

REGIONAL SECURITY IN FOCUS: INSIGHTS FROM THE 23RD SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

SCO's Impact on The Evolving Geopolitical Landscape of South Asia, Central Asia and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

The 23rd Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit, held in Islamabad in October 2024, highlighted the organization's evolving power dynamics and the ramifications for regional security. While the SCO's early focus was on combating the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, its goal has now grown dramatically. The conference highlighted China's growing influence as it works to develop its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and strengthen commercial relations via the International North-South Transport Corridor (ISNTC). At the same time, Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine has allowed China to dominate the SCO conversation. India's reluctance, stemming from its geopolitical alignment with Western countries, undermines the organization's collective security strategy. With China and Pakistan striving for economic integration despite India's reservations, the summit also emphasized Afghanistan's central focus for future stability.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 1996 as the Shanghai Five, was originally intended to address border conflicts and regional security among its founding members, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Over time, its aim grew to include combating the challenges of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, known as the "three evils." Uzbekistan joined in 2001, and the group was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation group. With Pakistan and India joining in 2017, the SCO expanded its reach across South Asia, making it one of the largest trans-regional organizations in terms of population and geographic extent. However, as the Islamabad summit of 2024 highlighted, the organization's functioning has been called into doubt due to divergent interests among its main members.

China's presence at the summit cast a shadow over the Islamabad summit, as the nation persisted in highlighting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a vital component of regional growth. In his comments, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif underlined the significance of expanding the BRI beyond Pakistan to Afghanistan and Central Asia. China's interest in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a trade corridor intended to link Russia, Iran, and India while evading Western sanctions, is another example of its growing power. With the geopolitical ramifications of the crisis in Ukraine, the INSTC offers Beijing a different path to Western-controlled sea lanes, opening up new markets while reducing its exposure to sanctions. China is concentrating on improving connectivity and trade in order to guarantee reliable supply chains and industries.

Russia, a co-founder of the SCO, has historically considered the organization as a means of maintaining influence in Central Asia, a strategically important region due to its energy resources and closeness. However, as Russia's involvement in the Ukraine war has grown, Moscow has sacrificed ground to Beijing inside the framework of the SCO. At the conference, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin advocated establishing an independent payment system for SCO member states, which aligns with China's larger goal to reduce reliance on Western financial institutions. However, these attempts are opposed by India, which remains wary of both Chinese and Russian intentions. India's participation in the Islamabad summit was notably reserved. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar avoided any bilateral discussions with Pakistan, instead focusing on lobbying for increased representation of developing countries on the United Nations Security Council. Jaishankar's oblique comments to cross-border terrorism, which avoided identifying Pakistan, underscored India's long-standing concerns about the region's security risks. India's objection to China's Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs through the disputed region of Gilgit Baltistan, highlighted the two countries' longstanding geopolitical problems.

Another major topic discussed at the meeting was the situation in Afghanistan. Both China and Pakistan highlighted the importance of establishing a stable and inclusive government in Kabul in order to ensure regional stability and open economic prospects. Afghanistan's membership in China's BRI, which could connect Central Asia and South Asia, is dependent on the Taliban's desire to preserve peace and enable infrastructure projects to progress. A stable Afghanistan is critical for Pakistan, not only economically, but also to prevent future destabilization of its western borders. Sharif urged the international community to continue giving humanitarian aid to Afghanistan while pressing the Taliban to take a more inclusive political stance.

Analysis and Implications

Several major regional security trends were discussed at the 2024 SCO summit in Islamabad.

First, as Russia's focus focuses toward Ukraine, China's supremacy inside the SCO becomes more clear. This change enables China to progress its Belt and Road Initiative while also promoting alternative trade routes like the INSTC, which has the potential to disrupt the regional economic order.

Second, the widening disparity in India and China's aspirations for the region highlights the difficulty of developing genuine cooperation inside the SCO. India's ambivalence regarding the organization reflects its fears about China's influence as well as its own strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific region, where it has strengthened connections with Western countries such as the US and Japan.

Third, Afghanistan remains a major geopolitical flashpoint, and the SCO's ability to influence the situation will be critical to regional stability. As China and Pakistan push for greater involvement in Afghanistan's economic reconstruction, the SCO could serve as a platform for coordinating efforts to bring stability to the war-torn country. However, this will require careful balancing of the interests of all member states, particularly India, which remains skeptical of any initiatives involving the Taliban. As China and Pakistan advocate for further engagement in Afghanistan's economic recovery, the SCO may provide a forum for coordinating initiatives to stabilize the war-torn nation. All member states' interests must be carefully balanced for this to happen, though, especially India's, which is still dubious of any efforts including the Taliban.

The shifting power dynamics within the SCO were demonstrated in the 2024 summit in Islamabad, where China took center stage while Russia dealt with the aftermath of its war in Ukraine. Even if the SCO still offers a forum for discussing issues related to regional security, its capacity to promote true multilateral cooperation is still in doubt. The efficiency of the organization is made more difficult by India's cautious attitude, which is motivated by its larger geopolitical strategy and the ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan. The willingness of the SCO's members to put aside their conflicting interests and work together toward common objectives will determine the organization's future capacity to handle regional security issues.

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