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POST-PULWAMA INDO-PAK CONFLICT: RECONNOITERING THE ROLE OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: Terrorism has emerged as one of the major challenges for the Eurasian regional peace, security, and cooperation. Keeping these challenges in perspective, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established to eliminate the menace of terrorism, fundamentalism, and secessionism. Against this background, the main objectives of this paper are to examine how terrorism emerged as a major determining factor in the Indo-Pak relations and how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), was failed to play its effective role in the Indo-Pak conflict given the Pulwama terror attack. For this research, descriptive and analytical methods were used and the data was collected from secondary sources. The major findings of this article are that terrorism has emerged as one of the major determinants of Indo-Pak relations and the same has become a major challenge for the SCO to resolve the issue. Against the background of terror attacks, it was anticipated that the SCO would play a crucial role to pacify the situation. However, the role played by the SCO in this situation proved marked as a Whack-a-Mole.

Keywords: Terrorism; Indo-Pak Relations; Foreign Policy Strategy; Balakot Airstrike; Post-Pulwama Indo-Pak Conflict; SCO's Role as a Whack-a-Mole

INTRODUCTION

Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrike had created a war hysteria and jingoism in both India and Pakistan. However, given the historical and colonial legacy, political, geographical, and geopolitical moorings, the Indo-Pak relations have already been passing through the see-saw mode since independence. After three conventional wars, it has been realized by Pakistan's leadership that it would be difficult to go for conventional war with India. During the 1980s, using terrorism on part of Pakistan particularly in the context of Kashmir has emerged as one of the bilateral irritants, even being used as a foreign policy strategy to 'Bleed India by Thousand Cuts'. In this backdrop, terrorism is a critical bilateral irritant that has enervated bilateral relations. The aiding and abetting of the several terror groups in Kashmir by Pakistan; and on the contrary, India's assertion on terror and talks would not move together, have been complicating the regional peace, stability, and security.

India and Pakistan had become permanent members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The main mandate of the SCO is to jointly combat the menace of terrorism, fundamentalism, and secessionism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a regional organization, which was established on the principle of 'Shanghai Spirit' i.e. strengthening mutual trust, mutual benefit, and equality particularly related to security threats. As per the SCO's Charter (2002), its main objectives are to strengthen mutual trust, good neighborliness, develop effective cooperation in political affairs, economy, trade, science and technology, transport and environmental protection, and including regional peace, stability, and security. With these lofty objectives has the SCO been successful to play a positive role in the post-Pulwama Indo-Pak conflict is the moot question is to be dealt in this paper?

TERRORISM IN INDO-PAK RELATIONS: SHADOW OVER BILATERAL RELATIONS

Indo-Pak relations have remained in a see-saw pattern since their independence. After independence, both countries had established diplomatic relations but very shortly, the violent partition and numerous competing territorial claims (Kashmir, Sir Creek) have made the bilateral relationship more or less out of balance. The same was further reached to the lowest ebb given the conventional major wars and one undeclared Kargil War. Since the 1980s, Kashmir has remained highly infested with terrorism/insurgency that has taken a pivotal position in Indo-Pak relations (Thoker and Singh 2017). In this background, Pakistan's Kashmir policy has made a paradigmatic shift from conventional war to proxy war by pursuing 'Bleeding India by Thousand Cuts', wherein aiding and abetting terrorism/insurgency in Kashmir resulted in several border standoffs.

There are certain reasons to believe that the terror groups aided and abetted by Pakistan have become a destructive phenomenon per se which could be corroborated by several attacks and deaths of Pakistani civilians and combat personnel. These terror groups have not only caused a lot of concerns in India over the Kashmir issue, rather entrapping Afghanistan, Iran, and including the home turf in serious complex security situations. However, despite the fact of an internal problem, Pakistan has failed to reign in the terror groups, rather has always been coming forward openly to support the Kashmiri insurgency.

The Kargil War (1999) was a setback for local, regional, and international peace and security. Along with the border standoffs and skirmishes, certain Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) have been put in place by both the countries like the Agra Summit and the Lahore Summit. These CBMs were further concertized by the Ceasefire Agreement (2003) and the Delhi-Lahore Bus Service - was partly somewhat successful measures to de-escalate the bilateral tensions. Despite the fact of some CBMs, terrorism has been keeping on haunting bilateral relations. In the backdrop of the Indian Parliament Attack (2001), the military of both countries had stood eyeball to eyeball. Mumbai was another such attack (Ahmad and Singh 2017). Kashmir has remained one of the major targets for terror attacks (Srinagar, Budgam, Jammu, Uri), whereby the bilateral relations reached abysmally low.

TERROR AS A FOREIGN POLICY OF PAKISTAN VIS-À-VIS INDIA

What is the place of terror in Pakistan's India policy is a serious question in the geopolitical calculations? Some scholars like (Jaffrelot 2015, 520) have argued that engaging India through proxy wars, aiding, and abetting insurgency in Kashmir has become an important tool for Pakistan's foreign policy. Scholars believed that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) perceived that it is the only way to keep the Indian troops to get engaged in local issues causing international condemnation of India and diverting attention from the western border. The open admission of terror groups' support by Pakistan leaders like Asif Ali Zardari and Parvaiz Musharaf to the international media corroborated the same arguments.

According to scholars (Gates and Roy 2016; Sitaraman and Srinivasan 2012; Ganguly 2016, 27), Pakistan has reoriented its Indian policy by adopting a military doctrine of 'Bleed India with a Thousand Cuts'. Pandey (2011), who cited Col. Javed Hassan (1990), argued that the idea of this doctrine was put forward by the Pakistani military.

To further clarify the same argument Chalk and Fair (2002) quoted the former director of the ISI elucidating the strategy who said, "We have gained a lot because of our offensive in Kashmir. This is a psychological and political offensive that is designed to make India bleed through a thousand cuts". As per the study of Sirrs (2016), the focus of this policy was to wage a covert war against India wherein insurgents used to use

bleed India for multiple locations. Kapur (2017) has argued that terror groups have become the most important and preferred strategic tools like Lashkar e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) of the Pakistani establishment bleeding a thousand cuts in Kashmir. The main agenda of these terror groups is to incite the local people to fight against the Indian government by providing extensive financial, logistical, and military support in return to get their support to join Kashmir back. While giving an interview to the Indo-Asian News Service (17 May 2016) Haqqani (Pakistan's former ambassador to America) said, "Pakistan sees Jihad as a low-cost option to bleed India. The security apparatus views terrorism as irregular warfare. Islamabad feels this is the only way to ensure some form of military parity".¹ Against this backdrop, the moot question is, has this policy remained successful? As per the opinion of Pervez (2016), "Pakistan's 'thousand cuts' policy is in shambles".

POST-PULWAMA AND BALAKOT AIRSTRIKE: INDO-PAK CONFLICT

Terrorism has remained one of the critical non-traditional security concerns and the same has been figuring prominently in the Indo-Pak relations. Several groups have been operating in Kashmir like al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Omar, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Sipah-e-Sahaba, Jaish ul-Adl, Al Badr Mujahideen, Hizbul Mujahideen, etc. The militancy has increased exponentially in Kashmir since 2015. The high-profile 'Fedayeen' attacks have been regularly taking place against the Indian security forces. The list is very exhaustive which included Pathankot Attack (Pathankot Air Force Station-2 January 2016); Uri Attack (18 Sep 2016); including Pulwama Attack (14 February 2019), killing 7, 20, and 40 personnel respectively. Although the memories of recent terror attacks like Pathankot and Uri have not yet been faded, the Pulwama attack once again added fuel to the fire on 14 February 2019, in which convoys of 40 Central Reserve Police Forces personnel (CRPF) were killed. The Pakistan-based militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed (Siyech 2019) had claimed the responsibility. However, on the other hand, Pakistan had not accepted the Indian accusation. Rather, Pakistan has accused India and raised the question over the time of the Pulwama attack and why the airstrike occurred ahead of the Indian General Election time (2019). Pakistan's PM Imran Khan pointed out that the Indian government wanted to raise the nationalistic sentiments among the people to exploit the same for the upcoming election by attacking Pakistan.

As per the studies of scholars Noor and Sanam (2007), Ramsey (2017), Singh (2016), the Government of Pakistan had committed *per se* (January 2004) not to allow its territory to be used for terrorism against India. Out of this public commitment of the

¹ *Pakistan sees Jihad as low-cost option to bleed India*. An interview by Husain Haqqani to Indo-Asian News Service (17 May 2016). Available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/pakistan-sees-jihad-as-low-cost-option-to-bleed-india-haqqani-ians-interview-116051700577_1.html

Pakistan Government, India has been expecting that the former would honor its commitment and assurance. Pakistan has been required to dismantle the terror training camps including the JeM and hold them accountable for their heinous and nefarious actions. PM Imran Khan in his very first comment said that India should, “stop blaming Pakistan without any proof or evidence” and urged Indian authorities to share any “actionable intelligence”. If “you think that you will launch any kind of attack on Pakistan, Pakistan will not just think about retaliation, Pakistan will retaliate” (BBC News 2019). Whereas on the other hand, the demonstration and public protests organized by the Indian people ultimately forced the Indian government to resort to the airstrike.

The Indian Air Force had conducted airstrikes at Balakot on 26 February 2019 (3:30 AM IST). As per the press release of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, the strikes were subsequently claimed to be ‘non-military’ and ‘preemptive’ in nature; targeting a Jaish-e-Mohammed facility within Pakistan. In the context of the Balakot Airstrike, it was for the first time that the Pakistan Army acknowledged and confirmed that the Indian Air Force (IAF) fighters had penetrated the Line of Control (LoC). Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor (DG ISPR), tweeted saying, “Indian Air Force violated Line of Control. The Pakistan Air Force immediately scrambled. Indian aircraft went back” (Babar 2019). However, he claimed that there is “no infrastructure got hit” and that there were “no casualties” (DG ISPR’s Tweet 2019). Of course, the targets of the airstrike were the terror training camps of Jaish-e-Mohammad (Chakothi and Muzaffarabad, both in PoK, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa respectively) which had carried out the Pulwama terror attack (Hussain 2019). India has also confirmed the same on the same day, calling it a preemptive and non-military strike directed against only the terrorist training camps. Following the retaliation mode, on the next day (27 February), Pakistan had also retaliated and claimed that an Indian airplane was shot down and its pilot was taken as a prisoner. The next day, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs has also confirmed that an Indian pilot was missing in action. To corroborate their claim, Pakistani authorities had shown videos and images released of the Indian pilot who was being rescued by the Pakistani soldiers from a violent mob and the interrogation of the same who tied and blindfolded with a bloody face.²

The Wire (2019) reported that the recent escalation and tension out of the Pulwama attack were characterized by disinformation from both sides. Particularly, the local media has been reporting unsubstantiated facts, rumors, and online trolls.

Against this background, realizing the reality of the situation has not only become a difficulty for the common man rather even for the enlightened people as

² *Pakistan Frees Indian Pilot Who Was Beaten by a Mob and Then Served Tea*, New York Times (March 1, 2019). Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/01/world/asia/india-pakistan-plane-abhinandan-varthaman-india.html>

well.³ The same view has been highlighted in its editorial (April 7) by the Dawn (Pakistan) as 'Amidst the Fog of War' begins Dawn's editorial as, "the truth is often lost as propaganda is trotted out by the belligerents to confuse and demoralize their opponent". The editorial talks of the 'particularly vitriolic' role the media has been playing in whipping up jingoism and 'war hysteria' in both India and Pakistan. In this situation, what India and Pakistan have been claiming regarding airstrike, the number of casualties, size of the damage, retaliation by Pakistan, damage to the jet fighters of both sides, etc. had confused the common people of both sides? However, the tweet of the Wire (1 March 2019, 5:22 PM) had refuted the claims made by India of 'a very large number' of militants killed in the strike as per the satellite imagery.⁴

In the backdrop of the Pulwama attack, the Indo-Pak multi-dimensional relations like economic, political, diplomatic, etc. have been reached to the lowest level. The relations were further enervated as India terminated the most favored nations (MFN) status to Pakistan. Times of India (16 February 2019) had reported that India has raised 200% customs duty on all imported Pakistani goods. The Government of India (GOI) had requested the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to put Pakistan on the blacklist, however, the same has decided to keep the former on the 'grey list' by providing ample time till October 2019 to comply with the set 27 conditions (June 2018). In case, Pakistan fails to go by the conditions, it would be blacklisted (Pandya 2019). In addition, the GOI had withdrawn the security provided to the Kashmiri separatist leaders from Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

The proposed visit of the Indian doctors' delegation for the 13th Association of Anesthesiologists Congress, sponsored by the SAARC in Lahore on 7 March was put on hold. The All Indian Cine Workers Association (AICWA) had not only taken a call to ban the Pakistani actors and artists, who have been working in the Indian film industry, rather threatened to take strong actions against the individual/organization who would cross the redlines. The Indian Film and Television Directors' Association (IFTDA) has also followed suit and banned Pakistani artists and the president of the association threatened to vandalize the sets of any Indian film production which would engage the Pakistani artists (Khan and Khan 2020). Thus, the Pulwama attack and Balakot Airstrike put the Indo-Pak militaries on the eyeball to eyeball. In this way, India and Pakistan's military had been stood eyeball-to-eyeball and even threatened each other with using nuclear options. Multilateral relations have been reached the lowest ebb.

³ *Did Balakot Airstrikes Hit Their Target? Satellite Imagery Raises Doubts*, The Wire (01 March 2019). Available at: <https://thewire.in/security/balakot-airstrikes-india-pakistan-satellite-images>. F-16s and Disinformation. The Dawn (07 April 2019). Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1474450/f-16s-disinformation>

⁴ *China controls 1,000 sq. km of area in Ladakh*. The Hindu (31 August 2020). Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/china-controls-1000-sq-km-of-area-in-ladakh-say-intelligence-inputs/article32490453.ece>

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: RATIONALE, EVOLUTION, AND GEOPOLITICAL EXPANSION

Regional integration is one of the major features of the XXI century. The SCO has emerged as a geopolitical and geostrategic pan-Eurasian regional organization that came into existence through the Shanghai Five. Scholars like Jackson and Lopez (2017), have argued that the origins of the SCO had taken out of the breakup of the former USSR. During the visit of Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev to China (May 1989), both countries had undertaken some Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) to iron out their differences and disputes including pulling back troops from the international borders and reducing aggressive patrolling along the borders. These CBMs had inspired the other Central Asian countries except Uzbekistan to join the same. In this background, the two treaties: The Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions (26 April 1996) and The Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions (24 April 1997) were signed resulting in the birth of the Shanghai Five. The same was rechristened as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the post-entry of Uzbekistan (2001), having seven permanent members.

China has been a dominant player in the institutionalization of the SCO. This argument is supported and substantiated by Song (2014), who argued "this organization is largely a Chinese initiative and (...) China plays a 'leading role' in the SCO process. China is further motivated to promote SCO than the other members" (pp. 85-101). In the Second Summit (St. Petersburg in June 2002), the establishment of the Secretariat (Headquartered in Beijing), was approved by the SCO, which was headed by a Chinese official Zhang Deguang. It was further institutionalized with the formal meeting mechanisms of Speakers of Parliament, Secretaries of Security Councils, Foreign Ministers, Ministers of Defence, Emergency Relief, Economy, Transportation, Culture, Education, Healthcare, Heads of Law Enforcement Agencies, Supreme Courts and Courts of Arbitration, Prosecutors General, etc.

The changing strategic dynamics in the Eurasian region had become the rationale for the establishment of the SCO. However, given the American's belligerent Asia Policy particularly under President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush was held responsible for the same. Moreover, the airstrikes on Iraq, deployment of troops, economic sanctions, knocking down of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, quitting of the Kyoto Treaty, and refusal of talks with North Korea, etc (Özdemir 2019), were some strategic postures on part of the US that impelled Russia and Chinese to rethink the dream of the multipolar world.

The entry of India and Pakistan in the SCO in the year 2017 was further strengthened the regional organizations in terms of demography, geography, economy, etc. Mackinder in his book 'The Geographical Pivot of History' (1904) has argued that the Eurasian region is one of the most important regions of the world particularly in

terms of geography and the geo-strategy. Fettweis (2000) has quoted Halford Mackinder who called the region "the greatest natural fortress on earth" (p. 3). However, since their independence, both countries have remained at loggerheads. Both the countries had fought three conventional wars and even the proxy war has been going on between both the countries. Even the border issue between India and China has been going on despite the several rounds of talks by the Joint Working Groups (JWG) (Kalra and Saxena 2007). Given the Doklam issue, the militaries of India and China had stood eyeball to eyeball for 76 days. With the changing, strategic equations in the post-Cold War period, the strings of Indo-Russia relations somewhat loosened.

India has been emerging as one of the major economies of the world. The Eurasian region is very important for India as the former holds a significant place particularly in terms of geopolitical, geostrategic, geo-economic, and the same way, it holds good for Pakistan as well. In the post-Cold War era, India has been facing some problems in general and connectivity in particular, to heighten its multidimensional cooperation with the Eurasian region given the geopolitical and geostrategic significance. Moreover, countries like Afghanistan and Iran have also been making efforts to be permanent members of the SCO. If it happens, then the SCO would be one of the major regional organizations. However, the member countries have many geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economical differences (Joshi and Sharma 2017). Therefore, the success of SCO would remain dependent on how the members manage their differences not allowing their differences to turn into disputes.

Ansar (2019) has revealed that after joining the SCO, Pakistan's leadership had expressed positivism and seen it as an opportunity. Firstly, the bilateral and regional cooperation/relations would be improved by providing connectivity through the Gwadar port, facilitating trade and transportation of energy. Pakistan would play a positive and constructive role in bringing peace to Afghanistan. Pakistan could play a very positive role in achieving the SCO's goals and objectives given its location to be a bridge link between Central and South Asia and its experience of fighting terrorism, constructively contributing to the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).

It would remain very interesting to see how the SCO's performance has remained particular for its objectives in general and apropos Indo-Pak conflict in particular. Ambrosio (2008) has argued that securing and ensuring liberal democracy was one of the important objectives among the member countries, however, the same could not take place in these countries. William (2015), has quoted Hamid Golpira (Iranian-American journalist and senior editor of Tehran Times 2000- 2015): "Russia and China have been paying attention to Brzezinski's theory, since they formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, ostensibly to curb extremism in the region and enhance border security, but most probably with the real objective of counterbalancing the activities of the United States and NATO in Central Asia".

It would not be an exaggeration in saying that the SCO has been provided the regional security architecture, the very much needed for the Eurasian region. The SCO has the potential to provide an opportunity for the members to manage their bilateral issues and differences and bring them on one page related to common concerns. It would lead to further integration of the Eurasian region with the South Asian countries. Given the withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan, the SCO can play a pivotal role in ensuring security by reinforcing the counter-terrorism measures in the region. Throughout the Cold War period, regional traditional security threats have remained the core agenda of global politics. In the post-WWII, geopolitically regional security has become paramount over geo-economics (Ali *et al.* 2019). This argument can be substantiated by the argument of regional security alliances like NATO, SEATO, CENTO, CSCAP, ARF and SCO-RATS, Six-Party Talks (2003 to 2009), Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), etc.

RECONNOITERING THE ROLE OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: WHACK-A-MOLE?

Concerning the Indo-Pak conflict out of Pulwama and Balakot, what role was expected from the SCO? Had the SCO played its role in the Indo-Pak conflict as per its goals and objectives? Could the SCO play a role in curbing terrorism, a root cause of the Indo-Pak conflict? Does the SCO able to maintain friendly and cordial relations between India and Pakistan? To analyze the role of SCO, one has to have a bird' eye view of the SCO's mechanisms to achieve these objectives.

The SCO has been established for the heightening of multilateral regional cooperation including the political, economic, regional, international dimensions. According to the Charter's article 1, the SCO has been assigned to achieve these goals of strengthening the mutual trust, friendship, and good neighborliness between the member countries, to develop the multifaceted cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace, security, stability of the region and promotion of a new democratic, fair and rational political and economic international order, cooperating in the prevention of international conflicts and their peaceful settlement, jointly searching for solutions to the problems that would arise in the XXI century.

Under article 2 of the Charter, the SCO would follow principles like mutual respect of sovereignty; independence; territorial integrity of states and inviolability of state borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas, peaceful settlement of disputes between the Member States. Article 3 refers to the scope of SCO covering the main areas of cooperation like the maintenance of peace and enhancing security and confidence in the region, jointly countering the

terrorism, separatism, and extremism, illicit narcotics and arms trafficking, and other types of criminal activity of a transnational character and illegal migration (Mitra 2014).

Seeing its scope in terms of political, security, and economic goals and objectives, the SCO seems a very panacea kind of institution for the Eurasian region. If these goals and objectives materialized and fructified into reality by the SCO, it would not be an exaggeration in saying that this region would become one of the best regions in terms of peace, stability, and security.

South Asia is one of the most volatile regions of the world given the Indo-Pak conflicts and sharing boundaries with nuclear powers like China and Iran (Malik *et al.* 2019). In this background, the first question is very important particularly in terms of the recent Indo-Pak standoff - would the SCO be able to jointly combat the three evils like terrorism, separatism, and extremism in all their forms and manifestations? What cooperation can SCO extend in the prevention of Indo-Pak conflict given the Pulwama attack and Balakot? Did it provide a peaceful settlement to the regional security issues? Had the SCO asked India and Pakistan to respect each other's sovereignty and follow non-aggression and non-interference in internal affairs? Has the SCO created mutual trust, friendship, and good neighborliness between the Indo-Pak relations?

Terrorism has become one of the critical threats to Eurasian regional security. In this direction, the well-structured mechanisms have been put in place by the SCO like SCO counter-terrorism instruments were signed as Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (adopted 15 June 2001); The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (adopted 15 June 2001); Agreement Between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (adopted 7 June 2002); Protocol on Amendments to the Agreement Between Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (adopted 16 August 2007); Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (adopted 7 June 2002); The Regulations on Observer Status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (adopted 24 April 2004); Agreement on the Database of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (adopted 28 June 2004); Concept of Cooperation Between SCO Member States in Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism (adopted 5 June 2005); Protocol on Establishment of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (adopted 4 November 2005); Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation Between the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (adopted 16 August 2007); Regulations on the Status of Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (adopted 8 August 2008); Agreement on the Procedure for Organizing and Conducting Joint Anti-Terrorist Exercises by Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (adopted 28 August 2008); The Convention on Counter-Terrorism of the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization (adopted 16 June 2009); Statement by the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on joint counteraction to international terrorism (adopted in Astana 9 June 2017) (Kulintsev 2019).

The SCO as the largest intergovernmental organization had set its foundational objectives to strengthen mutual trust, promote good neighborly relations among its member-states along with stability, security, and peace among its members. The member countries are to achieve these objectives by getting engaged in multifaceted cooperation. Haidari (2019) has opined that sustainable peace makes sustainable development possible and hence the SCO in its engagements with members has been emphasizing the importance of results-driven security cooperation among the members. The joining of India and Pakistan was widely claimed as a significant opportunity for the SCO to resolve the prevailing non-traditional security threats of three evils in South and Central Asia.

Terrorism, secessionism, and fundamentalism have been identified as the major non-traditional security challenges of the Eurasian region. Thus, fighting with the three evils has been the major objective of the SCO since its inception. The establishment of the RATS seems to be the first step in this direction. When India and Pakistan joined the SCO, the entry has been perceived in two ways -positively and negatively. Positively, it has been viewed that the SCO could facilitate resolving their bilateral disputes between India and Pakistan. On the other hand, the *Global Times* (12 July 2018) quoted Li Wei (an anti-terrorism expert at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations) who said: "There is some concern that the hostility between India and Pakistan might affect the organization's unity. However, it seems that the SCO would also become an ideal platform for members with disputes to solve their problems bilaterally based on the Shanghai Spirit". Jackson (2018), has argued that in the backdrop of the 5 July 2009 attacks in Urumqi, the SCO Convention on Counter-Terrorism was signed during the Yekaterinburg Summit. In the same summit, a statement was also issued to support China on the terrorism issue.

The RATS has been organizing joint counter-terrorism training and cooperation. It has prevented a considerable number of terror attacks from being faced by the member countries. It has acted against several terror groups and played a major role in arresting hundreds of suspects. It is argued by Plater-Zyberk and Monaghan (2014, 23-24) that the RATS has been building a database of suspected terrorists and organizations given the shared information among the member states. According to the Agreement on Cooperation and Interaction of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on Border Issues (SCO Secretariat 2015), the Executive Committee of the RATS has been tasked with sharing the information concerning border crossings, violations, border conditions, training, laws, and experiences. Even some Chinese scholars had floated an idea of having an active joint anti-terror aspect of the RATS, by raising the possibility of joint operations forces.

To have first-hand knowledge of countering the three evils, the SCO has been sponsoring military exercises like the Peace Mission 2007; Peace Mission 2010; the Tianshan-2011; Peace Mission 2012; Combined Border Activity 2013; Peaceful Mission 2014; Xiamen 2015; etc. in which all members have participated. The joint maritime exercises between the Chinese and Russian navies have been taking place since 2016. After joining the SCO, India, and Pakistan have also become part of the Peace Mission 2018, for the first time which was held in Russia.

The SCO does not allow discussing the bilateral issues. However, in a war-like situation, the moot question is what should be the role of SCO? At the organization level, SCO has not figured anywhere during the Indo-Pak conflict in question. However, on part of permanent member countries, at the individual level, they have issued statements and urged both the countries to get engaged diplomatically to sort out the conflict (Ahmed *et al.* 2019).

China and Russia are the dominant members of the SCO; but these two countries had played a very limited role, urging both countries to engage diplomatically. Despite Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood's effort to solicit China's support for current tension, China had maintained its low profile given the geopolitical dynamics. While addressing the press conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang responded to a question to Indo-Pak conflict, wherein he called both sides to, "find out the truth, control the situation, solve the problem and jointly well maintain regional peace and stability", while pledging that China "is willing to play a constructive role in this regard" (Stokes and Staats 2019). Scholars Stokes and Staats (2019), have argued that despite the above assurance there was no hint or public evidence by which it could be accepted that China had played a constructive role in de-escalating the Indo-Pak conflict. Post-Pulwama attack, Chinese President Xi sent the Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou to Islamabad to discuss and de-escalate the Indo-Pak tensions. It was being accepted that Beijing might have exerted diplomatic influence privately. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang during his press conference on 1 March, declined to say anything when he was questioned as if China was active behind-the-scenes. However, a U-turn had happened when the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed the media during the National People's Congress (Beijing) on 8 March 2019, wherein he took the credit for helping to de-escalate the simmering India-Pakistan tensions.

The SCO's role in the Indo-Pak conflict has also remained very passive. During the peak of the conflict, the new General Secretary of the SCO (Vladimir Norov) took over. During his first press conference address after the assumption of charge of the organization, in the context of one question related to the Indo-Pak conflict, Vladimir Norov said:

Before joining the SCO as full members, India and Pakistan committed themselves to strictly implementing all the provisions of the legal framework that has been developed by the member states of the

organization. One of such fundamental obligations is not to bring bilateral contradictions and disagreements to the SCO, as the same is not engaged in the settlement of disputable bilateral issues, whether border, water, or other topics in the relation between the individual Member States. These issues must be resolved and are being resolved through bilateral consultations and dialogue, goodwill, and mutual reasonable compromises (Pradt 2020).

He was of the strong opinion that both countries should resolve their issues bilaterally. Except for a warning statement, nothing positive and constructive has been contributed towards the conflict. He had asserted that both country's participation in the security grouping would/could become 'impossible' unless commitment on their part for an 'unconditional' fight against the three evils.

ABROGATION OF ARTICLE 370: CHANGING EQUATIONS AND THE SCO ROLE

The decades-long special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under articles 370 and 35A was revoked on 5 August 2019 by the Parliament of India. The occasion had become a defining moment in regional geopolitical and geostrategic history. There were mixed reactions from the people of both Kashmir as well as the rest of the country *vis-à-vis* abrogation of special status. Simultaneously, India's neighboring countries particularly Pakistan and China got antagonized with such kind of move (Kanjwal 2019). Both countries have started raising the same issue at the United Nations in the anticipation to compel India to reconsider its decision. However, the all-weather friends have been failed to achieve their desired goal to internationalize the issue as well as seek the support of the international community in restoring the pre-August *status quo* in Kashmir.

After repeatedly raising the abrogation of special status issues regarding Kashmir in the UNGA has not yielded desired results. In this backdrop, Pakistan has started its hostile approach towards India and accelerated cross-border terrorism in the same part. Concomitantly, Pakistan has also started getting substantial support from some Muslim countries like Turkey, Malaysia, and partly from Iran as well to put pressure on India. However, Pakistan did not get much support and backing from the Arab World in general and long-lasting friend Saudi Arabia in particular. In this regard, Pakistan tried to raise the Kashmir issue at the annual meet of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) which was declined by many of its members (Junaidi 2020). In other words, Pakistan did not get succeeded in bringing back the pre-August, 5 positions to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Given China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through the PoK a disputed territory, China has become another party to the dispute.

Moreover, China has border disputes with 14 neighboring countries in general and SCO members in particular like India, Russia, and almost all Central Asian countries. In this backdrop, SCO's role becomes crucial to ease off the tension and play a crucial role. Combating terrorism is one of the major objectives of the SCO. However, using terrorism as a strategy against one another country is prevalent among the member countries. Moreover, on the issue of terrorism, the member countries have not been on one platform, for instance, China and Pakistan are on one side over the Afghan peace process; whereas Russia is on the other. India has still been isolated on the same issue. Often, India, China, Pakistan, and sometimes Russia used to get engaged militarily over the border disputes. Given its obligation, the SCO has not been able to play its role in regional disputes. Moreover, given India's growing strategic partnership with the US, the SCO member countries have been divided into axis like Sino-Pak-Russia. Russia is not only openly supporting the Indian cause given the geopolitical sensitivities. Hence, Russia has been maintaining a neutral role as far as India-China tension is concerned.

The SCO's dominant member China, the all-weather friend of Pakistan had not only come forward to support Islamabad apropos Kashmir rather created a second war front by claiming the entire Pangong Tso Lake and Galwan Valley in the Ladakh region. Moreover, several other statements on part of China have been made for the claim of Ladakh and various other parts of Arunachal Pradesh as well. China has been opposing India's road construction project in Galwan Valley and, hence, on 15 June 2020, about 20 Indian soldiers were killed and many held captive by the People's Liberation Army. Media reports were indicating that more than 40 Chinese soldiers were also injured in the bloody Sino-India face-off in Galwan Valley. China has now occupied more than 1000 km² across the line of actual control in Ladakh as per one report published in The Hindu on 31 August 2020.

The two Asian giants as well as nuclear powers have been on the brink of a major war. India on the other hand has also deployed additional troops across LAC to thwart any future strategic challenge from China. In this regard, the current Chief of Defence Staff of India, General Bipin Rawat has also made it clear to the world community that if all other options fail, the war will be the last and only option to deal with Chinese transgression across LAC.⁵ Apropos, India has often stated that it wants a peaceful solution to all disputes with China. On the other hand, China has been also saying that it is India that has been violating the status quo across LAC. The situation across the LAC has been very critical and, currently seems that both neighboring countries might indulge in a war at any point in time, as both countries directed their respective armed forces to be ready to meet any eventuality. In this background, defense ministers of

⁵ General Bipin Rawat's threat of military option against China misplaced, National Herald (28 August 2020).

Available at: <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/general-bipin-rawats-threat-of-military-option-against-china-misplaced>

China and India had met off the sidelines of the SCO meeting (August 2020) but except for blaming each other for the turbulent international border, nothing concrete solution was made public. In these eventualities at the SCO level, no role has been visible despite Indo-Pak and Indo-China on the verge of nuclear war.

CONCLUSION

The SCO has been established to jointly combat the terrorism, separatism, and extremism being faced by its member countries in all manifestations. The SCO has also underlined the importance of cooperation in the prevention of international conflicts and their peaceful settlement by following the principles like inviolability of state borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, and peaceful settlement of disputes between the member countries.

When India and Pakistan joined the SCO, it was anticipated that it would create a sea of opportunities for both countries in terms of political, economic, connectivity, energy; regional peace, stability, and security. The SCO would play an important role in the Indo-Pak strained relations as well. Terrorism is one of the bilateral issues that have put the Indo-Pak relations off the keel in the recent past in the backdrop of accusation and counter-accusation of terror attacks.

The Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrike have become one of the major challenges for the SCO to prove its relevance to combat terrorism. Concomitantly, the issues of abrogation of articles 370 and 35A once again put both countries on the verge of nuclear war as well as India-China due to border dispute during the last four months of 2020. These issues have major litmus tests for the SCO to show its relevance as a regional organization in the context of the Indo-Pak terror issue. However, the SCO has not come forward and played its role as congruent set objectives. Rather, the SCO seems more or less rather geopolitically divided. More often than not, China has supported its longstanding ally Pakistan *vis-à-vis* India. Also, the Russian role has not remained up to its stature. At last, it is concluded that the SCO has failed to perform as per its lofty goals to foster good neighborly relations and to maintain regional peace, stability, and security. Moreover, the SCO has not been in a position to combat the three evils like terrorism, fundamentalism, and secessionism, the reason is having a different perception of the same particularly among India, Pakistan, China, and Russia. To maintain its relevance as a regional organization, the SCO has to go by its principles and perform congruently as per its objectives. 🌐

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