

PAKISTAN HOSTS 2024 SCO SUMMIT: STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY OR A DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE

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On October 15-16, 2024, Pakistan will host the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. Hosting this summit implies Pakistan's growing significance in regional dynamics as the summit is a golden chance for Pakistan to show its capabilities in diplomacy, strategic affairs, and economy. The theme of this summit is "Strengthening Multilateral Dialogue; Striving towards a sustainable peace and Prosperity".¹The key agenda at this summit is:²

- Regional security
- Counter-terrorism and improving security
- Fostering connectivity networks,
- Trade, investment, and economic opportunities,
- Climate change issues

¹ "SCO Summit 2024 in Pakistan: October Dates, Schedule, Members and Agenda," Observer Diplomat - International Affairs & Diplomatic Magazine, October 11, 2024, <https://observerdiplomat.com/sco-summit-2024-in-pakistan-october-dates-schedule-members-and-agenda/>.

² "SCO Summit 2024 in Pakistan: October Dates, Schedule, Members and Agenda," Observer Diplomat - International Affairs & Diplomatic Magazine, October 11, 2024, <https://observerdiplomat.com/sco-summit-2024-in-pakistan-october-dates-schedule-members-and-agenda/>.

SCO is highly significant as its nine member states are China, Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asian nations, also known as CARs (Central Asian Republics) Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Other than the member states, SCO has 17 observers and dialogue partners making it an organization of 26 countries. The member states encompass a resource-rich region with one-fourth of global oil reserves and many other resources. These nations contribute to 41% of the world's population and 23% of the world's GDP.³ The combined GDP of SCO members is approximately 24.4 trillion USD.⁴ These statistics provide a bright future for SCO if it expands further.

Significance of Pakistan for SCO

- **Important geostrategic position:**

Pakistan's important geographic location gives it an edge in geostrategic, geopolitics, and geo-economics. The Central Asian Republics are landlocked allowing Pakistan to provide a sea route to the SCO members, especially landlocked Central Asia.

- **Economic Potential:**

Pakistan is a resource-rich country. Its natural resources, such as coal, gas, minerals, etc., give it an edge in attracting foreign investments. Exploring trade relations with SCO member countries can further enhance Pakistan's exports. If free trade and tariff policies are implemented, Pakistan can serve as a potential market for SCO members.

- **Role in Regional Security:**

Pakistan has a whole history of war against terrorism. Through this experience, Pakistan can aid SCO in the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) as SCO members are prone to security issues.⁵

³ Babar Amin, "The Expanding Role of SCO: Strengthening Pakistan's Regional Integration," *ISSI*, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Article-The-Expanding-Role-of-SCO-Strengthening-Pakistans-Regional-Integration-by-Ambassador-Retired-Babar-Amin.pdf>.

⁴ Florian Zandt, "How Much Does The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Contribute to the World's GDP?," *Statista*, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/chart/32538/comparison-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-with-selected-regional-international-organizations/>

⁵ Muhammad Saif Ur Rehman, "SIGNIFICANCE OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION – PAKISTAN'S PERSPECTIVE," *Margalla Papers*, 2014,

Strategic Opportunities for Pakistan

Engagement in Diplomatic Relations

Hosting this summit provides Pakistan with an opportunity to enhance its diplomatic ties and engage in interdependent relations with major powers like Russia, China, and CARs. This provides Pakistan with an opportunity to position itself in multilateral ties and gives a break from strained bilateral relations. After the revocation of Article 370, the tensions over the Kashmir issue have escalated with India but Pakistan extending the invite to India in a multilateral platform allows both, Pakistan and India to open diplomatic ties. External Affairs minister S. Jaishankar is to attend the summit representing India and has clearly stated that his visit is for the SCO summit with no discussion on India-Pakistan bilateral relations.⁶ Even though this statement highlights the focus of summit on multilateral ties, still it is noteworthy as it gives a relief from contentious bilateral issues.

Economic Opportunities

Through the hosting of SCO summit, Pakistan's relations to multifaceted cooperation will boost new prospects for cooperation in the spheres of the economy with regional countries besides improving the existing cooperation such as CPEC. This summit offers Pakistan the opportunity to invite more foreign investment in spheres other than infrastructure, such as technologies, energy, and agriculture. For instance, this summit may create new relations with Central Asia through schemes such as the TAP pipeline which shall improve energy infrastructure and energy reliability in the region. Besides, this summit let Pakistan open to turn the country into a center of regional trade and logistics for other countries such as Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to invest.⁷

Climate Change

Even though Pakistan's contribution is the least to global Climate Change, it is still one of the most affected countries by Climate change effects. Pakistan has drawn attention to this issue at the Astana summit.⁸ The role of a host can influence this stance as it will give

⁶ "SCO Summit 2024 in Pakistan: October Dates, Schedule, Members and Agenda," Observer Diplomat - International Affairs & Diplomatic Magazine, October 11, 2024, <https://observerdiplomat.com/sco-summit-2024-in-pakistan-october-dates-schedule-members-and-agenda/>.

⁷ Muhammad Saif Ur Rehman, "Significance of Shanghai Cooperation Organization – Pakistan's Perspective," *Margalla Papers*, 2014,

⁸ Saima Shabbir, "Pakistan PM Demands 'Generous' Assistance for Nations Vulnerable to Climate Change at SCO Summit." *Arab News PK*, July 4, 2024. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2543281/pakistan>.

Pakistan a chance to attract a considerable amount of attention to its vulnerability to climate change. It can do so by framing debates on how climate change affects developing countries worse, advancing certain climate change frameworks, or advocating for enhancing regional climate change responses. From this position, Pakistan can also lobby for climate financing frameworks, especially for vulnerable countries, and conduct sector-wise specialized panels/sessions on climate, Risk management, Climate Resilience, and Sustainable Development best practices. This way, proactive engagement will help circulate Pakistan's viewpoint more widely around the world.

Diplomatic Challenges for Pakistan

Internal Political Instability and Governance Issues

The political instability and governance issues within Pakistan may also pose a challenge as they directly affect foreign policy and may hinder the country's capacity to be involved significantly in SCO. ⁹ These internal issues hinder the diplomatic efforts and also diminish the competency of the country in addressing its international commitments. If Pakistan has to become more proactive and have a larger influence within the organization addressing these issues around governance and stability is imperative.

The Dominance of Major Powers like China, and Russia in SCO

China and Russia are the most influential members with SCO. Both the countries play a key role in shaping the organization's agenda with some frequency and are capable of navigating various discussions and policies. Such dominance distorts the roles of decision making within nations, and makes the policies of the powerful countries dominate while neglecting the scarcely audible voice of a country. For Pakistan it is imperative to do this cautiously by forming alliances with other member states, ensuring that it is heard and getting an equal share of voice for the setting up of SCO's agenda. Moreover, Pakistan must look for ways how it can assert itself in important areas such as counter terrorism, trade and connectivity without being left behind or a nuisance in the process.

⁹ Muhammad Saif Ur Rehman, "Significance of Shanghai Cooperation Organization – Pakistan's Perspective," *Margalla Papers*, 2014,

Balancing the Western Perception

One of the concerns is that SCO is often considered to counterbalance Western alliances like NATO,¹⁰ so there is a possibility that this summit is considered to be an anti-Western gathering. Pakistan must consider this participation carefully and not let this harm its relations with Western countries. This diplomatic challenge involves to present SCO as regional cooperation and stability organization and not the combative towards the West.

Policy Recommendations

To achieve the full strategic advantage of this summit and counter the diplomatic challenges, Pakistan should:

- Focus on Confidence Building Measures to reduce the intensity of conflicts and open the way for regional stability.¹¹
- The member states should avoid politicizing the SCO forum, avoiding the bilateral conflicts that may overshadow the collective issues.
- Advocate to implement relevant UN resolutions particularly those related to counter-terrorism, regional stability, bilateral issues, and peaceful settlement of disputes.
- Advocate for equal say within the organization during the decision-making process. This would ensure the equal participation of smaller states like CARs and Pakistan.
- Advocate for climate change cooperation within the SCO framework. This involves the collection of actions and initiatives like Climate Funds.

Conclusion

Pakistan hosting SCO 2024 summits comes with strategic opportunities and diplomatic challenges. This will enable Pakistan to strengthen diplomatic ties, navigate economic collaboration, and help Pakistan enhance its role in regional stability and climate change issues. But the complex diplomatic issues may cause hindrances. Pakistan can take full advantage of this opportunity by working on CBMs, implementing UN resolutions, avoiding politicizing the organization and taking other strategic measures.

¹⁰ Syed Nasir Hassan, "The SCO Needs to Be More than a China-Russia Front against the West," The diplomat, August 6, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/the-sco-needs-to-be-more-than-a-china-russia-front-against-the-west/>.

¹¹ Sarwat Rauf, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): Opportunities for Pakistan." *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability*. Vol. II-II, 2019. <https://njips.nust.edu.pk>.