

Multilaterals and Minilaterals in the Asia-Pacific: A View from Pakistan

By Salma Malik

Pakistan has long sought to manage the differing requirements involved in maintaining good relations with both China and the US.

But as China becomes the driving force in multilateral and minilateral arrangements to address the aspirations of the Global South, Islamabad has begun to contemplate alternatives to a Western-led order in disarray, writes Salma Malik.

THE CHANGING geopolitical environment within the Asia-Pacific region due to heightened tension between the US and China is resulting in new alliances and co-operation arrangements, which are increasingly relevant for the region's security dynamics. The changing strategic environment with regard to multilateral and minilateral arrangements, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the expanded BRICS grouping, requires an evaluation of the role and sustainability of traditional multilateral organizations. While it is not a new concept, the renewed importance of minilateralism is a direct result of the unequal development of power hierarchies, which have necessitated a revision of traditional diplomacy. The minilateral initiatives of the Western powers in the form of the Quad (the US, Australia, Japan and India) and AUKUS (Australia, the UK and the US) are pertinent examples of this phenomenon.

While the increasing strategic rivalry between the US and China constitutes the crux of the changing geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific region, the underlying reality is a host of non-traditional security concerns, ranging from water scarcity, food insecurity, hunger, illiteracy, human trafficking and disaster management to issues pertaining to climate change, environmental degradation, trade disputes and migration pressures. These interconnected challenges, or poly-crises, pose a serious risk of future regional instability, with other regions such as South Asia standing particularly exposed due to its fragile and underdeveloped intra-regional mechanisms for co-operation.

In this essay, I offer Pakistan's perspective on

the core questions regarding China's outlook on multilateral and minilateral entities such as the SCO and BRICS with regard to Asia-Pacific stability. How do Chinese experts expect these groups to evolve by 2035, and what are the implications for understanding China's regional stability preferences and approach to regional order-building? And what consequences might the answers to the above questions have for Asia-Pacific BRICS and SCO members other than China as they develop their capacities and concepts of regional stability?

DEEPER THAN THE OCEANS, TALLER THAN THE HIMALAYAS

Pakistan's relations with China have remained strong and steady over the last 75 years, and they are periodically trumpeted as deeper than the oceans and taller than the Himalayas; there is sometimes talk of an "iron brotherhood" in Beijing. This "all-weather strategic partnership" has been translated into various bilateral socio-economic and infrastructure development programs, of which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the development of the Gwadar deep water port are the most significant.

In addition, joint military ventures, including multi-role elite fighter aircraft such as the JF-17 and J-10C and missile systems, not only provided Pakistan with an edge in the May 2025 conflict with India, but also illustrated the effectiveness of the Chinese defense industry. Pakistan once again found a voice and relevance in the global strategic discourse led by the US. Although wary of past US transactional attitudes, Islamabad also joined US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace and finds itself as a critical peace broker in the US-Iran conflict. Although Beijing remained deliberately reticent, its strategic hedging has not gone unnoticed.

Commenting on the near extinction of South Asia's sole regional institution, the South Asian

Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar gestured toward the need to reimagine regional co-operation in South Asia and its extended neighborhood through a possible "SAARC Plus" forum that would incorporate China and work on the principle of inclusivity. Dar said the region needs a positive spirit of solidarity, mutually beneficial collaborations and shared prosperity. South Asian countries can come together in various groupings on issues of economic and technological co-operation. Such flexible, interest-based coalitions are essential for inclusive growth and sustainable development across the region.

CAN CHINA HELP UNITE SOUTH ASIA?

Giving China a lead role in this proposed regional body would add the clout needed to move the process forward, in Islamabad's view. For Pakistan, the SCO and BRICS are good examples of China not being a passive participant but an architect of an alternative order. The global initiatives launched by China — in addition to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — provide countries in the region with a viable alternative to the traditional Western order, which appears to be breaking down. By engaging through bilateral or multilateral trade ties, Beijing not only opens new avenues for inclusive development and co-operation but also offers a framework for peace and progress that transcends traditional economic boundaries.

Beijing's pitch is that it aims to inject constructive energy into an increasingly volatile world and enhance the responsiveness, adaptability and effectiveness of existing international institutions, especially those in the developing world. This holds a strong appeal for all stakeholders. Rather than undermining the rules-based global order, these initiatives are perceived as reinforcing the principles of the United Nations.

Pakistan's involvement with the SCO and BRICS is a conscious gamble that the multipolar moment will persist long enough, and that multilateral organizations, despite their structure favoring China, can be leveraged by smaller players to pursue their own economic and security interests.

Beijing sees the SCO and BRICS as promising forums within which a new type of international relations can be realized, based on China's own founding principles of non-interference, sovereign equality, multipolarity and inclusive development. For Pakistan, the SCO and BRICS represent a space for strategic interaction and institutional involvement as the country finds itself at a crossroads. On the one hand, Pakistan is building strong bonds of culture, economy and security with China; on the other hand, Pakistan seeks a balance in its relationship with the US, which has seen dramatic fluctuations over many years. In this light, as the Asia-Pacific security order evolves, Pakistan's perception of the SCO and BRICS emerges from its own distinct set of interests and vulnerabilities.

UNDERSTANDING CHINA

China's leadership of the SCO is understood by Pakistan as being built around three key aspects:

- Security co-operation in terms of fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism;
- Economic co-operation centered on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative;
- The espousal of "Asian" values of sovereignty and non-intervention.

In this framework, the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), based out of Tashkent, puts into practice the security agenda; the

SCO Business Council and Interbank Consortium provide an economic structure; and the declarations by various summits lend credence to the discursive structure.

China's role within BRICS, from Islamabad's perspective, has its own set of contrasts. BRICS provides a forum to justify alternative financial and governance structures such as the New Development Bank (NDB), and more recent talk of de-dollarization and payment system alternatives. So far, however, Pakistan's desire to join BRICS is blocked by India and supported by China. Nonetheless, the now-expanded BRICS is seen by Islamabad as a potential alternative to Western financial leverage — with several caveats about institutional maturity and political conditionality within the bloc.

Pakistan endorses in principle the institutional frameworks that China envisages, but it does so with some reservations. Islamabad's endorsement of the SCO's counter-terrorism mandate is tempered by the reality that SCO members — particularly India — have at times weaponized the counter-terrorism discourse against Pakistan itself. The inclusion of India in the SCO in 2017 fundamentally altered the strategic chemistry of the institution from Pakistan's perspective. What was once a grouping where Pakistan could engage China and Central Asia without the shadow of its most consequential rivalry, now requires Islamabad to navigate its India relation-

ship within a multilateral setting that China formally presides over as the institution's anchor.

As regards BRICS, Pakistan's announcement that it will take a stake in the NDB indicates a willingness to explore other financial and diplomatic channels. The NDB's focus on infrastructure financing free of political conditions is appealing for a nation with massive developmental challenges and a history of politically expensive IMF programs. However, Pakistan is well aware that BRICS membership itself would not necessarily mean that there will be access to financing or solidarity between member states. The diversity within BRICS, which includes India, means that the institution cannot act as a purely China-centric institution.

LOOKING FORWARD

There is general consensus in Pakistan's strategic circles about the predictions of Chinese experts who foresee a further expansion of the SCO and BRICS as enhancing the mandate for both bodies to challenge the dominance of Western-led international organizations. Nevertheless, Islamabad's attitude is one of cautious optimism at best. By 2035, Pakistan predicts that the SCO, which it joined in 2017, will evolve into a body with greater security co-operation mechanisms, which could include military training exercises, intelligence-sharing and crisis-management protocols that surpass the existing counter-terrorist framework. Furthermore, it expects the SCO to evolve into a platform with a more prominent economic dimension and greater integration of Central Asian republics into the BRI.

Regarding BRICS, Pakistan's entry into the NDB suggests an intention to explore new avenues when it comes to both finance and diplomacy. Indeed, the lack of political conditionality attached to the NDB's commitment to provide infrastructure finance is an appealing feature

for a country with huge development aspirations and a painful memory of engagement with IMF programs. At the same time, Islamabad understands the limits to its financial gains and diplomatic leverage within BRICS given its heterogeneity and the presence of India among its members. Strategic circles in Pakistan seem to agree with Chinese experts' assessment concerning the expansion, maturation and increased rivalry with existing Western-oriented multilateral organizations from both the SCO and BRICS. However, Islamabad's views on such trends are rather more cautious than positive.

ENHANCED STRATEGIES AND SOME CAUTION

It can be argued that by 2035, the SCO will achieve greater integration in the field of security, including the establishment of joint exercise and crisis response plans based on the RATS agreement. The economic aspect of co-operation within the SCO may see further development as well, since Central Asia will become increasingly integrated into the BRI and digital networks, reducing transaction costs on Eurasia's landmass. The potential for Pakistan is significant, since enhanced economic co-operation within the SCO would give multilateral backing to the CPEC, taking away the bilateral image of Chinese dependency from the corridor and putting it into the context of a known regional economic body.

The logic behind plans to enlarge BRICS even further, as China and Russia desire, is the creation of a club of the Global South, which could become a strong alternative to Western financial domination and that Pakistan would like to formally join. If, by 2035, the NDB manages to increase its loan portfolio and BRICS achieves some success in creating a currency or payments system, Pakistan may benefit. Yet Islamabad recognizes that due to the heterogeneity of BRICS,

the process of deepening the organization's institutions faces serious limitations. For instance, there is a contradiction between India's strategic autonomy policy of balancing BRICS membership against its participation in the Quad and co-operation with the US — that cannot be resolved solely according to China's wishes.

China foresees several evolutionary trajectories for the SCO and BRICS by 2035, ranging from enhanced membership to expanding their geographical reach and influence, particularly into South Asia and the Middle East, to deeper security co-operation, as visible in both the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict and now the support being rendered to Iran in its war against the US and Israel. This security co-operation could include enhanced intelligence sharing and co-ordinated responses to perceived external threats. Moreover, BRICS may assume an even more prominent role in determining future global governance arrangements, pressing for reforms of institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. The inclusion of economic heavyweights in the BRICS grouping may also imply efforts toward developing alternative platforms of economic collaboration.

The Chinese plan for reimagining the regional order by 2035 seems based on the three pillars of multipolarity, economic interdependence and non-intervention. Pakistan views this with approval but also with some reservations. The multipolar approach corresponds well with Pakistan's longstanding policy of trying to balance its relations with two rival superpowers. Nurturing transactional relations tilted in favor of the US, Pakistan's reliance on China has become structural. Thus, a multipolar world with the SCO and BRICS, among others, as its main anchors, should provide Pakistan with more room to maneuver.

Nevertheless, economic interdependence, despite its appealing features, raises questions related to asymmetry. The example of the China-

Pakistan Economic Corridor indicates that while China's massive investments are capable of revolutionizing Pakistan's economy, these are conditioned by sovereign debt obligations, negotiated revenue shares and economic penetration, which is somewhat different from that of Western institutions but resembles it. Without adequate governance mechanisms, SCO and BRICS economic integration could leave smaller countries such as Pakistan to face another kind of structural dependency.

As for the second point, the anti-interventionist principle is precisely where Chinese preferences are closest to Pakistan's interests. In recent decades, Pakistan has experienced significant interventionism in various forms — ranging from drone attacks to diplomatic sanctions and grey-listing by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), all under the pretext of liberal interventionism. It can be said that an Asian regional order based on more rigid sovereignty norms and legitimate multilateral institutions is desirable for Islamabad.

Pakistan has mitigated this problem by sustaining its institutional voice where possible. The question of stability in Afghanistan, for example, has repeatedly emerged in discussions at SCO summits, couched in the language of SCO objectives, but representing distinctly Pakistani concerns. Yet on issues where Pakistan's priorities differ from China's — primarily in dealing with India's activities in occupied Kashmir — Islamabad has struggled with the SCO's consensus decision-making as an effective means of addressing its fundamental security needs.

The costs and benefits of a more developed SCO and BRICS framework by 2035 can be evaluated in relation to four different areas. From a financial perspective, formally joining BRICS would be a potentially positive step for Pakistan. In particular, the NDB's expanded operations in areas of social connectivity — health, education, cities — may provide an alternative source of

development finance that is more politically sustainable than repeated IMF programs. Even limited success in de-dollarizing the international financial system might alleviate Pakistan's perennial foreign exchange difficulties. Yet such a process requires significant institutional development, which seems unlikely over the next decade.

In conclusion, Pakistan's involvement with the SCO and BRICS is a conscious gamble that the multipolar moment will persist long enough, and that multilateral organizations, despite their structure favoring China, can be leveraged by smaller players to pursue their own economic and security interests. While the multilateral

system of governance provided by the SCO and BRICS is a double-edged sword for Pakistan, the pursuit of the opportunities afforded by it while protecting national sovereignty will prove to be one of the central tasks for Islamabad in its foreign policy up to 2035. In a region where both the US and China are simultaneously indispensable and unreliable partners, the multilateral middle ground is not merely a diplomatic preference for Islamabad: It is a strategic necessity.

Salma Malik is an Associate Professor in the Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Would you like to know the opinion in Korea?

"The Morning Peace" published by the Koreapeaceforum will satisfy you

"The Morning Peace" selects and provides columns and press reports which cover unification, South-North relations and Korean peninsula's peace issues in most reasonable and balanced viewpoints in Korea.

If you send your email address to us, we will provide you with regular newsletters.

Subscribe our newsletter by sending email to:
Koreapeaceforum@gmail.com

Introduction to the Korea Peace Forum

"The reunification 'Dream Team' that seeks reconciliation for the two Koreas"

This organization is comprised of former officials from the Ministry of National Unification and diplomats who have planned and executed the engagement policy towards North Korea, scholars who constructed the theoretical foundation for the engagement policy, civil society members who have worked on the ground to lead exchanges between the two Koreas seeking inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation in all fields.