

India and Pakistan admitted to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Amid growing hostilities between India and its arch-rival Pakistan, the two countries were granted full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) during its two-day annual summit in Kazakhstan last week.

The regional formation, which is dominated by Russia and China, was established to counter US geo-political strategy in Central Asia and the Caspian region. It includes a number of Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

India and Pakistan were not granted membership in 2005 because of differences between Russia and China, the two leading powers in the organisation. Russia pushed for full membership of its decades-long ally, India, while China favoured Pakistan for similar reasons. In recent years, Russia and China have come together in response to Washington's aggressive and confrontational stance and agreed to open the way for India and Pakistan to become full members.

The US has intensified its efforts to integrate India into its military-strategic agenda against China and, under the Modi government, has effectively turned India into a frontline state in Washington's war preparations against Beijing. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has increasingly parroted the US line on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Last August, India agreed to open its bases to the US military.

Pakistan and China have responded to the closer line-up between the US and India by further consolidating their decades-long political, economic and military partnership.

India hopes that its SCO membership will allow it to advance its geo-political ambitions in the broader Asian region and, in particular, secure access to energy-rich Central Asia. "Joining the SCO is a low-cost initiative to increase India's influence in Central Asia,"

Constantino Xavier, a fellow at Carnegie India, recently commented.

By backing Indian membership, Beijing is seeking to expand its own interests in South Asia and weaken US-Indian ties. As Xavier noted: "India joining the SCO could open a precedent for China to claim membership in SAARC [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation], BIMSTEC [Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation], and other regional organisations in South Asia."

Notwithstanding their full SCO membership, there is no sign of any de-escalation of war tensions between India and Pakistan. Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif failed to hold any formal bilateral or sideline talks during the summit. Their only meeting was a brief encounter at the leaders' lounge in the evening before the summit concert and banquet. They reportedly only "exchanged greetings" while Modi inquired about the health of Sharif and his family.

Before the SCO summit, the *Hindustan Times* reported on June 1 that there would be no bilateral meetings. The newspaper quoted an unnamed Indian official, who said: "The Pakistan army is playing a more emphatic role in its India policy. Everything possible is being done to spoil the ties on various fronts. As of now, there are no request from the Pakistan side for any meeting."

Modi's speech to the SCO summit focused on the "fight against terrorism" and declared, "unless we take coordinated and strong efforts, it is not possible to find a solution." While not naming any particular country, his obvious target was Pakistan, which New Delhi constantly accuses of waging a proxy war by supporting anti-Indian Kashmir separatist groups.

While the Indian prime minister said his country fully supported "connectivity" among SCO member

countries, he insisted that “sovereignty and regional integrity must be respected while inclusivity and sustainability are essential.” These remarks were significant, given that just weeks earlier India boycotted China’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) summit, citing a “sovereignty” issue. The \$46 billion China and Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is part of OBOR, passes through Pakistani-held Kashmir which India still claims.

Modi’s reference to “respect for sovereignty” shows that despite its SCO membership, India continues to oppose CPEC and the OBOR project. New Delhi, in line with Washington’s agenda, is concerned that these projects will significantly enhance China’s geopolitical clout in South Asia and Eurasia more generally, and boost Pakistan’s battered economy.

War tensions between the two South Asian countries have dramatically escalated during the past year. Last September, the Indian government ordered its military to launch a “surgical strike” inside Pakistan’s territory. Modi boasted that India’s military actions meant the end of “strategic restraint” vis-à-vis Pakistan. Since then, relations have worsened with exchanges of fire across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian- and Pakistani-held Kashmir. Both sides have issued war threats, including the possible use of nuclear weapons.

On June 11, the *Daily Excelsior* reported that the Indian military launched a major offensive against Pakistan after its army targeted defence locations and civilian areas in three sectors of the border districts of Poonch and Rajouri along the LoC. The newspaper reported that at least nine Pakistani army posts and bunkers were destroyed in retaliatory fire. Pakistan intensified its attacks a day after its army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, visited Muzaffarabad and some forward posts on the LoC.

On June 12, *Geo News*, quoting from Inter Services Public Relations, the Pakistan army’s media wing, reported that two young people were killed and another three injured in artillery attacks by Indian troops along the LoC. Two days earlier, a 70-year-old man was killed in Chirikot by Indian artillery. Pakistan’s ministry of foreign affairs summoned Indian Deputy High Commissioner J.P. Singh and lodged an official protest over the “unprovoked” firing by the Indian troops.

Early this month, the Indian army announced the killing of five Pakistani soldiers and the injuring of another six in a “retaliatory firing.” A Pakistan army spokesman reported that two Pakistani civilians were killed and eight injured by Indian military forces.



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