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Internal rifts, external pressures

As China and Russia vie for influence within the SCO, their strategies could either foster cooperation or deepen internal divisions

Pakistan is set to host the Heads of Government (HoG) meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Islamabad on 15-16 October. This is a significant diplomatic event where leaders of SCO member states will gather to discuss regional stability, economic cooperation and the future of the SCO in an increasingly polarised world. For Pakistan, the meeting takes on added significance given the ongoing domestic political and economic crisis that has put into question the credibility of the government to steer the country out of its current problems. A successful SCO summit is therefore seen as crucial for the government to establish its credibility and restore its image at home and abroad.

The SCO was established in Shanghai in June 2001 with five members, including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In recent years, the number of members has increased to nine with the accession of the Kyrgyz Republic, India and Pakistan. Iran is the most recent addition, joining the SCO in 2013, and Belarus is expected to become a full member in the near future.

The SCO Charter, signed at the Council of Heads of States meeting in St. Petersburg in 2002, aims to promote economic collaboration, address security concerns, enhance regional stability and foster socio-cultural linkages among its member states. The SCO has provided an opportunity for Russia and China to increase their influence in the Eurasian region and other neighbouring regions, which may not be seen favourably by the US and some other Western countries.

Plagued by internal divisions

The SCO is more than two decades old but has not made significant progress towards its promised potential due to internal divisions that, so far, seem manageable. The two major players – Russia and China – while

agreeing on the need for a common platform to protect and promote their security and economic interests, seem to be competing for greater influence in the SCO by bringing their allies into the organisation. While Russia supported India, China pushed for Pakistan's membership. Belarus, another close Russian ally, is also likely to become the next permanent member of the SCO, thus increasing Russia's influence in the regional organisation.

Other irritants that could potentially undermine the SCO's future work include the simmering rivalry between India and China, as well as India and Pakistan. India remains weary of China's growing influence in the region. It does not want to be seen to be working closely with China, thereby jeopardising its growing strategic partnership with the US. Similarly, the uneasy relationship between India and Pakistan is another irritant that has the potential to undermine the SCO as a platform for regional cooperation.

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has decided not to attend the SCO summit in Islamabad in person, instead sending his External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. This move may have already dampened the mood among the SCO members. There are concerns that if India remains hesitant to engage with Pakistan and China through the SCO platform, it could make this regional platform redundant or less effective.

In the past, another regional forum – the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an inter-government organisation of South Asian states – failed to make any progress due to India's refusal to participate in a meeting hosted by Pakistan under the SAARC banner in 2016. As a result, despite its potential, SAARC has become an ineffective organisation with no hope of revival. In regard to the SCO, Russia and China may not be pleased with tit-for-tat diplomatic spats between the two key member states, as this would undermine its credibility and send wrong signals to the US and other countries. However, they would not allow the SCO to become another casualty of the India-Pakistan rivalry.

Restoring credibility

The SCO has gained added significance in the wake of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, as the former can use the platform to demonstrate that it is not isolated in the region. It would also help Russia to signal to the outside world that the SCO member countries are willing to work

together to bring stability to the region.

For Pakistan, hosting the SCO meeting at this critical juncture is all the more important given its growing domestic and economic challenges. The government, which has been struggling to establish its legitimacy in the wake of controversial elections held earlier this year, is likely to use the opportunity to restore its credibility and image amongst the public and the international observers. It would also be an opportunity for the country's leadership to build economic linkages and explore alternate sources that could help lessen Pakistan's growing economic challenges.

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In recent years, Pakistan has been advocating its vision of geo-economics, which aims to build trade corridors through Central Asia and to other neighbouring regions. The SCO summit may be an opportunity for Pakistan to make progress on its geo-economic vision, but only if it can overcome its domestic economic woes by first bringing political stability to the country.

The SCO has made little progress since its inception due to several factors, including political rivalries among member states, continued instability in the region, the overbearing influence of extra-regional powers that make it difficult for some members to make independent decisions and the misplaced expectations that the SCO could be a rival security bloc to the US-led security alliances. However, if Russia and China can demonstrate their leadership by creating an environment of cooperation among the member states and providing impetus to regional efforts at economic integration, it could attract more states, and the SCO could eventually emerge as a credible platform for regional cooperation.



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