closely engage in the evolving dynamics with a view to appropriately calibrating its options. Within the

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pakistan/#:~:text=The%20Prime%20Minister%20of%20Pakistan%20underlined%20the%20importance%20of%20engagement,people%2Dto%2Dpeople%20contacts.

¹⁰ "Pakistan, Russia Celebrates 75th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations", *The Nation*, April 29, 2023, <https://www.nation.com.pk/29-Apr-2023/pakistan-russia-celebrate-75th-anniversary-of-diplomatic-relations>

¹¹ "India in SCO", *Indiain SCO*, <https://indiainsco.in/home>

¹² Joanne Linn, "India and Multi-Alignment: Having One's Cake and Eating it Too", *AsiaLink*, February 21, 2023, <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/india-and-multi-alignment-having-ones-cake-and-eating-it-too>

¹³ "India's Strategic Culture Has to Be Based on Indian Epics..." Jaishankar Explains", *Diplomacy*, *ANI News*, January 28, 2023, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/indias-strategic-culture-has-to-be-based-on-indian-epics-jaishankar-explains-diplomacy20230128235248/>

¹⁴ "Renewing the Shanghai Spirit: India's Presidency of Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA)*, September 17, 2022, pp. 5-15. <https://www.icwa.in/pdfs/ICWASCOGuestColumn.pdf>

¹⁵ "Meeting of the Council of Heads of Governments of Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan*, <https://mofa.gov.pk/meeting-of-the-council-of-heads-of-governments-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>

framework of SCO, Pakistan's three neighbouring countries – India, Afghanistan and Iran – are part of the SCO processes (India – as full member; Afghanistan, as observer state; Iran, in the final process of acquiring full membership).¹⁶ As such, Pakistan's decision of attending the CFM in-person is understandable since SCO has an established counter-terrorism structure, i.e., Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), and a regular security-related agenda. Pakistan could engage with SCO member states/observers to share its perspectives regarding the regional imbalance in South Asia and the emerging security situation after the U.S. troops withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In essence, Pakistan's decision to attend the SCO-CFM in Goa in-person helps reinforce its objectives vis-à-vis SCO and underscore its credibility as a responsible player. That Islamabad has opted to attend despite the negative Indian statements in the run-up to the CFM speaks eloquently of its maturity. The onus remains on India to use this occasion to move towards creating a conducive and enabling environment that would induce a meaningful and result-oriented bilateral engagement at the opportune time. It remains to be seen whether the Indian side would choose to act with wisdom.

That said, for its part, Pakistan needs to remain cautious in its handling of the Goa meeting, both in terms of substance and optics. In his pronouncements and varied interactions, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari must reaffirm Pakistan's strong resolve to continue to work for the advancement of SCO's objectives and also propose fresh initiatives that would further enhance the agenda of regional economic cooperation and connectivity for common progress and shared prosperity. Equally important is the issue of Afghanistan, on which Pakistan's perspective and the way forward must be articulated with clarity. Furthermore, the Foreign Minister must clearly state Pakistan's position on Jammu & Kashmir, as and when required, and also leave no doubt about its rejection of India's provocative move of hosting some G20 events in IIOJK including the 'Tourism Working Group' meeting in Srinagar.

In this way, Islamabad would demonstrate Pakistan's role as a credible, mature and responsible partner for regional peace and stability within the framework of SCO, while also illustrating its prudent handling of India as a venue. Any decision about the level and mode of Pakistan's participation in the SCO Summit in India later this year must await the outcome of the Foreign Minister's visit to Goa.

¹⁶ Mosharaf Zaidi, "SCO: Vital National Interest", *The International News*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1066146-sco-vital-national-interest>