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Q- Why Pakistan is desperately seeking full-fledged membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Introduction

Pakistan's request for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) - achieved in 2017 - was not merely symbolic but structural. The organisation, founded in 2001 by China, Russia, and Central Asian states, has evolved into a powerful Eurasian bloc representing 40% of the world's population and over 30% of global GDP. As Abdul Sattar in "Pakistan's Foreign Policy 1947-2005" (2011) observes, Pakistan's diplomacy "has consistently sought strategic inclusion rather than isolation." Joining the SCO thus

marked Islamabad's long-term
ambition to reorient its
foreign policy toward continental
integration and post-Western
partnership.

Quest for Strategic Diversification

For decades, Pakistan's foreign
relations were heavily tilted toward
the United States and
Western institutions. However, recurrent
trust deficits - especially after the
War on Terror (2001-2021) -
revealed the fragility of such
dependencies. Maleeha Lodhi in
"Pakistan Beyond the Crisis
State" (2011) notes that
Pakistan's diplomacy required a
"Shift from transactional to
transformational alliances." SCO
membership offered precisely that.

a durable framework for
diversified relations anchored in
Asian multilateralism.

○ Multipolar World Realignment ○

The Rise of China and
Russia, coupled with the decline
of unipolarity, has transformed
Eurasia into the epicentre of
global politics. SCO provides
Pakistan a seat in the
emerging multipolar order, reducing
its vulnerability to unilateral
Western pressure. Zbigniew Brzezinski
in "The Grand Chessboard"
predicted that control over
Eurasia determines control over
world politics; hence, Pakistan's
inclusion in SCO situates it
inside the strategic core of
21st-Century geopolitics.

Unipolar Order

Declines

Reduced US global
dominance

Power Diffusion begins

Eurasian revival
SCO/BRICS expansion
New trade
Corridors emerge.

Pakistan's strategic entry
CPEC as gateway
Geographic centrality
leveraged

Multipolar Balance
Restored
Multiple power Centers
No Single
Hegemon Dominates

Energy and Connectivity Imperatives

Pakistan's energy deficit - peaking at over 6000 MW in 2022 - remains a key constraint to industrial growth. SCO membership connects Islamabad to Central Asian energy suppliers such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Through projects like TAPI gas pipeline and CASA - 1000, Pakistan seeks to integrate itself into a transregional energy grid. SCO's economic and energy frameworks thus align with Pakistan's developmental priorities, offering long-term sustainability beyond IMF-dependency cycles.

Economic and Trade Expansion

Intra-SCO trade accounts for nearly \$ 6 trillion annually, while intra-OIC trade remains below 12% of total volume. This

economic asymmetry underscores why Islamabad values SCO as a growth platform. As Akbar Zaidi

in "Issues in Pakistan's economy" (2010) highlights, Pakistan's economic vulnerability stems from "low

regional integration and export stagnation". By linking CPEC with

SCO corridors, Pakistan aims to position itself as a hub

of Eurasian commerce, bridging China's western provinces with Russia and Central Asia

through its ports.

Geostategic Centrality and Transit leverage.

Pakistan's geography — connecting the Arabian Sea to Central Asia — transforms from liability into leverage under the SCO framework.

Gwadar Port and the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

gain legitimacy as regional assets rather than bilateral ventures.

Anand Lieven in "Pakistan: A Hard Country" (2012) asserts that

"Pakistan's geography is its greatest curse and its greatest opportunity".

SCO converts that opportunity into structured geopolitical capital through shared connectivity projects and coordinated security guarantees.

Security and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

The Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent, provides Pakistan with intelligence-sharing, joint training, and counter-extremism coordination with Russia, China, and Central Asia. This complements Pakistan's internal deradicalisation efforts after Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014-2017). By aligning with the SCO's "three evils" doctrine - terrorism, separatism, extremism - Pakistan integrates its security narrative into Eurasian frameworks rather than Western paradigms that often equate counter-terrorism with coercive aid.

Security Convergence
Shared threat Perception
Common Counter-Terrorism
Goal

Intelligence Cooperation
Joint Monitoring
Real-Time Information
Sharing

Reinforces

Counter-terrorism Success
Disrupted terrorist
networks
Reduced cross-border
attacks.

Regional Stability
Secure borders
Economic development
enabled.

Strategic Autonomy and Diplomatic Balance

SCO membership enables Pakistan to balance India within a neutral framework, avoiding SAARC-style paralysis. Unlike SAARC, SCO's China-Russia dual leadership prevents New-Delhi from monopolizing the agenda. Shamsheed Ahmad in "Pakistan and World Affairs" (2015) stresses that "true strategic autonomy arises when geography meets multilateral diplomacy." Within SCO, Pakistan can articulate its security and economic interests, without supervision or an Indian veto.

Narrative Rebalancing and Global Perception

The western narrative has often

framed Pakistan through terrorism and instability lenses. SCO forums, however, provide narrative sovereignty - a platform where Islamabad presents its case before neutral Eurasian peers. Joint communiques routinely acknowledge Pakistan's sacrifices in the global war on terror, restoring diplomatic parity long denied in Western-led institutions.

= Post - Afghanistan Relevance

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (2021), SCO emerged as the principal regional forum addressing Afghan stability. Pakistan's inclusion allows it to remain a stakeholder in peace-building and border security. Through SCO mechanisms, Islamabad coordinates humanitarian aid and

counter-narcotics initiatives, linking
Afghanistan's stabilization with regional
connectivity.

○ Technological and Educational linkages ○

SCO's University Network and science partnerships allow Pakistan to tap into Russian technology and Chinese innovation ecosystems. In a post-Covid global economy, this cooperation extends beyond trade to knowledge-based development. Pakistan's universities, for instance, now host SCO scholarship programs, marking a shift from Western academic dependence to regional academic integration.

Conclusion

Pakistan's full SCO membership reflects a strategic shift from Western Dependence to deeper Eurasian engagement. It opens new avenues for energy access, economic cooperation, and regional security. The move strengthens Pakistan's Diplomatic autonomy within an emerging multipolar order. As Malecha Lodhi suggests, geography becomes destiny only when diplomacy creates opportunity and through the SCO, Pakistan is doing just that.

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