

# Pakistan's Chair of SCO-CHS: An Opportunity for Pakistan

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**Abstract** - Pakistan's forthcoming leadership role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), including chairing the Council of Heads of Government, the meetings of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, and eventually the Council of Heads of State (CHS), presents tremendous opportunities to further its strategic and economic goals. By leveraging the principles of regionalism and regional cooperation, Pakistan can advance regional integration through economic connectivity, counter-terrorism collaboration, infrastructure development, and cultural exchanges. This paper evaluates Pakistan's achievements and missed opportunities during its CHG chairmanship 2024 and outlines a roadmap for maximizing the potential of its future roles. Particular emphasis is placed on enhancing trade through Special Economic Zones, promoting regional energy projects, advancing counter-terrorism strategies through the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure, and fostering climate change cooperation under the SCO's framework. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations to ensure Pakistan strengthens its position as a key player in the SCO, contributing to regional stability and global diplomacy.

**Keywords** - SCO, Regionalism and Regional Cooperation, Pakistan Chairmanship, Economic Integration, Counter-Terrorism Collaboration, Special Economic Zones, CPEC



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## 1. Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a permanent intergovernmental international organization established in 2001 by six initial members: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Currently, there are 10 member states, including the initial members. India and Pakistan were full members in 2017, Iran in 2023, and Belarus in 2024.<sup>1</sup> There are two observer states, Mongolia and Afghanistan, and 14 dialogue partners.<sup>2</sup> The Organization aims to

<sup>1</sup> Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 'SCO Member States', Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, n.d., [https://ecrats.org/en/about/member\\_countries/](https://ecrats.org/en/about/member_countries/).

<sup>2</sup> Ethan Teekah, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization,' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 23 January 2025,

enhance mutual trust, friendship, and good neighborliness amongst the member states, fostering effective cooperation across various fields, including politics, trade, economy, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transport, tourism, and environmental protection. There are additional goals like collaboratively ensuring and maintaining peace, security, and stability in the region and advocating for a new, democratic, fair, and rational international political and economic order.<sup>3</sup>

Recent times have seen the rise of a multipolar world, and within this new norm, China and Russia assert their influence openly, which has started a soft power competition between them and the West. Within this competition, the SCO allows China and Russia, the two leaders within the Organization, to counterbalance Western-led multilateral organizations which are under critique for US/ Western monopoly with no representation from global south in their decision making process. It has thus proven to be a platform where countries from Eurasia have come together and worked on various areas of interest, and it has experienced notable successes since, making significant strides in enhancing collaboration to combat multilateral security threats, increasing energy trade volume, accumulating economic wealth, and expanding its organizational membership.<sup>4</sup>

Pakistan has much to gain from its membership of the SCO, from the prospect of connectivity with the Central Asian Republics (CARs), increasing bilateral and multilateral trade with SCO member states, gaining access to energy sources from the numerous energy producers who are members of SCO, as well as cooperation in the domain of counter-terrorism and broader regional security. Pakistan has long faced economic challenges, which is much needed. This will be easier for Pakistan to do with the CARs since there are pre-existing cultural ties between the populations, and they have the best route for trade via Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

In October 2023, Pakistan first time became Chair of SCO Council of Heads of Government (CHG) and hosted the 23<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the CHG of the SCO member.<sup>6</sup> This allowed Pakistan to further its vision for regional and economic cooperation and simultaneously conduct bilateral meetings with the leaders of the participating states. Pakistan became the chair of the SCO's Council of Heads of Government in October 2023 and will assume chair the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS) from 2025 to 2026; after this, it will be the chair of the SCO Council of Heads of State (CHS) and Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) from 2026 to 2027.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will look at the opportunities that may have been missed while Pakistan was the chair of the CHG. Given its forthcoming positions as the chair of the RATS, SCO CHS, and CFM, what will be the opportunities for Pakistan across various domains like regional connectivity, enhancing trade and commerce, counter-terrorism, and cultural exchange, among others? How can Pakistan

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<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shanghai-Cooperation-Organization>.

<sup>3</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 'General Information on SCO', Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 9 January 2017, <https://eng.sectsco.org/20170109/192193.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Sinem ÜNALDILAR Kocamaz, 'The Rise of New Powers in World Politics: Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', *Uluslararası İlişkiler / International Relations* 16, no. 61 (2019): 127–41.

<sup>5</sup> Mehran Khan and Ferdos Jamal, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Opportunities for Pakistan', *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 8, no. 1 (12 February 2024): 282–94, [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2024\(8-I\)26](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2024(8-I)26).

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Curtain Raiser: 23rd Meeting of the Council of the Heads of Government of the SCO Member States', Government Website, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan, 12 October 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/infocus/23rd-meeting-of-the-council-of-the-heads-of-government-of-the-sco-member-states>.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Pakistan', Government Website, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan, accessed 24 January 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/sco>.

capitalize on these opportunities while learning from past experiences, as it will be holding numerous meetings at various levels while being the chair of the three councils?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theory of *Regionalism and Regional Cooperation* provides a valuable lens through which Pakistan's role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its forthcoming Chairmanship of the SCO Council of Heads of State can be analyzed. This theory emphasizes the collaboration of states within a geographical region to address shared challenges, promote development, and enhance their global standing<sup>8</sup>Pakistan's geographically and diplomatically strategic position enables it to significantly advance these objectives within the SCO framework. By assuming the Chairmanship, Pakistan has the opportunity to foster a sense of regional identity and solidarity among member states. This can be achieved by highlighting shared goals such as economic growth, security, and sustainable development. Pakistan's unique position as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and China places it at the center of efforts to promote greater regional integration and cohesion.

## 3. Missed opportunities during the Council of the Heads of Government Meeting

Pakistan hosted the 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Council of the Heads of Government in October 2024, irrespective of security threats and ongoing political unrest, and this re-established Pakistan as a solid partner. The joint communiqué issued at the conclusion addressed various topics, ranging from climate to cooperation commerce and focused on enhancing regional connectivity. However, the most significant takeaway was the collective opposition to the rising trends of unilateral sanctions, protectionism, and trade restrictions. Member states emphasized that the West's, especially America's, tendency to impose sanctions on nations that do not align with its policies is inconsistent with established international law.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the group reaffirmed its dedication to conducting trade in local currencies and established an SCO Development Bank.

The role of Emerging Technologies was also significantly discussed. The SCO leaders recognize the rapid technological changes occurring in the world and are determined to stay abreast of advancements in Artificial Intelligence, digital commerce, and information technology. Additionally, climate change was a critical topic; SCO leaders firmly advocated for action by endorsing the SCO Green Belt Program and committing to share expertise to combat environmental degradation.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, there is a renewed emphasis on preparedness for natural disasters, with plans to utilize space monitoring and enhance emergency response systems to address this growing challenge.

Along with these positive takeaways from the summit, some opportunities could have been leveraged; for instance, Pakistan could have also invited influential individuals from the business communities of the nations attending the summit. Business delegations normally explore new markets and build international relationships through networking events, meetings with key stakeholders, and site visits; not all of this was possible during the summit, but they could have been given briefings by various government departments, they could have attended the different meetings relating to trade and economic development which were part of the summit. Meetings

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<sup>8</sup> Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Introduction: Theories of New Regionalism', in *Theories of New Regionalism: A Palgrave Reader*, ed. Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy M. Shaw (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2003), 1–21, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403938794\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403938794_1).

<sup>9</sup> Editorial, 'Takeaways from the SCO Summit', *Brecorder*, 18 October 2024, sec. editorials, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40327696>.

<sup>10</sup> Yasir Habib Khan, 'SCO's Key Takeaways', *The Nation*, 25 October 2024, sec. Newspaper, <https://www.nation.com.pk/25-Oct-2024/sco-s-key-takeaways>.

could also have been set in Islamabad with Pakistan's business community and the various Chambers of Commerce to foster relations, which would later lead to economic and trade relations between Pakistan and the various SCO member states.

Another opportunity could have been the invitation of academia, scientists, and researchers from think tanks from the attending states; this would foster networking opportunities and cultural insights with their Pakistani counterparts and give them regional perspectives, enabling researchers to tackle complex issues more effectively within their fields of study. This would be especially beneficial in Artificial Intelligence, information technology, climate change, regional security, and counter-terrorism. Interactions between academia and researchers from different countries enhance knowledge exchange and improve research quality through diverse perspectives and methodologies. Ultimately, such collaborations increase visibility and credibility in the global research community.

#### **4. Opportunities during the Chair of Regional Antiterrorism Structure**

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is a permanent body and key pillar of the SCO. It focuses on combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism at regional and global levels. Its primary role involves establishing an organizational and legal framework to facilitate cooperation among member states' competent authorities, aligning national legislation with SCO conventions, and coordinating practical measures against transnational threats. RATS oversees activities such as joint anti-terrorism exercises, capacity-building for counter-terrorism units, and efforts to counter the misuse of the Internet for extremist purposes.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, SCO RATS cooperates with international and regional organizations, among which there are the UN, Interpol, and CSTO, to further cooperation in counter-terrorism. Every year it organizes joint border operations and scientific conferences to deal with new challenges, share experience and coordinate more effectively. Such multilateral cooperation and practical initiatives have made RATS a very important actor in strengthening regional security and ensuring effective implementation of counterterrorist strategies in the SCO framework.

As previously mentioned, Pakistan will be the chair of the RATS. This will be an opportunity for Pakistan to work closely with the other members of the SCO to lessen the impact of terrorism in the region. As the chair, Pakistan will be hosting the annual meeting of the RATS in 2025. This will allow Pakistan to further the initiatives on intelligence-sharing and capacity-building.<sup>12</sup> Pakistan could also support SCO member countries in security cooperation, drawing on its extensive counter-terrorism experience and collaboration with the RATS mechanism.<sup>13</sup> Pakistan is and has been fighting against transnational terrorist organizations for more than the past two decades; there have been successful operations against groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)<sup>14</sup>, Al-Qaida, East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)<sup>15</sup>, and most recently against Islamic

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<sup>11</sup> Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 'RATS Background and Mission', Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, n.d., <https://ecrats.org/en/about/history/>.

<sup>12</sup> Syed Basim Raza, 'Issue Brief on "Pakistan's SCO Landscape of 2024 : Achievements, Challenges, and Opportunities"', Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 10 December 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-pakistans-sco-landscape-of-2024-achievements-challenges-and-opportunities/>.

<sup>13</sup> The Newspaper's Staff Reporter, 'Pakistan's Role in SCO Entails Important Opportunities: Experts', *DAWN*, 25 February 2024, sec. newspaper, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1816871>.

<sup>14</sup> National Counterterrorism Center, 'FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS - Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)', International Terrorism Guide, 2022, [https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/ttp\\_fto.html](https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/ttp_fto.html).

<sup>15</sup> Mustafa Malik, 'Al-Qaida's War on China; Pakistan's Role and Threat Perception', *Center for Research & Security Studies* (blog), 7 November 2024, <https://crss.pk/al-qaidas-war-on-china-pakistans-role-and-threat->

State-Khorasan Province (ISKP)<sup>16</sup>, among others. The SCO members states especially CARs members view Pakistan as a state with profound experience in countering terrorism in an efficient manner. All of the experiences and expertise it has gained in the fight against terrorism can be shared with the other members of the SCO, and Pakistan can also learn from their respective experiences against terrorism in their own countries. Pakistan can also encourage and host counter-terrorism training and exercises with the other members, where techniques and best practices can be shared between the participants. Such bilateral engagements have occurred between Pakistan and the various SCO members, but they should also be undertaken at a multilateral level from the SCO platform.

These actions are especially true as it is becoming more apparent that Afghanistan is resurging as a haven for different terrorist organizations, with the most concerning one being the ISKP, with the US<sup>17</sup> and UN<sup>18</sup> among other states and international bodies are becoming increasingly more concerned about this. ISKP has carried out terrorist attacks in and against the citizens of various SCO member states<sup>19</sup> and is a group that poses a massive threat to the entire Eurasian region. The attackers in these attacks belonged to different states within the area; no single state could take on and defeat this threat. It will require a regional approach, and RATS is the best platform available to the SCO members.

### 5. Broader Security Cooperation

Regional organizations typically focus on four key areas: preventing and managing conflicts, fostering military cooperation, advancing defense, democracy, or good governance, and addressing unconventional security threats.<sup>20</sup> The SCO and its predecessor, the "Shanghai Five," have significantly reduced the likelihood of conflicts among member states by promoting security sector interaction and introducing institutional mechanisms to tackle regional challenges.<sup>21</sup> The Organization's primary responsibilities include facilitating communication among member states to address terrorism, separatism, and extremism and collaborating with international organizations. This is done not only via the aforementioned RATS but also with broader security collaboration. The SCO strengthens member states' collective security capabilities by undertaking joint military drills and search operations.

For Pakistan, the SCO provides a valuable platform to enhance regional security cooperation, particularly in combating terrorism, extremism, and organized crime. Pakistan's participation in Multinational Military Exercises (MMEs) aligns with its strategic objectives, such as restoring peace in Afghanistan, countering terrorism, addressing India's regional ambitions, strengthening

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perception/.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Palmer and Mackenzie Holtz, 'The Islamic State Threat in Pakistan: Trends and Scenarios' (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 3 August 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-threat-pakistan-trends-and-scenarios>.

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Seldin, 'Afghanistan Reemerging as a Terrorism Incubator', Voice of America, 18 August 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-reemerging-as-a-terrorism-incubator-/7230546.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Besheer, 'UN Sees Rising Threat of IS-Khorasan Attacks Outside Afghanistan', Voice of America, 8 August 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-sees-rising-threat-of-is-khorasan-attacks-outside-afghanistan/7734968.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Noah Tucker and Edward Lemon, 'A "Hotbed" or a Slow, Painful Burn? Explaining Central Asia's Role in Global Terrorism', *CTC Sentinel*, August 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Alyson J. K. Bailes et al., 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization', SIPRI Policy Paper No. 17 (SIPRI, May 2007), <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2007/sipri-policy-papers/shanghai-cooperation-organization>.

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad Ihsan Qadir and Saif ur Rehman, 'Expansion of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Harbinger of Regional Peace and Prosperity', *Journal of Political Studies* 23, no. 01 (30 June 2016): 117–32.



alliances, operationalizing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and ensuring naval security in the Indian Ocean.<sup>22</sup> The SCO's mechanisms, such as intelligence-sharing and counter-terrorism initiatives, can bolster Pakistan's security framework while contributing to broader regional stability. By leveraging the SCO, Pakistan aims to achieve its foreign policy goals and mitigate regional strategic uncertainties.

## **6. Opportunities when Pakistan Chairs the Council of the Heads of State**

The Council of the Heads of State is the SCO's highest authority. It sets the priorities, outlines the key areas of the Organization's activities, makes decisions on fundamental issues regarding the Organization's internal structure and operations, manages its interactions with other states and international organizations, and addresses the most pressing international issues.<sup>23</sup> The Council conducts its regular meetings annually; this meeting of the Heads of State Council is presided over by the head of state responsible for organizing that particular session, which is whatever state is the current chair of the CHS.

Pakistan will be the Chair of the CHS between 2026 and 2027 and thus will be able to host and moderate not only the CHS meeting but numerous other medium—and lower-level meetings of the various organs and sub-organs of the SCO. These meetings and interactions will give Pakistan a unique opportunity to work on issues vital to the region.

Pakistan can promote numerous economic opportunities for its own and collective benefit, including expanding regional trade. Pakistan could advocate for streamlined trade policies and reduced barriers to enhance commerce among SCO member states. Lowering trade barriers and facilitating cross-border trade would also provide Pakistan with substantial opportunities for export-driven growth and enhance Pakistan's access to new markets.<sup>24</sup> Reduced tariffs and streamlined customs procedures are expected to lower trade costs and boost competitiveness, enhancing the effects of greater regional trade.

The energy sector is another area where Pakistan can benefit greatly, as SCO is unique as many of its energy producers have vast quantities of oil and gas. Pakistan has had long-term energy issues<sup>25</sup>, within this one of the key issues is the cost of the fuel which is used for the production of energy, which is primarily imported. The cost of energy imports could be reduced if Pakistan could import from the members of the SCO under a regional energy framework, or by establishing regional pipelines.

Pakistan already has two projects involving Pakistan and the CARs, the 'Central Asia, South Asia 1000' (CASA-1000)<sup>26</sup> electricity transmission line connecting Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI)<sup>27</sup> gas pipeline project, and one project with Iran, the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline<sup>28</sup>. Although work on both projects with the CARs has

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<sup>22</sup> Khan and Jamal, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization'.

<sup>23</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 'The Council of Heads of State', Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2022, <https://eng.sectsc.org/20220907/911928.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Uzma Zia, 'Pakistan's Economic Opportunities in the SCO', *Brecorder*, 23 October 2024, sec. opinion, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40328460>.

<sup>25</sup> Ali Hassan Bangwar, 'Energy Crisis in Pakistan', *The Express Tribune*, 24 March 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2460283/energy-crisis-in-pakistan>.

<sup>26</sup> 'Construction – CASA-1000', CASA-1000, accessed 26 January 2025, <https://www.casa-1000.org/construction/>.

<sup>27</sup> AFP, 'Afghanistan to Begin Work on TAPI Gas Pipeline', *DAWN*, 11 September 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1858339>.

<sup>28</sup> Habib Ullah, 'Iran's Notice on the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline: Challenges and Legal Options for Pakistan', *Institute For • Strategic Studies, Research And Analysis*, accessed 26 January 2025, <https://issra.pk/pub/insight/2024/Iran%27s-Notice-on-The-Iran-Pakistan-Gas-Pipeline-Challenges-and-Legal->

commenced, they have encountered challenges and experienced significant delays over the years due to security concerns. The project with Iran has been stalled because of the threat of American sanctions. Similarly to these projects, others can be started under the ambit of the SCO, as Iran, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have vast oil and gas deposits.

Pakistan can showcase its industrial potential to the other member states to attract investment. In this regard, the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) established under the CPEC can be ideal locations for industrial investments. Thanks to advantageous rules and regulations such as tax incentives, deregulated business operations, and improved benefits for technology transfers and foreign investments, these will act as hubs for trade and business activities. Such large-scale economic operations contribute to increased national growth, enhanced global competitiveness, and more significant innovation.<sup>29</sup> Pakistani industry can also undertake joint ventures and technology transfers to modernize their industries<sup>30</sup>, leading to greater productivity and better products.

The Interbank Consortium was established following the CHG of SCO member states' decision to create a mechanism for financial support and facilitation of investment projects within the economic sphere of SCO member countries. However, these financial mechanisms within SCO countries face significant challenges. These include inadequate information sharing, limited financial integration, and a heavy reliance on the China Development Bank for financial resources. Additionally, informal channels like Hawala and Hundi remain prevalent, highlighting gaps in formal financial systems.<sup>31</sup>

Pakistan's financial integration with SCO member states is at a moderate level, with several notable aspects. Pakistan actively participates in the SCO Interbank Consortium, with Habib Bank Limited (HBL) being a member of the Consortium from Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> Under this initiative, financial institutions such as HBL can facilitate banking services for both domestic and international traders. These activities need to be redoubled, and there should be a greater push for trading to be undertaken in regional currencies, which would reduce the reliance on the US dollar.

Climate change is another area where the members of the SCO can work together. The member states can share their research on climate change, develop joint protocols for combating climate change, and work together to mitigate the effects of climate change in the region. The Council of the CHS instructed the establishment of the Special Working Group on Climate Change during its 23<sup>rd</sup> summit in Pakistan<sup>33</sup>, during the summit proposals were put forth for the cooperation in the field of climate change between the member states. Pakistan is one of the countries which faces the highest level of consequences of climate change. As such, it can be gained from the knowledge

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options-for-Pakistan/Insight.html.

<sup>29</sup> Asad ullah Khan, 'Issue Brief on "Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Pakistan: Lessons from China" | Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad', Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 10 September 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-special-economic-zones-sezs-in-pakistan-lessons-from-china/>.

<sup>30</sup> Zia, 'Pakistan's Economic Opportunities in the SCO'.

<sup>31</sup> Olga G. Lebedinskaya et al., 'The SCO Financial Mechanisms: Risk Analysis and Development Prospects' (External Challenges and Risks for Russia in the Context of the World Community's Transition to Polycentrism: Economics, Finance and Business (ICEFB 2019), Atlantis Press, 2019), 21–24, <https://doi.org/10.2991/icefb-19.2019.6>.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Interbank Consortium of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', VEB.RF, accessed 26 January 2025, <https://xn--90ab5f.xn--p1ai/en/international-multilateral-cooperation/the-interbank-consortium-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>.

<sup>33</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 'Joint Communiqué of the Twenty-Third Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,' Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 16 October 2024, <https://eng.sectsc.org/20241016/1574921.html>.

of the other member states on how they are facing various aspects of climate change and how they are working to mitigate its effects.

As previously stated in the CHG section of the paper, there was a lack of interaction between the business communities of the member countries and that of Pakistan. This should not be the case when the Chair of the CHS comes to Pakistan, as it will be hosting numerous meetings of the Organization's various organs and sub-organs as previously stated. For the meetings related to commerce, trade, economics, and finance, Pakistan can invite the members of the business communities of the member states to promote business-to-business linkages. This will initially help in networking and developing relations, leading to the start of transactions and business between Pakistani businesses and those of the other member states.

Similarly, as previously mentioned, there was no interaction between academics, researchers, scientists, and the think tank communities of the member states, while Pakistan was the chair of the CHG. This should not persist when it assumes the role of the chair of the CHS in 2026. Fields like AI, information technology, climate change, sustainable development, agricultural development, regional security, and counter-terrorism would greatly benefit a candid exchange of ideas. This exchange of ideas would lead to member states trying to jointly solve the issues they face in various fields and develop a regional structure for sharing data and knowledge. It will also help understand each other's member states, leading to cultural exchanges between academics and researchers.

One of the goals of the SCO is to improve connectivity between the numerous member states, which perfectly aligns with one of the goals of CPEC, which is better connectivity between Pakistan and China. It also aligns with what China hopes to achieve with the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project, establishing a global infrastructure and energy network. During the 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Council of CHG, the member states reaffirmed their support for OBOR. They complemented the ongoing work to jointly implement the project and the efforts to link it with the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>34</sup> At the meeting, Pakistan's Prime Minister also called for expanding the OBOR and stated that the focus should be on developing rail, road, and digital infrastructure to enhance regional integration and cooperation.<sup>35</sup> During its tenure as the chair of the CHS, Pakistan should work to enhance regional connectivity and open CPEC to other members of the SCO, especially the landlocked CARs who need connectivity to the global trade routes via the ports of other states in the region. The increased connectivity in the region will lead to increased regional trade, greater energy trade, better cultural and person-to-person exchanges between the member states, and enhanced tourism between the member states, among other benefits.

Pakistan should also focus on increasing cultural ties between the member states during its time as the chair of the CHS. This would be made easier by the development of regional connectivity infrastructure, more frequent trade between the member states, and the sharing of information and knowledge between the academia, universities, and research organizations of the various member states.

## 8. Conclusion

Conclusively, Pakistan's upcoming roles within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from the chairmanship of the CHG to taking over the Chairmanship of the CHS-endow opportunities that

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<sup>34</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

<sup>35</sup> Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, 'China-led Regional Group Calls for Countering Protectionist Policies, Sanctions', *Reuters*, 16 October 2024, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-pm-sharif-calls-expansion-chinas-belt-road-initiative-2024-10-16/>.



will be transformative in furthering national interest and advancing regional cooperation. Through a strong commitment to regional cooperation, Pakistan can position itself as an indispensable player in achieving shared goals such as economic development, security, connectivity, and environmental sustainability by SCO member states. These roles in the past and will in the future allow Pakistan to enhance its diplomatic standing, increase regional integration, and cooperatively work toward pressing regional issues with the rest of the member states of the SCO.

During its chairmanship of RATS and CHS, Pakistan can take specific actions to enhance economic ties within the SCO member states. These include promoting trade in local currencies, developing energy frameworks, and attracting investments in SEZs. Furthermore, the connectivity provided through projects like the CPEC can be expanded to include CARs, thereby boosting regional trade, energy collaboration, and integration. By addressing gaps in financial frameworks, Pakistan can reduce dependence on external currencies and foster economic resilience in the region. The chairmanship also offers opportunities for Pakistan to strengthen multilateral security cooperation through platforms like the RATS. By sharing its extensive counter-terrorism experience, hosting joint exercises, and advocating for collective action against emerging threats such as the resurgence of the ISKP, Pakistan can solidify its role as a key contributor to regional peace and stability. Establishing mechanisms to address unconventional security challenges, such as cybersecurity and border management, further underscores Pakistan's commitment to regional security.

Cultural and academic exchanges are equally critical to strengthening regional ties. By fostering collaborations among academia, researchers, and think tanks in fields such as artificial intelligence, climate change, and counter-terrorism, Pakistan can encourage knowledge sharing and innovation within the SCO. These initiatives are not just about tackling shared challenges, but also about promoting cultural understanding, people-to-people connections, and mutual respect among member states. Moreover, Pakistan should propose a regional Green Belt Initiative under SCO's environmental cooperation framework. It will enable member states to mitigate environmental challenges more effectively. By implementing joint strategies for disaster preparedness, sharing expertise on environmental conservation, and enhancing regional research on climate adaptation, Pakistan can drive progress on one of the most pressing issues of the 21st century. The upcoming roles of Pakistan within the SCO are not just opportunities, but they also carry significant importance. They reflect a golden opportunity to bridge divides, enhance regional solidarity, and chart a path toward collective prosperity. Through strategic initiatives in economic integration, security cooperation, academic exchanges, and environmental sustainability, Pakistan can utilize its leadership positions to strengthen the SCO as a platform for meaningful regional collaboration. These efforts will uplift Pakistan's standing in the international community and contribute to building a more interconnected, stable, and prosperous Eurasian region.

## **9. Recommendations**

Pakistan's advocacy for streamlined trade policies and reduced barriers is not just a strategic move, but a beneficial one. By boosting regional commerce among SCO states, Pakistan can foster stronger economic ties and enhance financial sovereignty. A key aspect of this advocacy should be the promotion of trade in local currencies, which can reduce reliance on the US dollar. Leveraging SEZs under CPEC, Pakistan can attract investments from SCO members while pushing for regional energy projects like TAPI, CASA-1000, and the IP pipelines to address regional energy needs.

Being an experienced state in counterterrorism, Pakistan is in a great position to lead and build

capacity-building alongside intelligence-sharing through RATS and host joint counterterrorism exercises. Extensive experience with groups like ISKP and TTP can guide SCO members in reassuring them about the robust security measures in place. Pakistan should propose intelligence-sharing agreements and counterterrorism frameworks within the SCO to collectively address the resurgence of ISKP and other threats emerging from Afghanistan.

Pakistan's role in promoting regional integration and unlocking economic opportunities is significant. By advocating for enhanced rail, road, and digital infrastructure under OBOR, Pakistan can solidify its position. Similarly, Pakistan must expand the connectivity of CPEC to include CARs, providing these landlocked states access to global trade routes. This expansion will not only benefit Pakistan but also the entire region.

Pakistan can spearhead such endeavors to pool its expertise and information on addressing climate change and sharing it with the SCO countries. Projects undertaken by the SCO in collaboration with a Green Belt and disaster preparedness based on space monitoring could greatly help overcome environmental challenges and boost regional resilience.

To boost financial integration, Pakistan should initiate discussions with CARs to integrate them into CPEC's logistics network, ensuring streamlined customs procedures and transit agreements. This will ensure a stable and secure financial system. By advocating for increased trade in regional currencies, Pakistan can deepen its integration with SCO economies while promoting sustainable financial frameworks.

Pakistan should encourage academics, researchers, and think tanks to exchange each other's experiences in key areas, such as AI, climate change, and security, which can significantly help improve regional collaboration. Hosting cultural events and holding academic forums would enhance people-to-people connections and cultivate mutual understanding among SCO member states, therefore fostering long-term regional solidarity.

Pakistan's tenure as the Chair of the CHS offers a golden opportunity to advocate for greater regional cooperation on connectivity, security, and sustainability. By hosting events that involve business leaders, academics, and researchers, Pakistan can foster partnerships and promote its role as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and China, positioning itself as a pivotal regional player.

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