

SCO Summit in Islamabad: Geopolitics in the Shadow of US-China Rivalry

By Abdul Majeed Bhatti

Under tight security in Islamabad, the 23rd Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit got underway with the usual fanfare. Attended by important powers like China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran and some Central Asian republics, the meeting concluded with the signing of eight documents, covering the organization's budget, the operations of the SCO secretariat, and regional counterterrorism efforts. The highlight was the unanimous endorsement of China as the Chair for the period 2024-2025 and confirmation that Russia will be the next host¹. To the unaware observer the summit appears to underline SCO's ambitions to position itself as a major geopolitical bloc. However, behind the grandiose announcements there is little substance.

What was noticeable was that the organisation failed to adopt a robust stance against the West, especially America and NATO. SCO did not embrace a resolution warning 'Israel' and America of severe retaliatory measures if Iran is attacked. Nor did SCO members extend unstinting support to Russia's war against NATO-backed Ukraine. Perhaps, most disappointing of all was any meaningful cooperation extended to China to counter America's intimidating military buildup in the Pacific Rim. Moscow and Beijing had long hoped that SCO someday would rival NATO² and push back West's "rule-based-order", but they may have to wait for an indefinite period. The lack of unity amongst member states served as a reflection of the deepening rivalries that undercut SCO's capacity to influence regional politics but more significantly weaken China's chances of winning peer competition with the United States to control the world.

China envisages organizations like SCO and BRICs to help it oppose American hegemony in Eurasia. SCO is a vital component of Beijing's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at expanding influence through infrastructure projects across Eurasia. However, for Russia this is problematic. Moscow's views BRI encroaching on its traditional sphere of influence—the Central Asian states. Despite closer ties between Moscow and China—due to aggressive US tactics to employ Ukraine as a bulwark against Russia and America's strenuous efforts to surround China—deep mistrust between the two neighbors rooted in the Boxer Rebellion of 1899 is hard to overcome.

Then there is the more recent Chinese contention with India that spans the Himalaya region, Indian Ocean, the Pacific Rim and space. Away from the big powers, enmity between India and Pakistan has resulted in four wars, border skirmishes between Iran and Pakistan are on the increase and the constant border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan continues to undermine the lofty goals set by SCO. Additionally, the organisation is riven with the balance of power calculus. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan compete to consolidate ties with Russia at the expense of each other. China seeks to shore up Pakistan through CPEC and military weapons,

while India pursues expansion of relations with Iran and Russia to offset Pakistan's danger. To top it all off, the grave trade imbalance between China's behemoth economy and other member states spurs domestic grievances against cheap made in China imports. Subsequently, SCO is riven with security and economic fractures but what threatens to unravel the whole organisation is India's strategic relationship with America and Europe.

Despite China's best efforts, SCO like BRICs is unlikely to pose a significant challenge to US primacy in the region and act as a counterweight to NATO. America's shadow hangs heavy over SCO and through India and Pakistan, the US could further weaken SCO. Therefore, China's aspirations to rid Eurasia of US hegemony have met substantial resistance.

What is most disconcerting, is that out of the ten member states, six are Muslim countries with India and China possessing considerable Muslim populations. Hence, the question arises why are Muslims longing for security and prosperity in an organisation dominated by China and her lesser partner Russia. Both are arch enemies of the ummah. The savage occupation of Afghanistan and the obliteration of Grozny by Russia, and the brutal treatment of Uighurs is an indelible crime that cannot be forgiven or erased our memories. Besides, both powers are unworthy leaders. They could not even muster the collective political resolve to exploit America's global embarrassment and moral catastrophe over Gaza and replace the dilapidated rule-based order.

If Muslims look to their rich history, they will discover that the greatest periods of economic success and security in the SCO region were under Islamic rule. The Rashidun Caliphate, Umayyad Caliphate, the Abbasid Caliphate and later the Seljuk sultanate, and the Timurid sultanate are examples of thriving trade networks, scientific progress, and political stability. These periods of growth under Islamic governance stand in contrast to the modern-day struggles faced by SCO members, many of whom are struggling with political and economic instability, because of their alignment with great powers.

The Muslims of the SCO region must return to Islam for all their solutions, otherwise they will continue to suffer humiliation and ignominy under the subjugation of great powers. Allah (swt) says: ﴿وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ﴾ **“Whoever seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter, he will be among the losers.”** [TMQ: Aal-i Imran: 85]. The only salvation is in the resurrection of Khilafah Rashidah (rightly guided Caliphate) upon the method of the Prophethood.

Reference

[1] Pakistan Tribune, (October 2024). SCO summit: Members sign eight agreements, endorse China as 2024-25 chair. Pakistan Tribune. Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2503156/sco-summit-kicks-off-pm-shehbaz-sharif-delivers-keynote-speech>

[2] USA Institute of Peace, (July 2024). China, Russia See SCO at Counterweight to NATO but India Is Ambivalent, UIP. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/china-russia-see-sco-counterweight-nato-india-ambivalent>