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Goa Story: A multilateral belligerent India

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By

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1. Introduction:

On 4-5 May at the sea-side Taj Exotica Resort in Goa's Benallium beach, foreign ministers of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) met for finalizing the deliberations of an upcoming Heads of State Council (HSC), its supreme decision-making body, meeting in July, 2023. The agenda on the table included discussion on issues of regional security, economic cooperation and connectivity as well as SCO's stance on global economic and political developments.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization is mainly a Eurasian political, economic and defense organization, comprising of eight permanent members namely Pakistan, China, Russia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In addition to the eight member states and four observers, Mongolia, Iran, Afghanistan and Belarus, the SCO currently has 9 dialogue partners and 4 guest attendance entries. It is expanding its ambit to almost 60% of the area of Eurasia and 40% of the world population. It has almost reached the 35% of world GDP. It was first convened in 1996 by China, with bordering Central Asian states and Russia, as the Shanghai Five to discuss security issues. By the membership of Pakistan and India into the SCO in 2017, it has become more of a forum for world connectivity which is essential for the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By extending its membership to Iran and Belarus in the upcoming Heads of State Council meeting, it would become the largest informal and regional organization in the world by any extent, surpassing many formal organizations like NATO and European Union. In order for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to achieve remarkable success, it is absolutely crucial for all member states to wholeheartedly embrace and adhere to the SCO Charter, the Shanghai Spirit, and the fundamental principles of international diplomacy. However, regrettably, during the recent Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM)

meeting hosted by India in the enchanting city of Goa, it appeared that India has overlooked these imperative guidelines.

Among much speculation, Pakistan's foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari decided to go to India, after almost 12 years lapse of any Pakistani foreign minister's visit to India, to attend the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers. "On my way to Goa, India. Will be leading the Pakistan delegation at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization CFM. My decision to attend this meeting illustrates Pakistan's strong commitment to the charter of SCO," he said before leaving for India.

2. No Bilateral Talks with India:

Bilawal Bhutto categorically stated that, "During my visit, which is focused exclusively on the SCO, I look forward to constructive discussions with my counterparts from friendly countries." The statement ruled out any possibility of bilateral talks with India along the sidelines of SCO CFM meeting. India being the current president and host of SCO CFM and upcoming HSC meeting at the same venue, however, displayed a belligerent and antagonistic behavior criticizing and condemning Pakistan and using the multilateral forum for its political point-scoring and geopolitical chauvinism. New Delhi held Pakistan culpable for the recent attack on an Army truck in the Poonch district of Jammu in which five soldiers of Rastriya Rifles were killed.

3. Discourteous, Duplicitous and Disdainful behaviour by Host:

During the deliberations of the SCO foreign ministers' meeting in Goa, Jaishankar while addressing a press conference remarked, "As a Foreign Minister of an SCO member state, Mr. Bhutto Zardari was treated accordingly. As a promoter, justifier and spokesperson of a terrorism industry which is the mainstay of Pakistan, his positions were called out and countered including at the SCO meeting itself".

Anticipating this new diplomatic tool of India, in his earlier address at the meeting, Bilawal Bhutto had called for comprehensive and collective approach for eradicating the menace of terrorism and advised, "Let's not get caught up in weaponizing terrorism for diplomatic scoring... The collective security of our people is our joint responsibility." Hinting about the ongoing fascism and historical revisionist policies of Narendra Modi, Bilawal condemned the willful provocations and incitement to hate and called for collective fight against fascism and historical revisionism that is leading to violent nationalism.

Similarly, he also highlighted the duplicitous behaviour of India when it comes to the question of Kashmir. On a question of unilaterally abrogating the Article 370, Jaishankar said, "...wake up and smell the coffee. 370 is history. The sooner people realize it, the better it is." Regarding this deplorable and haughty attitude, Mr. Bilawal Bhutto

emphasized that unilateral and illegal measures in violation of international law and the UN Security Council Resolutions also ran counter to the SCO objectives.

He also categorically highlighted the, disdainful and insolent behaviour of India in gross violation of the commitments made to the people of Kashmir to have the right of self-determination through conduct of a free and fair plebiscite as enshrined in the successive resolutions of United Nations. The deplorably arrogant response of the Indian FM to a question about Kashmir was: “There is only one issue to discuss on Kashmir, it's Pakistan Occupied Kashmir”. This attitude and negation of the UN resolutions in itself speaks of India's blatant violation of the Shanghai Spirit- mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and striving for joint development and the SCO Charter.

4. Disregard for the SCO Charter, Shanghai Spirit and Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation:

According to the SCO Charter, “The member states are committed to avoiding bloc, ideological or confrontational approaches to dealing with issues of international and regional development.” “The member states stand for respecting the right of nations to... sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of states, equality, mutual benefit, non-interference in internal affairs, and non-use of force or threat of force serve as the foundation for the sustainable development of international relations. They reaffirm their commitment to the peaceful settlement of conflicts and disputes among states based on dialogue and consultations.”

Further this undiplomatic and unfriendly attitude toward the member state is also counterproductive to the Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the SCO Member States. The 2022 Heads of State Council meeting of the SCO in Samarkand approved the Comprehensive Plan for its implementation for 2023-2027. The document underscores that “The member states will further step up the SCO's participation in efforts to ensure peace and security, advocating the settlement of international and regional conflicts exclusively by peaceful political and diplomatic means in order to strengthen relations between the member states so that the friendship of their peoples is passed on from generation to generation.”

It was, as such, a smart and tactical move on part of Pakistan to participate in the CFM meeting. On the one hand, it prevented India to launch a vicious propaganda in the SCO against Pakistan and on the other, it provided opportunity to the country to rebut blatant lies unleashed by India for the sake of domestic and international political machinations.

Against this backdrop, a range of policy options are suggested for Pakistan's policy makers to consider and pursue particularly at the upcoming Heads of State Council meeting scheduled for July 2023.

5. Policy Options for Pakistan:

- i. **International Pressure:** Kashmir is the thorny bush that guards the path to greatness in any multilateral platform of which India is the participant. Pakistan can leverage its presence at the SCO summit to mobilize international support for the Kashmir cause. It can seek endorsements from other SCO member states for a peaceful settlement of the issue based on UN resolutions. Pakistan can urge the international community to put pressure on India to revoke the abrogation of Article 370 and engage in meaningful dialogue.
- ii. **Humanitarian Aid and Assistance:** Islamabad can use the SCO summit to highlight the humanitarian aspects of the Kashmir issue. It can draw attention to the plight of Kashmiri people and emphasize the need for providing humanitarian aid and assistance to alleviate their suffering. This approach aims to garner sympathy and support from other SCO member states, encouraging them to play a constructive role in resolving the issue.
- iii. **Track II Diplomacy:** In addition to official diplomatic channels, Pakistan can engage in Track II diplomacy initiatives during the SCO summit. These initiatives involve non-governmental actors, such as think tanks, academics, and civil society organizations, to facilitate dialogue and explore alternative solutions. Track II diplomacy can provide an informal platform for discussions and help generate innovative ideas to address the Kashmir issue.
- iv. **Mediation and Facilitation:** Given the evolving situation in the Asia, particularly Middle East and South Asia, China and Russia can potentially act as mediators or facilitators in promoting dialogue and negotiations between India and Pakistan. Their impartiality and influence within the SCO can help create an environment conducive to constructive discussions. They can encourage both parties to engage in meaningful dialogue, address each other's concerns, and explore potential solutions.
- v. **Regional Security Cooperation and collective fight against terrorism:** The SCO has a mandate to address regional security challenges. China and Russia can promote enhanced security cooperation among SCO member states, including India and

Pakistan, to address the underlying security concerns related to the Kashmir issue and rampant terrorism. By facilitating discussions on confidence-building measures, joint counter-terrorism efforts, and conflict prevention mechanisms, China and Russia can help reduce tensions and create an environment conducive to resolving the dispute.

- vi. **Improved Regional Connectivity:** Resolution of the Kashmir dispute would open avenues for improved regional connectivity- the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Enhanced transportation and communication links can foster greater trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges between SCO member states. CPEC would prove to be multiplier for the economic success of Islamabad. It would also facilitate regional integration, benefiting not only the two countries, China and Pakistan, but the entire South Asian region.
- vii. **Counterterrorism Cooperation:** Another outstanding issue between Delhi and Islamabad which needs special attention of member states is the Terrorism and Insurgency. On one hand, India is continuously weaponizing the terrorism for the sake of diplomatic point scoring and alienating Pakistan. Having shown the credible evidences and producing the witnesses like Kulbhushan Yadav, an Indian Navy official actively involved in insurgent and terrorist activities within country, Pakistan is yet behind garnering support and sympathy at international arena. By addressing the underlying grievances and resolving long-standing conflicts, both countries can focus their efforts on joint counterterrorism initiatives, intelligence sharing, and collaborative measures to
- viii. **Utilize SCO Platforms:** Pakistan must leverage various platforms provided by the SCO, such as summits, ministerial meetings, and working groups, and most importantly, the Council of Foreign Ministers and the Heads of State Council meetings.to raise the Kashmir issue and garner support. Therefore, Pakistan ought to use the upcoming Heads of State Council summit to highlight the SCO charter's clauses that emphasize peaceful resolution of disputes and seek endorsements from other member states.

The above options, if prudently pursued, will enable Pakistan to seize the multiple opportunities likely to be unfolded during the HSC meeting to advance Pakistan's case and overcome the massive challenges geo-political, economic and security – posed by the Indian hostility toward Pakistan.