



RESEARCH PAPER

**Pak-China-Russo Relations and the Platform of SCO:
Changing Foreign Policy and Strategic Options for Pakistan**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship of Pakistan with China and Russia and looks into the new opportunities for Pakistan if these relationships are more developed. New Silk Route has provided Pakistan with opportunities to enhance cooperation with China and Russia regarding energy, economic and security requirements. SCO can be a good platform for Pakistan. Pakistan has changed its approach from pure realism to neo-liberalism in its policies vis-à-vis China and Russia. This Silk Route is providing Pakistan with new foreign policy options and it is tilting towards Asian Block. Pakistan by joining this China and tilting towards Russia can counter India and its influence in Afghanistan. The joining of China and Russia by Pakistan is not only in the benefit of Pakistan but also for them as they need us more than we need them. At the end few policy decisions will be discussed, that Pakistan can take in near future.

KEYWORDS China, Gwadar Port, Pakistan, Russia, SCO, Silk Route

Introduction

Pakistan can serve as an energy and trade corridor for the Gulf region, as well as, Central Asian states, due to its geographical location and newly built Gwadar port. As a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia and also for the adjacent regions, Pakistan has become important as the African and Middle East oil can be transported to China and Russia and other destinations, through road, sea and rail routes. Further, landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics can get access through Pakistan to Iran, China and Russia. Pakistan has become most appropriate route for European states for the energy supply to China and getting energy resources from Russia. It can be stated that Pakistan 'provides a natural link between SCO countries to connect the Eurasian heartland with the Arabian Sea and South Asia'. There have been many impediments for Pakistan in the past and in recent years, which have prevented it from being acknowledged as a viable transportation corridor for energy supply. These include, but not limited to complex law and order situation in Afghanistan, conflicting relationships between regional players like Iran, India, China and efforts of regional as well as, international players like America to influence the Asian states and its tensions with Iran. Russia is trying to reclaim its influence and power at the regional and global level, whereas China has emerged as an economic giant and is expanding its military, social and economic influence internationally. Recently Pakistan and India have been given member status in SCO, which can provide Pakistan with an opportunity to exploit this platform to influence India and fulfill its energy, security and economic issues. Role of America has also changed drastically and its tilt towards India is an eye-opener for Pakistan. The CPEC has also provided Pakistan with numerous opportunities to

progress; therefore it is high time that Pakistan adopts proactive foreign policy and search for new strategic, political and economic partners especially in the shape of Russia and strengthen its already developed relations with China. (Rahim, Khan, & Muzaffar, 2018).

Literature Review

Michael Fredholm (2013) states SCO has developed itself into the security and energy entity of an international outlook and stature and its members represent half of humanity. It may be declared as NATO of East therefore alarmists consider SCO as a long-term threat to the West, as SCO's political development is un-ignorable for the major international actors owing to collective and mutual economic development and energy production of major countries like China, Russia, and Pakistan. Author also talks about spirit of Silk Route, evolution of US attitude towards SCO and prospects for regional economic and energy alliance in the making.

Thrassy N. Marketos (2008) is of the view that due to enormous economic growth and energy resources, China is having central place and handling the wheel of SCO. Pakistan and China both have common agenda of securing resource flow. However, this is a political issue. The author has laid emphasis on China's energy problem in a broader framework. Regional stability and securing multi-polarity are the other important concerns for both Pakistan and China.

As per Marcel de Haas, energy security is gaining importance in SCO, in addition to military-political issues. An Energy Club was established within SCO, for common energy approach and strengthening energy security. Therefore, among SCO members a common energy approach is being developed along-with bilateral as well as, multilateral energy cooperation agreements, which is seen by West as increasingly becoming a mechanism to oust the US and its Western allies from Central Asia, and thus to threaten Western security interests. It is further stated that SCO has developed itself from (originally) a border arms control-oriented organization, via a regional counterterrorism body, to a truly international entity. Till recent years, it has changed its outlook from political and economic to a body cooperating in the field of security. But if we compare it with NATO, it still does not have integrated politico-military structure, no permanent operational force and headquarter, further its members and observers tend to cooperate in many areas, yet they have major political differences as well as, contradictory economic interests.

The Centre for Pakistan and Gulf Studies in its Round Table Report titled Pakistan and the SCO: Building Common Understanding has provided historical context, structure and functions of SCO along-with Pakistan's historical ties with CARs and ways in which Pakistan can limit American influence, which in turn will lead to lowering tensions in South Asia. It is stated that SCO is increasingly becoming significant both in regional and international affairs due to two main reasons; (a) vast energy resources and (b) being huge market for foreign exports as well as, geopolitical significance in war on terror. The roundtable has explored the significance and challenges to Pakistan's bid for the membership of SCO and analyzed contemporary strategic and geopolitical concerns related to regional connectivity and energy trade. In this region, Pakistan can act as a conduit between SCO countries and its neighbors due to two reasons; (a) it provides shortest possible route connecting CARs and Iran on one side and Russia, China and Indian markets on the other hand; and (b) it has a vital role in combating terrorism. This role of Pakistan will not only facilitate conflict resolution in volatile regional hotspots like Kashmir and Afghanistan, but also in FATA and Balochistan along-with functioning of Gwader port. In this piece of work, the case of

Pakistan's permanent membership in SCO has been pleaded. The work identifies six key issues in this regard and discusses their pros and cons in detail. The issues include:-

- (a) Pakistan's prospects for SCO membership;
- (b) Common grounds that bring Pakistan and SCO at one platform;
- (c) How can Pakistan represent interests of SCO;
- (d) Role in conflict resolution in South Asia;
- (e) Neutralization of US factor vis-à-vis SCO; and
- (f) SCO's expansion can settle remaining explosive hotspots in Asia.

Khan (2009) in *Pakistan's Policy towards Central Asia: An Evaluation Since 1991* has stated that Pakistan's policy towards Central Asia has been shaped by energy, trade, transit, political and security concerns. Pakistan has always wanted to get access to Central Asia's energy resources and for this purpose ECO and Gwader port are its hopes. Pakistan knows that for its policy to be successful it needs peace in Afghanistan, so it has always tried to have a stable pro-Pakistan regime there. Whereas, many factors including external as well as, internal economic and political instability have been stumbling blocks in Pakistan's access to Central Asia. The author further states that Pakistan and Central Asia have close cultural and economic connections rooted in history since Taimur's conquest.

Hypothesis

New Silk Road concept (the extension of which is CPEC) has provided Pakistan with opportunities to enhance cooperation regarding energy, economic, and security requirements. . If Pakistan makes its foreign policy proactive, it can get maximum out of these.

Theoretical Framework

Pakistan has espoused the neoliberal approach in its policies vis-à-vis China and Russia as pure realism oriented policies failed to ensure energy, economic and security requirements. A multilateralism approach must be followed by Pakistan.

Pak-China-Russo Relations

Russia and China are becoming unmistakable phenomenon in the current international relations. The reasons are many including but not limited to deteriorating Russo-US and China-US relations, ever changing geopolitics and rise of these two states as economic and military powers providing other states a chance to look at them for their future relations. Russia may provide natural resources to China and its entry into the world economy may take place (Lukin, 2015).

A proactive and pragmatic approach has been adopted by Pakistan in the new millennium as far as its foreign relations are concerned especially after 9/11 and its indulgence into war on terror. It has successfully transformed its challenges into opportunities and has become a frontline state in international relations. It is constantly trying to improve its relations with all neighboring states including India and Afghanistan.

‘Following the end of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and a change in Pakistan’s Afghan policy, a major hindrance in improving relations with Russia and Central Asian States has been removed and there are strong signs of improvement in bilateral relations. With China, Pakistan is moving extensively into economic cooperation, which has been a missing dimension in their comprehensive bilateral relations. To improve relations with all the countries of the neighboring regions in a mutually beneficial manner is one of the core objectives of Pakistan’s foreign policy’.

Before going into the details of areas of common interests, challenges, policy options and recommendations, it is imperative to firstly discuss Pakistan’s relations with both China and Russia in some detail, to have a better idea for the future prospects.

Pak-China Relations

Pakistan has always given more importance to China than any other state in the world. Its relations with China are based upon trust, confidence, mutual benefits and are rooted into the general public. Pakistan was amongst the first states which recognized China and supported unconditionally for China’s permanent seat in UN in 1961. In 1962, when US gave military support to India against China during India’s border war, Pakistan felt threatened and took that as a detriment to its national security and moved out of CENTO and SEATO. This led to the start of Pak-China strong relations. Their interests were common, geopolitical environment was same and enemy was same. Hence, an agreement on the demarcation of common border between Pakistan and China was signed in 1963. Pakistan also helped China a lot in ending its isolation and bringing it into main stream of international relations during Cold War era through air-transport and trade agreements. In return, China helped it during its wars with India and still helping it in all the possible ways whether it be economic, military or strategic fields (Muzaffar, & Khan, 2016).

1970s saw Pakistan’s role in Henry Kissinger’s secret visit to China followed by Nixon’s historic visit. India perceived Pakistan’s relations with China as threat to its national security, so it entered into a treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation with Russia. This led to more sound relations among Pakistan and China during Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 71, when China gave huge military and economic assistance to Pakistan. China also vetoed the Bangladesh’s application for membership of UN. Pak-China relations in 1970s introduced new dimensions in the region and created new strategic balance of power. During this decade China assisted Pakistan in building its Heavy Rebuild Factory for Y-59 tanks and F-6 Aircraft Rebuilt Factory, the two mega defense related projects. These developments cultivated deep-rooted respect and goodwill for China in the hearts of Pakistani people.

1980’s witnessed international developments in the region, which not only changed the whole global politics but also left deep impacts on Pakistan. Two major events took place in late 1970’s (a) Iranian Islamic revolution and (b) Soviet-Afghan war. The Afghan war threatened Pakistan from another front and Pakistan which had a hostile neighbor in the shape of India at one border, had to face another anarchic situation at other border. This created peace threatening atmosphere and security problem for Pakistan. In this situation too, China stood firm and helped a lot in shaping strategies and provided military help to counter these threats and alike. 1980s also saw shift in Chinese instance on Kashmir issue and China started to look for better relations with India, which was perceived by Pakistan as good sign, in a way that India would be restrained from belligerency. On the other hand, Pakistan kept on supporting China in all the issues whether it be Taiwan, Hong Kong or Tibet.

End of Cold war changed the dynamics of world politics. US once again started giving cold shoulder to Pakistan, even imposed sanctions on it, due to Pakistan's nuclear program. The change in US behavior was due to disintegration of USSR and end of Afghan war. It was China which provided all the military related assistance in the shape of personnel training, hardware as well as, logistics. So, during this time, Pak-China defense related cooperation reached its peak and is still growing in the shape of missile technology, nuclear program and ships and air craft development.

During the end of last millennium, especially after Indian nuclear tests, Pakistan has been very important for China regarding its South Asian policy and maintain balance of power for India. Therefore, China gave Pakistan confidence to go nuclear. During Kargil war China remained neutral, which showed that China was interested in making its relations better with India. 9/11 brought with it many challenges for Pakistan as its policy to give its air, land and waters to US led allied forces for war on terror raised few concerns for China, which were removed through diplomacy and high level visits. In this period, whenever Pak-India tensions arose, China remained neutral and played its role in defusing tensions between the two. It must be noted that at state level both China and Pakistan have unanimity of views on issues like war on terror, nuclear programs of different states and peace, security and economic development in the region.

Both wish to strengthen the UN authority and oppose unilateralism and concepts such as 'coalition of willing' or 'concert of democracies' outside the UN ambit to deal with international security issues. Pakistan and China have cordial relations in military and political fields for the past six decades, yet their economic relations have always been missing until recently. Now both have realized that they need economic cooperation, side by side the military and political one, in order to have comprehensive cooperative everlasting relationships. Hence, they have been able to determine a vision for the direction of their bilateral economic relations, which are evolving and getting better day by day. They are entering into different projects, bilateral trade is increasing, development of infrastructure including Gwadar Port, CPEC, upgrading Karakorum highway, Thar Coal mining, upgrading Pakistan Railway and many power generation projects are in progress. So, it can be said that Chinese economic support is integral for Pakistan in current scenario.

Pak-Russo Relations

For the very outset, Russia wanted to start relations with Pakistan, but our government inclined towards US during 1950s and Pakistan became an ally of US against USSR's expansionism. This led to strained relations between Pakistan and Russia and Soviet-Afghan war saw the peak of strained relations among the two. Now their relations are undergoing a process of normalization yet at slow pace. The good thing is, the ice has started to melt and high level meetings have started among leaders and officials. This shows that both states intend to come closer economically and strategically. The geostrategic landscape of the region is providing both states the reason to improve their relations. Cooperation in counter terrorism, Russia's will to gain its prior position as super power, huge military and weapon market and economic interdependence of different states has led to regional states come closer, so are the two i.e. Pakistan and Russia. Pakistan is searching for alternate options in the fields of technology, science, fuel, energy, security and searching new markets as well as, strengthening relations with its Central Asian neighbors. The same is the case with Russia, which is looking for becoming more and more influential in the region first and then at the global level, for which it needs cordial relations within this region and

Pakistan is one of the most important players in this regard. So the benefits are mutual. The impediments in this regard are:-

- (a) Their relations have a Cold War legacy, both being opposite to each other for decades.
- (b) Pakistan was the frontline state in Soviet-Afghan war and the main cause of Soviet defeat in Afghanistan.
- (c) Russia being India's most trusted ally and Pakistan being US ally throughout, causes doubts and mistrust in the minds of leadership of both towards each other.
- (d) The legacy of long term Indo-Russo relations will continue to influence the Russian decision makers in near future.
- (e) Further there is a perception in Russia that Pakistan based terrorist groups are involved in Chechnya, Dagestan and some parts of Central Asia, which may hinder the policy makers in Russia to take speedy steps towards cooperation in different fields.
- (f) Pakistan's nuclear proliferation is also an issue for Russian government, which remains apprehended that these would fall in the hands of terrorists.

Whereas, after 9/11 and Pakistan's role in war on terror, the Russian and Pakistanis started finding common grounds for engagement. Pak-India composite dialogue process also helped in this regard. Most important event in new millennia, as far as Pak-Russo relations are concerned, was President Musharraf's visit to Moscow in 2003, which proved to be an icebreaker and resulted into the initiation of high level dialogue for mutual understanding and cooperation. In the same year Russian Foreign Minister visited Islamabad, in 2004 Pakistani Foreign Minister visited Moscow and in 2005 our PM Shaukat Aziz attended SCO meeting there, which opened the doors of bilateral relations. In the same year Russia became observer at OIC and Pakistan at SCO. This was not a coincidence; rather both states apparently accommodated each other in their pursuits.

Further, evolving US-India ties in arms purchasing, strategic partnership, nuclear deal and economic cooperation has also led Pakistan and Russia to come closer. Russia is in search of new markets for its arms and Pakistan is looking for new allies in the region, so commonality of their interests will bring both closer in near future. There are two major areas in which both states can engage in economic interests of both; (a) textile and (b) oil and gas. Pakistan has also supported Russia in becoming part of WTO, with the hope that Pakistan will have access to Russian markets in leather, surgical, sporting goods and textile. On the other hand, energy sector is another sector in which Pak-Russia future cooperation can flourish. Pakistan has also signed MOU with Russian Company Gazprom in 2005 for cooperation in oil and gas sector for exploration, development, training, research, production and developing Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. Apart from government, many private companies of both states have entered into different MOUs in the field of oil and gas. Hence, Pakistan attached great importance to its relations with Russia and in this regard it looks at the common grounds to strengthen their mutual relationship such as, promoting peace in South Asia, Afghanistan and Central Asia; both have similar view on Middle East situation and Iran's nuclear issue. For this they need to shed the historical baggage and explore new mutually beneficial opportunities and move forward with mutual cooperation under new circumstances,

and further develop deeper understanding, rectify misperceptions, remove misgivings and develop respect for each other's legitimate interests in the region

Foreign Policy and Strategic Options for Pakistan

While addressing SCO Summit in 2006, President Musharraf emphasized, on the geo-strategic, political and economic importance of Pakistan in the context of interests as enshrined in SCO charter. He was of the view that Pakistan could play key role in this regard and provide natural link between SCO states, Arabian Sea, South Asia and Eurasian heartland, and this connectivity would be of mutual benefit in terms of inter-regional trade and energy transactions. He further vouched for developing Pakistan as an economic and trade hub and a linkage for neighboring states through ports, roads, highways and rails.

Following shared interests and be identified:-

- 1) There has been resentment against unipolar system and world is shifting towards multipolarity. The US and its Western allies have their own vested interests in terms of security and energy. China and Russia want to restructure the international system, for which their mutual cooperation is mandatory for multi-polarity and the tussle between West and South has been started in terms of interests, approaches towards problems and development issues (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Rahim, 2017).
- 2) As far as international legal system and UN is concerned, Russia and China both have same aspirations regarding preservation of sovereignty of states in UN and Security Council.
- 3) On regional conflicts both Russia and China hold same positions especially on Iran Nuclear issue, North Korean issue, Libya and Syria and others. Pakistan also holds more or less same position on these issues and this aspect can bring them closer. They further want to reform the international financial system i.e. World Bank and IMF and emphasize on the increased role of non-Western states. Pakistan has opportunities to explore these options and get benefit out of these.
- 4) Trade between Russia and China is at rise since 2010 and both are looking for new markets, Pakistan can exploit their need for new markets and serve as a transit route and bridge in this regard.
- 5) These states are in need for economic development, political stability and energy supply. These common aims can bring them at one page and SCO framework for Pakistan can be vital.
- 6) Pakistan must quickly develop economic cooperation not only with Russia and China, but also with other major powers of the region.
- 7) Open discussion on Russian and Chinese fears in Pakistan must be held at different forums, so that a national consensus can be developed in this regard.
- 8) The forums like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can be used as an umbrella organization for coordination, which can significantly strengthen the strategic as well as, economic ties among these states. As admission of India, Pakistan and Iran into SCO can alter its agenda from beyond the confines of China-Russo cooperation in Central Asia (Lukin, 2015).

- 9) Pakistan, for China and Russia, can be an important partner in their efforts to maintain their own independence and to oppose Western pressure, so they themselves need Pakistan as their economic and strategic ally.
- 10) Through its economic corridor, Pakistan needs to become self reliant as soon as possible and come out of the influence and interference of international donors. This will lead to political and economic independence and debt reduction (Muzaffar & Khan, 2021).
- 11) Pakistan should now make efforts for China's membership in SAARC, which will make this organization a balanced one and will neutralize the Indian influence in SAARC and will further help in regional peace and stability.
- 12) Pakistan should make such policies with China and Russia that they must cooperate with it in the fields of economic investments, infrastructure, science, technology, culture and education and SCO can be used as a starting point.
- 13) An Eastern worldview must be developed in Pakistan to overcome the skewed Western narratives and these organizations can serve the purpose in this regard.
- 14) Through this block Pakistan can counter India and its influence in Afghanistan can be minimized. This will lead to peace and harmony at the northern border of Pakistan and will be helpful for the completion of CPEC and trade enhancement.

Conclusion

Pakistan and China have invested hugely in terms of economic and strategic projects and Gwadar port is one of them, which has full potential to serve as trade as well as, energy corridor for oil and gas from the Gulf and Central Asian states to China and other states. However, there have been many constraints in terms of security and international politics especially the role of India, Afghanistan and US is important. The SCO can provide a platform for Pakistan to counter India and settle security issues in the region, which can ultimately result into the safety of CPEC and in return Pakistan has option to come closer to Russia, as Russia also needs new allies for his interests in the region.

The shared interests among these states may provide basis for these states eventually to draw closer. Good relations with China and Russia are necessary for Pakistan for economic and political reasons. For Pakistan, China is an important strategic partner along-with Russia who is gaining its lost position through progress and open policies and is searching for new allies. Hence, these can turn into one of the centres of world influence. As per Alexander Lukin (2015) Putin's course for turning Russia into a more autonomous, mighty power naturally is understood as cultivating partner relations with all non-Western centres of power, of which China is the closest and most necessary and geopolitical partner. Pakistan can get benefit by entering into this China-Russo axis, as each state's energy, strategic and political needs are forcing them to draw closer even despite all the contradictions among them. Abundant natural resources, Gwader Port-being shortest available route for trade and geopolitical location leading to being natural allies rather artificial or interest based allies tends Pakistan to incline towards China and Russia.

The new situation has once again given Pakistan an opportunity to improve its relations with Russia and strengthen its already better relations with China. Right now Pakistan has adopted proactive and pragmatic approach to deal with Russia and other

Central Asian states and is also using multilateralism to expand its engagement with its neighbors through different regional organizations like ECO and SCO. Pakistan's basic policy objectives are economic and commercial interests along-with creation of goodwill, political as well as strategic, for future relations. Pakistan wants to serve as trade and energy corridor in the region and for which basic infrastructure is developed. Now it needs, peace in the region for which it needs full support of China and Russia, whereas, both China and Russia need Pakistan for their interests in the region. The time is perfect and if efforts are made in right directions to further improve Pak-Russo and Pak-China relations, the US influence in the region will be minimized and dawn of new era will see the increased role of Pakistan in confronting problems in terms of its expanding role in Central and South Asia.

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