Pakistan and India Accession to SCO: Future Prospects and Challenges

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Introduction

Owing to geographic proximity among the member states namely China, Russia, the five Central Asian republics (CARs) and recently during the annual summit, in July 2015, the strategic alignment of India and Pakistan being a key player in South Asia into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could be interpreted as sign of a counter-balancing the West in general and the US hegemony in particular. While the membership applications of India and Pakistan, which previously have observer status, were rejected in 2011 because of the tension between them, the decision to accept them this time was announced even before the summit, indicating the urgency the members feel about their positioning in global affairs. Likewise, new countries are seeking to join SCO not because of the great prospects, but for fear of falling behind the powers of continental Eurasia. That is the main motivation for India and Pakistan to enhance the SCO outreach on the broader agenda of creating a democratic, equitable international political and economic order under the umbrella of multi-polar world.

Fostering Economic Cooperation

Contrary to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the SCO is a balanced organization and was originally created as a border security organization on 15 June 2001. With passage of time SCO has largely evolved from focusing on security interdependence to that of regionally connectivity and economic trade. This offers a window of opportunity for both Pakistan and India being key players in South Asia, whose geostrategic locations can help it act as a conduit between SCO member countries and its neighboring states to pursue their legitimate agenda towards peace and security for the long term economic prosperity of the region. Similarly, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, during his SCO address stressed on the point that “if the true spirit of the SCO is to be realized, we must work together to resolve our long outstanding disputes.” After Iran’s nuclear deal with the West, the road to Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project as well as the Turkmenistan

Afghanistan Pakistan India Pipeline (TAPI) are two examples of opportunities that stem from such regional cooperation and can only be institutionalized through organizations like the SCO. With the likely extension of this pipeline to India, it will further enhance the viability and importance of the project. That is why Pakistan proactively supports SCO’s “Energy Club”. Pakistan being cognizant of its security imperatives is always mindful of maintaining strategic balance vis-à-vis India. SCO will be another channel of confidence building initiate security dialogue between Pakistan and India which might help in the resolution of disputes.

Being at the junction of great powers, furthermore China needs India as well as Pakistan on its side both politically and via trade through one belt one road project to integrate the economies of Eurasia along the New Silk Road initiative. It also brings Pakistan further into the fold and secures China’s Xinjiang province through upgrading the Karakorum Highway (KKH) and linking Gwadar with Kashgar and Central Asia via the KKH to create transcontinental overland connectivity. Russia also hopes to access the warm waters of the Arabian Sea through peaceful, friendly and cooperative means. India is the only country in the world with a working population large enough to be able to satisfy China’s future middle class consumer population with the provision of low cost products. Perhaps the principal exchange emerging from India’s accession to the SCO, will be a new push by China to be admitted into SAARC. India, on its part, will also be able to gain access to Central Asia via Lahore and Kabul and ultimately linkup with the New Silk road project.

**Political Imperatives and Strengthening Regional Security**

Considering the vitality and futuristic politico-economic outreach of the organization, the bigger issue is political attention. The Central Asian powers are sandwiched between China and Russia and find themselves increasingly drawn into China’s economic thrall, in the face of a declining Russia to which they are still bound by history and physical and linguistic infrastructure. They constantly seek new partners and both India and Pakistan offers an alternative they can appreciate and work with.

As an expanded regional and global powerhouse SCO, could serve to play positive role in stabilizing the security situation in the region given
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Since 2014, Afghanistan has been going through profound changes and its foreseeable future will have a huge impact on the entire Central Asia, along with Pakistan, India and China engaged in tackling the three evils (terrorism, separatism, extremism). Stability of Afghanistan which might become once again hotbed for terrorism is one major important issue for both India and Pakistan to join SCO. Knowing this, the SCO will provide a new platform for them to communicate and cooperate for their common interests.

Moreover, the world’s largest share of drugs comes from Afghanistan and transited to different parts of the world mainly via Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. SCO’s joint anti-drug trafficking drills can help Pakistan not only through training of personnel (Anti-Narcotics Task Force), but also intelligence sharing can help to expose the network of drug barons. Cooperation under the SCO between these two countries on Afghanistan’s borders could expedite the process of an Afghan settlement. Afghanistan will be surrounded by a powerful regional association with common values and approaches to resolving issues.

Key Challenges to SCO Expansion: Internal Conflicts and External Pressure

However, there is flip side of the same coin and SCO membership does not really confer on India any advantages. China and Russia, which lead the SCO, are currently in anti-West mode. India is being allowed to join the SCO to mask this. Also that China will not permit India to get any significant economic benefits from joining the SCO. China has dropped its opposition to India’s membership because it has lost interest in the SCO and is pursuing its agenda independently through bilateral contacts and the One Belt One Road project. Therefore, there is no real
benefit for India as China is the driving force in the SCO. Russia being a key player and also holding a permanent membership at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) supported India’s entry into the SCO as a balancer against the weight of China, but it will have no effect on the long-term viability of the organization.

Nevertheless, the conflict between India and Pakistan could shift to the SCO platform. The antagonisms between the two countries have always had a Central Asian dimension. Islamabad is no less active than Delhi in Central Asia. India’s interest in the region has military overtones, too. A major dispute erupted a few years back over the Ayni Air Force Base in Tajikistan, the reconstruction of which was financed by Indian loans. India clearly views Central Asia as a strategic clamp with which to exert pressure on Pakistan from the rear should the situation on the Indian-Pakistani border flare up.

Pakistan and India’s troubled relations remain a hurdle that prevents the group from truly operating as a cohesive unit. Both nations are unlikely to cooperate given their mutual suspicion, especially on a militaristic level. Perhaps where diplomacy has not yielded results economic compulsion will. Historically, Pakistan has always remained apprehensive of India’s role in Afghanistan as it sees the situation in zero sum terms, at the expense of its strategic security interests. Perhaps it’s one of the reasons that India has never been part of any peace process between the Afghan Taliban and other regional stakeholders. Moreover, both nations need access to Central Asian energy markets and any planned oil and gas pipeline from Central Asia to South Asia must go through Afghanistan, which further accentuates the geostrategic centrality of Afghanistan for any regional economic plan, including the TAPI gas pipeline. Given these imperatives, reconciliation between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan would be anything but a challenge for the SCO.

The statement that the SCO will not be a platform for regulating conflicts between member countries is a major flaw. Similarly, for Uzbekistan, the focus of the SCO’s geopolitical agenda is still considered to be Central Asia. The inclusion of the South Asian agenda could overburden the organization, and complicate matters for the CARs. In an expanded SCO, Tashkent would be in the thick of a multilateral and eclectic policy, something that it has sought to avoid through giving priority to bilateral cooperation. On the other hand, India believes it is in a lose-lose position with respect to the SCO: if it becomes a member state, it will be bound to abstain from aggression against Pakistan under the watchful eye of the SCO secretariat; on the other hand, not becoming a member of the SCO will deprive India of a very viable opportunity to make safe inroads in the CARs.

Speaking in Ufa, Uzbek President Islam Karimov drew attention to the fact that the SCO is about to be joined by two nuclear powers in a state of permanent conflict with each other. Central Asia, a recognized nuclear-weapons-free zone (NWFZ), suddenly finds itself in a club with four nuclear-armed countries. This new configuration forces a rethink of the whole

NWFZ concept, if it means anything at all to the region and the world. The growing Indo-US strategic partnership and the emerging US Pivot Asia Strategy is a matter of concern for the SCO countries. Thus region is exposed to strategic imbalances.

Beyond India’s interests in Central Asia, accession to the SCO is also part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s strategy to engage China in a way that offsets initiatives elsewhere to contain China in cooperation with the US. This is a tricky balancing act, and one made no easier by China’s plan to build a $46 billion economic corridor through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.\(^3\) India has always preferred that Russia play the leading role in Central Asia, but with its economy in turmoil and a renewed westward focus, Moscow’s grip is loosening. At the same time, the Central Asian states are wary of the new Sino-Russian understanding in Eurasia. In particular, Kazakhstan and even Uzbekistan are seeking to diversify their foreign policy.

On the other hand, it will open a new Pandora’s Box for the India and Pakistan due to the fact that the SCO is believed to be a counter-weighted to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and sometimes it is also called a “NATO of the East” because of its military designs and the drills that would pave the way for the transformation into a permanent military alliance, will generate the sense of competition and an opposition towards the most of European nation and the US.

Future Prospects

Given the continuous shift in power among the major players of the world, the face of international relations keeps changing respectively. Global politics is always characterized with three tendencies; namely, cooperation, competition and conflict. Moreover, it is strongly going to become a time of test of the significance of 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 neighboring states. Such success at the part of SCO would be historical landmark on its credit and would encourage many others to consult the organization for their issues and this will ultimately make the SCO an ever effective player next to the UNO in the international political arena.

Conclusion

In conclusion, India, Pakistan membership may be a distant reality, the SCO should not be considered a defensive alliance directed against the US at the present time. Furthermore, the forum can also act a venue for conflict resolution in the South Asia. A balanced approach in the strategic orientation of India and Pakistan relations vis-à-vis SCO is the order of the day. The two nations have much more at stake in creating win-win scenarios under the umbrella of SCO and to not allow their future to be relegated to the interests of western powers.

It is not only Pakistan and India that would appreciate SCO cooperation, but also mutual cooperation is vital for many of the Central Asian States, as well as China and Russia. China and Russia

have apparently developed a clever scheme to safeguard the respective national interests of Pakistan and India in South, respectively and ultimately include two promising strategic partners in South Asia. Whereas, China and Russia handle affairs in North and Central Asia. A potential rapprochement between Pakistan and India could help open a new path that avoids the instability of Afghanistan, connecting Turkmenistan, Iran, and India by pipeline and ocean tanker. In fact, it was not terrorism but energy security that prompted talks between India and Pakistan in Ufa. Russia and China are attempting to nudge both countries toward cooperation, especially in terms of working on the energy pipeline.

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Miss Roshan Taj Humayun holds a Master of Philosophy in International Relations from National Defence University, Pakistan. Her area of interests includes Pakistan’s foreign policy, Peace and Conflict Analysis, Arms control and disarmament, Security Policies of South Asian states, Energy issues, International Terrorism and Politics of Asia-Pacific region. In addition to her native language Urdu she has a good command over English language and partly Turkish language. Miss Humayun is research intern at the Wise Men Centre for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM).