

OPTIMIZING SCO-RATS COOPERATION FOR COUNTERTERRORISM IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The SCO's primary purpose is to address the 'three evil forces—terrorism, separatism, and extremism. These remain the principal concerns of the Organization's leaders, who strive to promote socio-economic development through enhanced connectivity and maintain internal peace and security by collectively combating the menace of terrorism. In this context, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) under the SCO is highly beneficial for member states in addressing the threat of transnational terrorism. Pakistan cannot combat the menace of transnational terrorist syndicates alone. Therefore, it needs the assistance of like-minded states, especially SCO members, to enhance the efficacy of its counterterrorism strategy. It raises three interlinked questions. What is the SCO counterterrorism mechanism? Why have terrorist groups' activities increased since the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan? How is Pakistan Optimizing SCO Cooperation for Counterterrorism in Pakistan?

Keywords: SCO-RATS, Counterterrorism, Pakistan, Cooperation, Operations, Security.

Introduction

The fast-changing global geopolitical environment has increased the relevance of regional organizations in maintaining peace and security. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has gradually become an important platform for Eurasian countries, mainly focusing on non-traditional security challenges. Although it avoids direct involvement in bilateral disputes, it provides a forum for informal discussions of such matters during summits. Over the past two decades, member states have used the SCO to expand economic and trade ties through

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joint projects and agreements. At the same time, they have worked on building mechanisms to deal with transnational threats such as terrorism, cyberattacks, illegal migration, drug trafficking, and cross-border crime.

The SCO's core aim remains confronting the "three evil forces" (terrorism, separatism, and extremism). These remain priority concerns for its leaders, who want to promote socio-economic progress through improved connectivity while maintaining peace and stability through collective action against terrorism. In this context, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) plays a very useful role for member states in countering transnational terrorism. Member countries can benefit by sharing best practices, exchanging intelligence, and working together to prevent and dismantle terrorist networks.

Since the US-led NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, terrorist incidents have risen sharply in Pakistan. Foreign-sponsored groups are attacking law enforcement personnel, kidnapping and killing civilians, and targeting foreigners (especially Chinese workers) to discourage investment. As a result, Pakistan faces serious threats to its internal security, relations with neighbours, and economic development.

The international community's increasing engagement with the de-facto Taliban government in Afghanistan, despite its failure to dismantle transnational terrorist sanctuaries in the country, has boosted Taliban leadership's confidence and negatively affected bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In October 2024, Russia removed the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations to counter the threat from the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), which had earlier claimed responsibility for the March 22, 2024, attack on Crocus City Hall near Moscow.¹ Washington is cautious of Beijing's growing influence in Afghanistan, and the Trump administration has also increased its engagement with the Taliban government.

Pakistan is deeply concerned over the Taliban's reluctance to act against sanctuaries of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch militant groups in Afghanistan, as well as growing cooperation between Kabul and New Delhi. For the past two years, Islamabad has repeatedly asked Kabul to stop harbouring "terrorists" who carry out attacks inside Pakistan. Pakistan, in response, launched "Vision Azm-e-Istehkam" to "integrate and synergize multiple lines of effort to combat the menaces of extremism and terrorism comprehensively and decisively"

on June 22, 2024.² One of its essential features is combating the menace of transnational terrorism through diplomatic means, particularly through closer coordination with SCO-RATS to cut off external financial and material support to groups such as TTP, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and Daish (ISKP).

On July 4, 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif drew the attention of SCO participants to terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan. He intelligently used the SCO summit opportunity to apprise and sensitize member states about the increasing challenges posed by transnational terrorist syndicates in the region. He solicited their support to coordinate with SCO-RATS and terminate the foreign financial and material backing extended to terrorist groups involved in attacks inside Pakistan.³

Pakistan cannot combat the menace of transnational terrorist syndicates alone. Therefore, it needs the assistance of like-minded states, especially SCO members, to enhance the efficacy of its counterterrorism strategy. This raises three interlinked questions. What is the SCO counterterrorism mechanism? Why have terrorist groups' activities increased since the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan? How is Pakistan optimizing SCO cooperation for counterterrorism? To answer these questions, the following discussion is divided into five sections. The first section provides a precise explanation of the evolution of the SCO. The second describes its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. The third discusses the contemporary landscape of terrorism in Pakistan. The fourth section debates Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy. The fifth section explores the means to enhance Pakistan's cooperation and coordination with RATS within the broader framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was founded in Shanghai on 15 June 2001 by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It is a Eurasian mutual-security grouping whose founding charter drew on a distinct regional political philosophy of "Shanghai Spirit".⁴ The SCO Secretariat, headquartered in Beijing, is overseen by a Secretary General who serves a three-year term, while the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) operates with its staff based in Tashkent.⁵ Decision-making within the SCO follows a consensus-based model, which facilitates member states in harmonizing their policies by rising above bilateral differences. This arrangement also allows

even belligerent neighbours to deliberate on contentious issues during sideline leaders' meetings.

The SCO enables its members to publicize their concerns both regionally and globally. It reveals the increasing acceptability of China's role in Eurasia. On July 1, 2024, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson opined that China believes that the SCO summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, "will help build more consensus, open up a new chapter of cooperation, and contribute to the security, stability, development, and prosperity of all countries and to building a community with a shared future for mankind."⁶ While addressing the Astana Summit, President Xi said, "We should join hands to resist external interference, firmly support each other, take care of each other's concerns ... and firmly control the future and destiny of our countries and regional peace and development in our own hands."⁷ Furthermore, Russia has a decisive role in the affairs of the SCO. Though China has expanded its economic influence across Central Asia, Russia strives to maintain the forum's balance of members in its favor. President Vladimir Putin views the forum as significant because it demonstrates that Russia still maintains regional influence and is not isolated in global geopolitics. Belarus's becoming a full member of the SCO would be favorable for the Kremlin. Indeed, Russia and China cooperate rather than compete, sharing common interests in stable Central Asian regimes. During the SCO Astana Summit, President Xi and President Putin opined that global power centers are changing, and a multipolar world is on the horizon. They portrayed the China-Russia relationship as a stabilizing force in times of chaos. President Putin said, "The multipolar world has become a reality." He added, "The circle of states that stand for a just world order and are ready to defend their legitimate rights and protect traditional values resolutely is expanding. New centers of power and economic growth are strengthening."⁸

Since 2017, Pakistan has actively participated in the SCO's activities. Islamabad hosted the 23rd meeting of the Council of the Heads of Government (CHG) in October 2024. Islamabad appears determined to implement the CHG decisions after assuming the rotational Chair of the SCO Council of Heads of State (CHS), the Organization's second-highest decision-making body, and the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) in 2026-27.

SCO-Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure

The SCO provides a platform for member states to develop joint strategies against transnational threats from terrorist and criminal networks. From the

beginning, SCO countries have emphasized collective action against terrorism. In 2003, they established the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. RATS works to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism at both regional and international levels.⁹ The key five functions of RATS are the following:

- **Information Sharing:** Facilitating the sharing of intelligence and information related to terrorism and extremism among member states.
- **Counterterrorism Cooperation:** Strengthening the capacity of member states to respond effectively to terrorist threats.
- **Joint Exercises:** Conducting joint military exercises and training programs to enhance the operational capabilities of security forces.
- **Legal Framework:** Developing a legal framework for the extradition and prosecution of terrorists across borders.
- **Counter-Radicalization:** Collaborating on strategies to counter radicalization and prevent the spread of extremist ideologies.

The RATS, with its collaborative approach, is responsible for coordinating nonmilitary actions to address common sub-state security threats of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Therefore, it was designed to develop a 'single approach for SCO states in the fight against terrorism and other problems of modern society. In 2006, the RATS identified 14 terrorist organizations "as directly threatening the security of the region, including the Taliban, the Islamic Party of Turkmenistan, and the Hizb-ut Tahrir."¹⁰ After the U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan, the terrorist groups that are operating in the Eurasian heartland have created sanctuaries in Afghanistan. To address transnational terrorist groups operating in Eurasia, it collaborates with international and regional organizations, including the United Nations, Interpol, and CSTO, to expand cooperation on counterterrorism.¹¹ This collaborative effort ensures that all SCO states are included in the global counterterrorism efforts. It organizes annual joint border operations and scientific conferences to address emerging threats, share expertise, and strengthen coordination. For instance, a delegation of the SCO RATS Executive Committee took part in the international conference on national and regional counterterrorism strategies, held by the UN Security Council Counterterrorism Committee Executive Directorate jointly with the Government of Malta from March 12 to 13, 2025, in Valletta (Malta).¹² RATS has become

instrumental in enhancing regional security and ensuring the effective implementation of counterterrorism strategies within the SCO framework.

Terrorism Landscape in Pakistan

Terrorism, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, poses serious challenges to Pakistan. According to the Pakistan Security Report 2024, Pakistan witnessed 521 terrorist attacks in 2024, representing a 70% increase compared to 2023. These attacks claimed 852 lives, a rise of 23% over the previous year's terrorism-related fatalities, while another 1,092 people were injured.¹³ Despite these alarming figures, the report also highlights the collective resolve of the Pakistani people against terrorism. To address the challenge, the government has adopted both military and non-military strategies. However, terrorist violence continued to escalate throughout 2024.

Afghanistan Sanctuary

The Taliban's persistent unwillingness to act against TTP poses a serious existential security threat to Pakistan. The group's operational strength is estimated at 6,000 to 6,500 fighters, equipped with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) calibre weapons, including night-vision devices obtained in Afghanistan, which are used to target Pakistani military border posts.¹⁴

A clearer picture of the Taliban's complicity emerged in July 2024, when the UN Security Council's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team reported that the Taliban do not conceive of TTP as a terrorist organisation. According to the report, the bonds between the two groups are close, and the debt owed to TTP is significant. The Taliban have permitted Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) to provide training and funding to TTP, enabling the group to purchase weapons and suicide vests. As the Monitoring Team noted, "TTP camps with Al-Qaida and Taliban involvement focus on training local Afghan fighters and TTP operatives. Several Member States report that the Al-Qaida figure Abu Ikhlas-al Masri is actively collaborating with Jamaat-ul-Ahrar in providing suicide bomber training to TTP in Kunar Province."¹⁵ The same report warned of a more dangerous trajectory ahead, observing that "There is increased support and collaboration between TTP, the Taliban, and Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), sharing human resources and training camps in Afghanistan and conducting more lethal attacks under the banner of Tehrik-e Jihad Pakistan (TJP). Therefore, TTP could transform into an umbrella organization for other terrorist groups.

Balochistan Conundrum

The Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS) is an umbrella militant organisation for the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG), and the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) under a single command structure. It was reorganised in March 2025, by establishing Baloch National Army (BNA), for coordinated and technologically enabled attacks against Pakistan. BRAS's primary objective remains the disruption of CPEC projects in Balochistan.

The BLA has developed a tactical pattern for their militant activities. It has repeatedly segregated hostages along ethnic lines and selectively killed Punjabi passengers, a method seemingly designed to ignite ethnic conflict within the province. Several recent incidents illustrate the pattern. The armed men offloaded passengers from buses, vans, and trucks. They shot 23 Punjabis after checking their identities on a highway connecting Punjab with Balochistan in the Musakhail district of the province in August 2024.¹⁶ On May 9, 2024, seven laborers hailing from Punjab were killed in the coastal town of Sarba-ndan, around 25km east of Gwadar. On April 13, 2024, nine passengers traveling on a Taftan-bound bus were killed in Noshki on the Quetta-Taftan N-40 Highway.¹⁷ Contrarily, Balochs do not experience any hatred in Punjab.¹⁸

The BLA's tactical reach was demonstrated most dramatically on March 11, 2025. It attacked a passenger train 32 km (20 miles) away from Sibbi City, near a tunnel in the Bolan Pass, by using an improvised explosive device. Pakistan responded and, "by midday on March 12, Zarrar Company had completed its situational assessment. Tracking BLA communications revealed potential suicide bombers were stationed near the hostages. They were eliminated first, after which the troops entered the train". 354 passengers were evacuated, and 33 BLA terrorists were killed, and 26 security officials and passengers had already embraced martyrdom before the troops could secure the train.

The hijacking of an entire train in Balochistan manifests that "years of kinetic operations, intelligence gathering, and counteroffensives have been unable to bring the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) to heel."¹⁹ The security experts opined that "Balochistan is being destabilized as vast swathes of land in the province and its strategically important coastline, where China is making investments as a vital element of its Belt & Road Initiative, are being fought over by foreign powers, from

India to a 'brotherly' Gulf State to even the U.S. — all those united in wanting to contain China.”²⁰ The ISPR signaled a revamp of its Balochistan kinetic strategy.

Targeting Chinese

Chinese nationals working in Pakistan have emerged as a particularly visible target of militants. According to the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), 20 Chinese citizens had been killed and 34 others injured in 14 separate terrorist attacks in the country since 2021.²¹ The police First Information Report (FIR) subsequently revealed that the suicide attack had been engineered by BLA commander Bashir Ahmed alias Bashir Zeb, alongside Abdul Rehman alias Rehman Gul and other associates.²² All these attacks are aimed at scuttling the progress of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, which remain imperative for Pakistan's economic progress and sustainability.

India's Involvement

India rejected the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and was determined to obstruct the initiative's flagship project, CPEC. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's absence from the 2024 SCO Summit indicates India's dwindling interest in the Eurasian Organization. In 2023, India, as the chair, organized a virtual Summit that revealed its inclination towards the West at the expense of the SCO's connotation. India sponsors terrorism against Pakistan through Afghanistan to undermine the internal security of the country and spoil CPEC projects. After the US military's withdrawal in August 2021, India lost a friendly government in Afghanistan. However, India has quietly reestablished and elevated ties with the Taliban. In June 2022, New Delhi sent a technical team tasked with facilitating the distribution of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people to reestablish its diplomatic presence in the country.

In November 2024, the Taliban appointed Ikramuddin Kamil as an acting diplomatic representative in the Afghan Consulate in Mumbai. In January 2025, India's Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, and the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, had a bilateral discussion. Taliban said: "In line with Afghanistan's balanced and economy-focused foreign policy, the Islamic Emirate aims to strengthen political and economic ties with India as a significant regional and economic partner." ²³ The continuous financial and material support of the Indian intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to the anti-Pakistan armed groups in Afghanistan has transformed them into a very lethal, potent militant force. On March 14, 2025, Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfaraz

Bugti “We’re in an intelligence-driven war waged against the state of Pakistan by RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) and other hostile agencies through Afghanistan, especially because Afghan soil is being used against us.”²⁴

Pakistan Counterterrorism Strategy

Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy, a multifaceted approach, is in urgent need of revamping. The rapidly transforming internal and external strategic environment demands immediate action. The deteriorating law and order situation in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly the Jaffar Express hijacking on March 11, 2025, underscores the necessity for the state to overhaul its conventional approaches to combat terrorism. The Baloch terrorist groups and the TTP's campaign of terror are posing existential threats to the nation and the country's integrity. It is of utmost importance that the 14 points of the revised National Action Plan (NAP) be executed in letter and spirit to eradicate the menace of terrorism from Pakistan. The NAP was constituted in 2014 after the APS Peshawar atrocity.²⁵ It was revised in 2021, stressing the kinetic and non-kinetic domains of the counterterrorism blueprint.

Kinetic Domain

- Intolerance for Militancy – No Militant/Armed/Identified Criminal Gangs to be Allowed to Operate
- Action Against Spread of Terrorism Through Media (Electronic, Print & Social Media) Communication & Cyber networks
- Taking Effective Measures Against Religious / Sectarian Persecution & Terrorism
- Choking of Terror Financing & Proscribed Organizations
- Curb Increasing Trends of Illegal Spectrum (Narco, Weapons & Human Trafficking)

Non-Kinetic Domain

- Follow up of Counter Terrorism (CT) cases in Courts to a conclusive end
- Capacity Building / Strengthening of CTDs
- Formulation, Institutionalization & Implementation of CVE Policy

- Regulation & Registration of Religious Seminaries / Madaris
- Balochistan Reconciliation Process
- Merged Areas of KP Reforms (NFC, Capacity Building of LEAs, LG Elections & Land Reforms)
- Reforms in the Criminal Justice System (CJS)
- Legislative / Legal Oversight for Espionage / Subversion
- Repatriation of Afghan Refugees and dealing with their issues.²⁶

The non-kinetic aspects of NAP are significant in establishing and maintaining lasting peace in the country's troubled areas. Islamabad has tried to make reconciliatory gestures towards TTP to end terrorism in the country. In 2021, former Prime Minister Imran Khan offered a general pardon to the TTP, provided that the banned group had laid down weapons. It relocated at least 5,000 TTP fighters and their families, totaling around 35,000 people in the country. Unfortunately, the plan miserably failed because TTP viewed it as a weakness of the government. Realistically, the non-kinetic approach has proven counterproductive in dealing with the Baloch terrorist groups and TTP during recent years. The two leading causes of the failure of non-kinetic measures were the mediocre reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction reforms in the affected districts of Balochistan and erstwhile Federal Administrative Tribal Areas (FATA), which merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Consequently, the social, economic, and political initiatives in the militancy-hit parts of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, led by the civilian administration to win the hearts and minds of the locals, have been compromised. Secondly, Afghanistan and India's continuous gigantic financial and material support sustains the armed group's warfighting potential. The continuous terrorist attacks hinder the reconstruction, rehabilitation, and development initiatives of the states. Restoring the state's writ in ineffective areas is impossible without curtailing its warfighting ability and capability. The writ of the government's credibility is a prerequisite for effectively implementing the multidimensional non-kinetic measures. The policy should be crystal clear that there is no compromise on Pakistan's territorial integrity and the supremacy of the Constitution. Thus, it is imperative to operationalize the kinetic aspects of NAP unconditionally to neutralize all armed groups that challenge the state's authority, thereby making the local security environment conducive to reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. A clear and comprehensive policy is essential to achieve this goal.

Islamabad has devised a two-pronged strategy: diplomatic engagement and targeted surgical strikes on the TTP safe hideouts inside Afghanistan. It has also approached the Afghan Taliban regime diplomatically. On December 24, 2024, Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq, met with Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mutaqqi and Interim Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in Kabul. Both sides agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation and work together for regional peace and progress.²⁷ However, the urgency of the situation cannot be overstated. Realistically, the Taliban government seems unprepared for regional peace. This unfriendly attitude of the Taliban government has multiplied mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul. Prime Minister Shehbaz has linked improved relations with Afghanistan to Kabul's efforts to rein in the TTP. While addressing the cabinet on December 27, 2024, he said, "We have conveyed to the Afghan government that we desire good ties with them, but TTP should be stopped from killing our innocent people. This is a red line. TTP operating from there against Pakistan is unacceptable."²⁸

On March 14, 2025, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director General Lt Gen Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry reported the successful operations of our law enforcement agencies. They conducted 59,775 major and minor intelligence-based operations in 2024 and have already carried out 11,654 IBOs in 2025. These operations led to the neutralization of around 1,250 terrorists in 2024 and 2025. Still, unfortunately, 563 of our brave security personnel, who served with utmost courage and dedication, were martyred in the line of duty.²⁹

One of its essential features is cooperation with like-minded states to combat the menace of terrorism. Pakistani authorities apprehended Daesh-K terrorist Mohammad Sharifullah, also known as Jafar, and later extradited him to the United States. He was involved in the 2021 suicide bombing at Kabul's Abbey Gate during the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan, causing over 170 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members to be killed. On March 7, 2025, U.S. State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said, "We extend our gratitude to the Government of Pakistan for their partnership in bringing Mohammad Sharifullah to justice."³⁰ It underscores the ongoing US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation.

Pakistan and RATS

Pakistan has actively participated in the RATS event, as countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism aligns closely with Pakistan's own national

interests. The framework has enhanced law enforcement agencies' operational effectiveness by enabling them to learn new tactics, share cyber intelligence, and conduct forensic investigations. Pakistan hosted several joint anti-terrorism exercises. "PABBI-ANTITERROR-2021" is a case in point.³¹

The RATS framework also promotes legal cooperation among member states, including counterterrorism laws, extradition processes, and effective prosecution. Therefore, Pakistan is undertaking judicial reforms in this direction. Special anti-terrorism courts, for instance, have been established to expedite the prosecution of terrorism-related offences.³²

Pakistan, as the chair of the SCO Council of Regional Anti-terrorism Structure (CRATS), has pushed for a unified regional front against terrorism, extremism, and separatism. As CRATS chair for 2025–26, Pakistan has a unique opportunity to work closely with fellow SCO members to reduce the regional impact of terrorism and to combat the menace of terrorism within its own borders.³³

RATS also provides real-time access to critical intelligence on terrorist activities, networks, and funding sources. "This collaborative intelligence framework can enhance Pakistan's ability to pre-empt and prevent terrorist attacks by disrupting plots at an early stage. Moreover, intelligence sharing can help Pakistan identify cross-border threats and coordinate operations with neighboring countries, particularly Afghanistan, which has a direct impact on Pakistan's security dynamics."³⁴

Conclusion

The SCO's RATS framework enables Pakistan to enhance its counterterrorism capabilities through cooperation with SCO members. It can strengthen counterterrorism operations by leveraging intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, legal cooperation, and financial tracking. Since Pakistan has successfully conducted operations against TTP, Al-Qaeda, ETIM, and ISKP, the hard-won lessons enable Pakistan to host counterterrorism training programmes for fellow members. Admittedly, kinetic operations are important, but they alone cannot ensure sustainable security and prosperity. An innovative, inclusive approach is required to effectively address the menace of terrorism. Proactive intelligence-driven security should be the guiding principle for kinetic measures. Besides, non-kinetic measures are also necessary so that people feel represented

rather than being subjugated. Therefore, it is crucial that Pakistan broaden the definition of counterterrorism and adopt a dynamic, forward-thinking approach. Indeed, the SCO-RATS framework will help Pakistan in this regard.

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