
THE ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN INSTITUTIONALIZING PAKISTAN–CENTRAL ASIA CONNECTIVITY: A NEO-FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how far regional organisations- SCO, ECO, and EAEU- enable functional cooperation and institutionalise Pakistan–Central Asia connectivity within a neo-functionalist paradigm. Drawing solely on the provided literature, the analysis traces sectoral cooperation (security, trade, transit, and energy) and evaluates whether functional spillovers have produced durable institutionalisation. Findings show that SCO has broadened from security to multi-sectoral cooperation; ECO provides an ambitious but inconsistently implemented economic framework; and EAEU advances geo-economic linkages aligned to Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership with selective compatibility to the BRI/CPEC vector. Across cases, progress is mediated by Afghanistan's instability, capacity gaps, and geopolitical rivalries (notably India-Pakistan), constraining spillovers and formal institutionalisation implication. Regional organisations act as both facilitators and inhibitors: they create agenda-setting platforms and soft rules, but weak supranational authority and political frictions keep integration partial and uneven.

KEYWORDS

Pakistan, Central Asia, SCO, ECO, EAEU, Connectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, regional organisations have assumed an increasingly central role in shaping the contours of cooperation between Pakistan and the Central Asian republics. As globalisation and regionalism continue to redefine political and economic relationships, platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) have emerged as pivotal instruments for fostering regional connectivity. For Pakistan, these organisations are not merely diplomatic forums but mechanisms to consolidate its role as a transit hub linking South Asia with Central Asia, Russia, and beyond. Through frameworks like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Quadrilateral Traffic Transit Agreement (QTTA), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Pakistan has strategically positioned itself as the geographical bridge between energy-rich Central Asia and energy-deficient South Asia.

This study aims to explore “how far regional organisations like the SCO, ECO, and EAEU allow functional cooperation and institutionalise Pakistan–Central Asia connectivity under a wider neo-functionalist paradigm.” The research applies a qualitative, interpretive methodology, relying entirely on secondary sources—academic literature, institutional reports, and official documents—to examine patterns of cooperation and interdependence. Adopting a neo-functionalist approach, the study interprets regional connectivity as a dynamic process of functional spillover, where collaboration in one domain, such as trade or energy, gradually generates cooperation in adjacent sectors like transport, communication, and politics. This theoretical framework emphasises how non-political integration in economic or technical spheres can lead to broader institutionalisation and interdependence among member states.

Regional cooperation within the SCO, ECO, and EAEU embodies varying levels of integration and institutional maturity. While the SCO provides a multi-sectoral forum integrating security, energy, and infrastructure cooperation, the ECO remains the most established yet least effective economic mechanism, hampered by weak institutional capacity and limited implementation. Meanwhile, the EAEU represents an evolving framework that aligns Russian-led regionalism with China’s BRI through geo-economic linkages extending toward South Asia. In this context, Pakistan’s geostrategic centrality makes it indispensable to the success of Eurasian connectivity projects. The subsequent sections analyse these organisations as instruments of regional integration, assessing the extent to which they have transformed functional cooperation into durable institutional frameworks capable of sustaining Pakistan–Central Asia connectivity under neo-functionalist dynamics.

REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

The development of relations between Pakistan and Central Asian countries has been shaped by regional organisations. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) allow collaboration between Pakistan and Central Asia on trade, energy and security.

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (SCO)

Over the years, regional integration has come to characterise the relations between countries worldwide. Countries formulate cooperative strategies in response to this phenomenon to bolster their capacities, tackle common problems, and improve their positions both globally and within their own regions. Cooperative structures enable countries and their local institutions to react to the changes around the world in a more prompt and efficient way. Countries pursue cooperative structures and integration frameworks to enhance their capabilities, address common issues, and improve their global and, most importantly, regional positions. Regionalism has many distinct forms, from rigid, legally-bounded trade and regulatory blocks to more flexible multiple and informal frameworks. A good illustration of this complex regionalism is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). It is a mixed type of intergovernmental regional integration cooperation, combining security, economic, cultural, and connectivity geography issues.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was established in 2001, developing from the Shanghai Five (1996), the members of which were China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The incorporation of Uzbekistan in 2001 was the first step in the evolution of the SCO as a trust-building and security-focused cooperation multilateral platform (Molchanov, 2017). The cooperation goals were defined in the domains of security, the economy, regional culture, and the movement of the population, especially in recognition the need to counter the “three evils,” which are extremism, separatism, and terrorism (Javaid & Khan, 2015). The organisation has also grown in membership, which now includes eight permanent members, including Pakistan and India since 2017, in addition to six dialogue partners and four observer states, making the SCO one of the largest and most influential regional organisations in Eurasia (Khan & Jamali, 2021).

The addition of Pakistan and India in 2017 was a turning point, as it was the first time the SCO's geographic limits formally spanned South Asia and Central Asia. Particularly for Pakistan, gaining membership in the SCO was and is a means for Pakistan to deepen its aspirations to connect with the Central Asian republics (CARs) and its geostrategic role as a transit hub (Kuralbayev, 2022). Economic as well as geopolitical dynamics placed even greater importance on Pakistan's membership as the country was entering the phase of building the China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC). Apart from this, the two most powerful SCO members, Russia and China, have kept using the forum for their integration plans, which illustrates the slowly developing conjecture of the SCO as a potential Eurasian bloc of influence (Sinha, 2021).

SCO is becoming a more complicated regional organisation where security, trade, energy, and infrastructure development can be seen. Its vision of connectivity closely corresponding to the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt, that is a central component of the Belt and Road project. This vision aims at building a transport, energy, and communication network, which links China to Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe. It is made to encompass the entire Eurasia.

The SCO Development Strategy 2025, the SCO Interbank Consortium, which was created in 2005, and the planned SCO Development Bank are all based on financial and infrastructural collaboration. Likewise is the SCO Business Council was just set up in 2006, and the Energy Club was just set up in 2013. The Council fosters commerce, investment, and energy collaboration, such as renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy management (Klimentyev, 2014; SCO, 2022). All these are signs of the transformation of the SCO as a body that has more of a security-driven agenda towards a more multifaceted integration agenda.

The importance of the SCO to Pakistan goes beyond the strategic recognition to real benefit. Due to its geostrategic location between South Asia and Central Asia, the country has a chance to act as a transit route for the SCO countries. By having the Gwadar and Karachi ports open, the closed Central Asian countries to the Arabian Sea, and Pakistan stands assured in being a part of the transit routes of the Eurasian trade. In this respect, the CPEC stands out as the most significant project as it not only enables the relations between China and Pakistan but also enables the SCO nations, Russia and the Central Asian nations to access South Asia, the Middle East and Africa (Javaid and Siraj, 2021). The corridor legally and logistically gives Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan an avenue of connectivity to CPEC via the QTTA. It implies that the corridor is not a bilateral project, but can become a lifeline to the region and help change the economy of Eurasia.

The CPEC not only benefit SCO members physically in terms of market accessibility. The corridor enhances new possibilities of industrial collaboration, implementation of new technologies, and joint ventures in the manufacturing industry and service sectors. Infrastructure projects, such as the sharing of infrastructure, also have positive effects on the creation of jobs and investment. The pipelines which are under construction along the corridor can serve as important energy transportation corridors. Besides, the improved interconnection will be accompanied by improved people-to-people contacts, cultural exchange and tourism. Not only would these developments help to bolster economic growth, but they would also help to foster understanding and decrease

the chances of war. Such opportunities may be ground-breaking in landlocked states that have always had a difficult time accessing international trade.

The core of the SCO mission and its endeavour lies in the issue of fostering security and stability. The organisation has been fighting against extremism, separatism, and terrorism since its formation, three issues which have continuously impacted on peace and progress of South and Central Asia. These issues were the main focus of members who founded SCO, and the organisation is still emphasising its focus on them as these problems are not affected on an individual basis but they are multinational threats that cannot be handled individually by a specific nation. SCO is gradually improving its ability to manage these issues through collaborative strategies, establishing mechanisms for sharing ideas and collaborative responses. Security is not the only concern for SCO; there are other sectors as well. The management of SCO has admitted that security and development are the factors that can't be separated and secondly, that the vision of achieving connectivity can be accomplished by maintaining stability by enhancing integration within the region in other sectors as well, such as trade and transit and energy trade (Akhter and Javaid, 2021).

Establishing regional connectivity is the major concern of the SCO. Connecting regions within Asia and Asia with European states through infrastructural development, building networks for trade and transport, and enhancing communication is not a concept of the present time, but it has now emerged into a new shape through changes in geopolitical and economic ways. SCO greatly supported the initiative of Silk Road, which later became a broader vision in the name of the Belt and Road Initiative by China (Abajyan, 2021). This project emphasises building modern pipelines, railways, roads, highways and communication networks that will serve as a bridging element for connecting regions of Eurasia. The vision of SCO is strong as it not only focuses on establishing physical relations in means of improving trade but it also focuses on emotional connections among people of the states by cultural integration and interactions among people (Liang, 2024). In this way, connectivity is recognised as both a practical as well an illustrative connection among nations.

Another area in which the SCO has enormous potential for cooperation is energy. The situation in the region is ambivalent: there are representatives of both poles: those who lack energy and cannot satisfy domestic demands, and there are those with enormous amounts of natural resources. In this case, Central Asia, especially, has large oil, gas and hydroelectric reserves that can supply the increased needs of the other states. The examples of the projects like the CASA-1000 electricity line and the TAPI gas pipeline demonstrate that such connections between the energy-rich and the energy-deficient states are possible. As soon as these projects are put into operation, the situation with energy in the region is likely to become much better, with stable supplies guaranteed and the export revenue prospects open.

Energy projects like CASA-1000 are beneficial for developing regions such as Pakistan, being an energy-deficient nation, Pakistan may maintain stability in its financial situation and increase industrial development with the help of such initiatives (Khetran and Khalid, 2019). The SCO Energy Club (2013) has increasingly emphasised renewable energy and sustainable resource management, aligning with global transitions toward clean energy (Javed, Siraj & Żukowski, 2024).

Turkmenistan, endowed with significant gas reserves, regards Pakistan as a potential anchor market. Pakistan, meanwhile, seeks to diversify its energy imports away from the Middle East. Nevertheless, the accomplishment of all this hinges on ensuring stable transit through Afghanistan, the weakest link in the equation. Once operational, the CASA-1000 and TAPI projects could help Pakistan address its domestic shortages and earn transit revenues, and this could help to industrialise Pakistan.

As part of CPEC, Pakistan has prioritised development of road and rail linkages, defended by the SCO with its wider visions of transport corridors. Highways, railways, and reformed border facilities comprise the quintessence of Pakistan's infrastructural aspirations. Instability in Afghanistan once again, sadly, pauses the operationalisation of these projects. Viewed through a neo-functionalist prism, stunted progress on security integration (i.e. instability in Afghanistan) shows how a deficit in one piece, in this case, the energy and trade corridors, will stop progress in another. The spillover effect, in this case, is negative.

In this regard, the role of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) headquartered in Tashkent is equally important in the fight against extremism, separatism and terrorism. For Pakistan, RATS offers both the legitimacy and the means to address its enduring security concerns. Afghanistan, as an SCO observer state, has an important role in the discussions with the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group (est. 2005, revived 2017), aiming to foster dialogue and humanitarian cooperation for stability. Without Afghanistan's regional integration, key projects like TAPI, CASA-1000, and road corridors will invariably fall short.

The organisation faces limitations despite its potential. Geopolitical tensions - especially those between India and Pakistan - remain a hindrance to multilateral cooperation. Economic differences among members create unequal progress, and doubt over China's dominance within the organisation breeds suspicion (Sinha, 2021). In addition, enduring tensions and instability within Afghanistan are a structural barrier to connectivity initiatives.

ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION (ECO)

Establishing economic cooperation, the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) forms one of the earliest and most important pillars of regional cooperation, which connects Pakistan with Central Asia. ECO is Pakistan's oldest regional

cooperation organisation. Initially, ECO was established in 1967, along with the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), as an organisation of cooperation for economic development with Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan. In 1985, the organisation was renamed ECO. The Treaty of Izmir laid down the legal foundation of the organisation, and the advancement and expansion of the membership of the organisation in 1992 with the entrance of the five central Asian republics and the Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, transformed ECO into a comprehensive regional organisation. The ECO is a significant regional development organization, integrating the central Asia region with South Asia. Population-wise, it's around 488 million people within 8 million square kilometres (ECO, 2023). Certainly, the economic vision of the region thrives on the promotion of economic integration and the construction of transport and energy corridors (Sharma, 2020).

The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) is one of the oldest regional cooperation frameworks between Pakistan, Central Asia, which has its background, culture and geographic location. For Pakistan, ECO provides a natural institutional linkage to Central Asian markets mainly through probable road and rail corridors. However, despite its ambitious framework, ECO has been plagued with weak implementation, overlapping silos with other institutions, and low intra-regional trade (Farah, 2019). The organisation has a lot to offer as a means of integration, but the vision and implementation gaps continue to limit its potential.

ECO has progressively pursued a vision of integration and regional connectivity. The Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) (Ilie, 2010), the CAREC transport program, and the formation of the ECO Trade and Development Bank and ECO Chamber of Commerce and Industry are all manifestations of its institutional and physical connectivity aspirations. Most recently, ECO Vision 2025, adopted in 2016, strategic pillars for cooperation focused on regional connectivity to trade and investment, energy and the environment, and people-to-people contact (Khan, 2017).

In recent decades, the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) has successfully integrated trade and cultural exchange activities among its member countries and established cooperation at the regional level. The Organisation has developed a varied and all-inclusive cooperation structure on the basis of historical, geographical, and cultural connections. In this regard, the ECO Trade Agreement (ECOTA) is considered to be one of the most significant projects of the Organisation. ECOTA, signed in 2003, was to reduce tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers, protect intellectual property rights, and make the climate more investment-friendly (Asian Development Bank, 2008; Javaid and Khan, 2015). The majority of efforts at placing ECOTA in the context of a holistic regional market, and its further integration across the region, have led to pathetic intra-ECO trade. It is reported in literature that the lack of strong tariff systems, the fragmented regulatory systems,

and the ineffective border conditions will curb the growth of trade (Achakzai, 2022).

Subsequently to trade integration, the 1995 ECO Transit Transport Framework Agreement (ETTFA) was aimed at ensuring the convenience of the movement of goods and vehicles, which also incorporated the streamlining of the processes, naming of the transport corridors, and implementation of new technologies in the transport systems (ECO, 2023). For the landlocked Central Asian countries—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan—which need to access seaports via Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, this agreement was of utmost importance, but the expected advantages have been lost owing to underdeveloped transit infrastructure, inadequate cooperation, and the sometimes unwillingness of member countries to align their transit policies (Jamil, 2017).

In 2016, to revitalise the organisation, ECO members introduced Vision 2025, which contained five strategic pillars designed to guide the member states in regional connectivity, trade and investment, energy, tourism and culture, and sustainable development (Khan, 2017). This framework integrated ECO's hopes with the infrastructure and institutional transformation aspirations, particularly geared towards the global Sustainable Development Goals. Strategic institutional infrastructure initiatives proposed inclusive and integrated institutional reforms and the enhancement centre building. Nevertheless, as with previous case scenarios, the gap between intent and practice continues to persist as documented in previous studies, as the continuance of policies and initiatives disproportionately favours the external and bilateral over the regional (Ali & Mujahid, 2015).

Compared particularly to other thematic areas, there are more reasons to be optimistic about the harnessing of cooperation in the energy sector. Central Asian ECO members have abundant oil, gas and hydropower resources. In contrast, Pakistan and Afghanistan are deeply energy impoverished. To address this imbalance and refine ECO energy cooperation, the ECO Energy Strategy, which complements Vision 2025, aims to source diverse energy and integrate cross-border electrification and encourage the exploitation of the region (Ali & Mujahid, 2015). Nonetheless, large-scale project implementation continues to be synonymous with the high cost of implementation, political instability and an absence of project commitment over an extended timeline.

ECO has placed great importance on developing its tourism potential. Since 2012, ECO has promoted cultural, adventure, and eco-tourism based on the diverse heritage of the region. The advertising partnership of eco-tours and construction of border-crossing tourism circuits encouraged investment in infrastructure. Regardless, the development of tourism continues to struggle because of the political instability of the region, the poor road and air connections to the region, the inadequate hospitality services, and the negative impacts of development on the environment.

Even with the implementation of new governance structures, ECO has not yet been able to develop the global inter-regional networks of trade and transport. Most obstacles remain as a matter of political conviction. Governance agreements signed by member countries fall short of formal implementation of policy (Javaid & Khan, 2015). Disputes over international borders, geopolitical tensions, the monopolisation of shared water resources, and issues of national security in member countries create friction and obstacles to the implementation of transport and trade agreements. Most transport trade infrastructure is still directed to the Soviet-era transport networks of the region and has yet to be reconfigured to assist in intra-ECO trade (Jamil, 2017).

There is a substantial discrepancy between the Eastern Caribbean Organisation's potential for trade and its current performance. Intra-regional trade is still lagging behind and not taking advantage of the size of the population and market; this comes from inefficiencies, tariffs, and non-tariff barriers (Achakzai, 2022). Regional studies have shown that trade agreements are far more effective for economic integration than "shallow preferential tariff arrangements. Agreements that are far more effective include investment, service provisions, and conflict resolution standards" (Review of World Economics, 2025).

ECO-led connectivity projects have had both the Tejen-Meshed Railway and the Karachi-Almaty Highway connectivity projects as cases of integration. These projects remain positive as they continue to work through Peter Jamil's 2017 projects. At the same time, central Asia is still suffering from stressed ECO's integrated energy, and connectivity projects continue to work through initiatives of Ali & Mujahid (2015).

EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION (EAEU)

The Eurasian Economic Union, established in 2015, is an initiative for regional integration under Russia's leadership, which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia as its members. It is built upon the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Community, and currently operates as a supranational body tasked with enhancing economic integration, the unification of customs policies, and the development of infrastructure in Eurasia. It is incorrect to characterize the EAEU as a nostalgic reconstitution of Soviet integration, as its primary purpose is to increase institutional competitiveness, control external challenges, and strengthen ties with the Asia-Pacific, South Asia, and Europe (Valdai Club, 2012; Maçães, 2018). The EAEU in this respect is the core part of Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) that is set to build a trans-continental order of collaboration.

The integration of the EAEU with the Belt and Road Initiative has been proposed by Russian policymakers, including President Vladimir Putin, mainly because the EAEU's institutional design complements the BRI (Morozov and Korybko, 2020).

BRI makes the strategic location of Pakistan even more important, especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Gwadar port. Pakistan, as the link between the Central Asian region and the Arabian Sea and the rest of the world, opens and facilitates a major integration in the region. As a result, the integration plan of the EAEU will rely on how far Pakistan can go to become a transit and trade hub.

Although Pakistan is not a member of the EAEU, it still shows the intention to unify its partnership, especially a preferential trade partnership (Kassenova, 2021). To Islamabad, the most beneficial contact with EAEU would be market entry into Central Asia, thereby increasing its trading and creating more energy relations with the republics. Nevertheless, the economic model of the union (strongly oriented to Russia) and the economic nationalism of the member states significantly interfere with the potential to implement the full potential of the EAEU by external states, including Pakistan (Makarov, 2022).

Better connections with Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, can transform Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In the case of these Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, greater connectivity has great payoffs. Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republics have an opportunity to enter Pakistan in terms of its consumer market and energy corridors, and exploit its access to the sea as a diversification of their economies and to reduce their dependence on Russia and China. The vision fits this view that Lissovlik (2015) regards EAEU as a medium of open regionalism that encompasses modernization and integration in the global economy. The EAEU also has the potential to target consumers in over 200 million Pakistanis, and through Gwadar, the Middle East, Africa and others.

The significance of the EAEU can be explained by its roles of interrelations with other regional projects. It is the basis of the institutional structure of Eurasian integration with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Together with the BRI, it is the foundation of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) of Russia that aims to establish an inclusive, versatile, and multipolar regional order (Barabanov, 2022). Here, CPEC is the most prominent due to the centralization of Pakistan, which is located at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East (Khan, 2019). Nonetheless, the significance of Pakistan has not been given its due attention in the literature until recently, and recent research indicates that it is becoming significant to the post-connectivity planning of Russia (Sokolov, 2024)

To Russia, further expansion of the relations with Pakistan via the EAEU is not only a question of trade but also a question of geopolitical balance. Partnerships with Pakistan will let Moscow deepen its footprint in the South Asia region, deepen cooperation with China, and maintain ties with India without being overly reliant on any one of them. While India may not approve of CPEC, the EAEU-BRI combo

may open the door to trilateral or, even, multilateral discussions in the region, reviving rusty regional cooperation frameworks like SAARC (Mowchan, 2022). From an institutional standpoint, the EAEU is already engaging South Asia's neighbours and has expanded its geopolitical scope in the South through a free trade agreement with Iran. This expansion may well include South Asia in the future, with Pakistan acting as a bridge, strategically positioned to connect the EAEU to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and even the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Gulf states, already heavily invested in Gwadar, will gain from the EAEU-CPEC trade route that connects Central Asia to the Arabian Sea.

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of Russia focuses more on economic diplomacy and the integration of the region to generate a favourable external environment to develop the country (Barabanov, 2022). This realization can be used to understand the overall Eurasian strategy of Moscow in the context of the integration of Pakistan into the CPEC. Including Islamabad into the EAEU-BRI, Russia boosts cooperation with China and becomes able to cooperate with this country in energy and infrastructure trilaterally (Mowchan, 2022).

The Eurasian ambitions of Moscow are also based on the necessity to reduce the consequences of the Western sanctions by export diversification and market expansion. CPEC offers Russia the prospect of avoiding trade and Western sanctions, acquiring new markets in South Asia, and de-linking the Russian South Asian trade ties. However, the fine balancing Russia has done between China and India still exists. While New Delhi's opposition to CPEC created a conundrum for Russia, the pragmatic engagement with the project and maintenance of diplomatic relations with Pakistan has been characterized as a rational adjustment to new geopolitical realities (Chia & Zheng, 2021).

The effort shown by the EAEU demonstrates its desire to go beyond the borders of Eurasia. Economic integration includes the EAEU's 2018 free trade agreements with Iran and the 2017 bilateral trade agreements with Pakistan (Pakistan Business Council, 2021). Economic integration with Pakistan will likely be through the EAEU, as analysts believe that such integration will be in alignment with Russia's geopolitical interests, as it currently maintains strong relations with China and India. Access to Pakistan's markets will be economically beneficial for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as it will help diversify their economies and bolster their sovereignty, thus decreasing reliance on super-powers (Tarr, 2016).

The East/West trade corridor, geopolitics and infrastructure connectivity and interdependence present a great economic opportunity. China, Pakistan, and Russia's interconnected strategies will exacerbate regional geopolitical and trade disparities. Increased connectivity with the CPEC infrastructure will enhance the trade and economic interdependence of Russia and Pakistan. There is great

potential for the EAEU to connect with SAARC, while the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) can use the port of Gwadar to trade with Central Asia (Naseer, 2022). But geopolitical and infrastructural issues, as well as deep-rooted political mistrust and opposing strategies, will always be prevalent.

Ultimately, the EAEU serves as a key component of Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership, with the geographical centrality of Pakistan making it crucial for the success of the project. The EAEU is also able to get out of the box of a regional bloc and comes to serve as a catalyst of trans-regionalism in the environment of multipolarity and the Eurasian interdependence expansion. The future of this vision is however, contingent on the political goodwill of the member states, institutional structures of the region and geopolitical context (Sokolov, 2024).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is observed through the study that regional organization such as the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization) and EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union) serve as a crucial uniform platform that promotes connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia. In the context of neo-functionalism, such platforms highlight functional spillover, where one-part collaboration, such as in trade, is expanded to vast economic integration in the form of energy and transport. Whereas, on the other hand, weak capacity of institutes, rivalries of geopolitics and instable situation of Afghanistan constrain the integration process. This complex dynamic in Pakistan-Central Asia relations has been a consistent focus of regional scholars (Javaid & Dashti, 2016).

It is explored that SCO has developed from a narrow platform of security into a broader international platform for regional integration. Pakistan became a member of the SCO in 2017, and since then, the SCO has provided Pakistan a recognition of its geostrategic location and also offered Pakistan access to a platform that serves as a linking bridge of South and Central Asia. Initially, SCO was just focused on counter-terrorism and security through the structure of RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure), but later on, it expanded its vision to trade, energy and transport. SCO also reflects the neofunctionalism's concept of spillover, as one sector's collaboration on a functional level pressurises the generation of collaboration in another sector as well. The prospects for Pakistan's cooperation within this expanding SCO framework were noted by scholars even prior to its formal membership (Javaid & Khan, 2015).

It is observed that regional organisations play a vital role in Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity. It is analysed that SCO has become the most functional and effective platform on which dialogues and cooperation are regulated at the regional level. India and Pakistan joined the SCO in 2017, whereas the founding members of the SCO are Central Asia, Russia and China (Dadabaev, 2019). The study indicates that via SCO, Pakistan and Central Asia are offered an international platform on which

they can promote their coordination on energy and security issues. It is observed that though SCO has not yet become a fully economically functioning union but its vision of countering extremism and terrorism has offered a suitable environment of dialogue.

It is also examined that Pakistan's ports and the Quadrilateral Transit Traffic Agreement (QTTA) complement the SCO's connectivity agenda by providing access to Central Asia to the naval routes. Through the SCO platform, interdependence between Pakistan and Central Asia was created via energy projects such as TAPI and CASA-1000 projects, through which Pakistan's deficiency of energy deficiency and Central Asia's surplus of energy were managed and coordinated. But still, integration between Pakistan and Central Asia remained constrained due to Afghanistan's unstable environment, and the rivalry between India and Pakistan disturbed the concept of Spillovers. In terms of neofunctionalism, limitations and potentials of integration, both are demonstrated by SCO as connectivity deepens by technical collaboration, whereas political rivalries or conflicts can slow down the process of connectivity.

Pakistan is the founding member of ECO, which is the platform that has a history of promoting initiatives of trade, such as the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul railway, whose extension may be made towards Central Asia. Whereas, the limitations of ECO are categorised by weak capacity at the institutional level, intersecting priorities, and financial constraints have limited its effectiveness in translating dialogue into concrete outcomes. Nevertheless, its persistent focus on transport and trade corridors reflects the incremental spillover process that neo-functionalism emphasises. The analytical study of the ECO's role in Central Asia by Javaid (2015) similarly identifies this gap between the organization's ambitious framework and its operational shortcomings.

The findings show that the SCO has especially played a critical role in this regard, giving Pakistan a platform to interact with Central Asian states in collaboration with China and Russia (Dadabaev, 2018). In the same line, Pakistan is a member of the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), which highlights its attempts to increase trade and transport relations. The analysis shows, however, that though these multilateral forums have provided a forum to air issues, they have not been able to translate discussions into action. The findings show that bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of finances and local interests are likely to reduce the effectiveness of such platforms.

The paper has pointed out that ECO is another valuable, but underperforming, mode of Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity. The organisation has embraced various structures, which include ECOTA, ETFTA, Vision 2025, and sectoral plans within energy and transport, yet implementation has been poor. The paper explored that ECO lacks the political goodwill, institutional capacity and infrastructural bottlenecks that would enable it to go beyond pledging commitments. The intra-

ECO trade is limited and still, a constant visa limitations, customs inefficiencies, and security issues, especially in Afghanistan, that sabotage integration activities. However, ECO still gives Pakistan a strategic platform to reach Central Asia and the rest of the Middle East. Gwadar's location near the Strait of Hormuz enhances its value as a transit hub, while ECO's energy and transport initiatives, if aligned with CPEC and trans-Caspian projects, could reinforce Pakistan's role as a bridge economy. In neo-functional terms, ECO reflects a case of arrested spillover: institutional frameworks exist, but weak political will and insufficient supranational authority prevent functional cooperation from generating cumulative integration.

It is disclosed that the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is another major body in this environment. The results show that Pakistan is not a member, but its trade with EAEU countries is growing (Libman & Vinokurov, 2018). The study defines that the platform, like EAEU, is an economic framework that provides access to the states of Central Asia to link with Russia and most probably with Pakistan as well. It is proven that if Pakistan shows its involvement in EAEU so it will be a milestone for Pakistan and will be beneficial in improving its relations in terms of trade and investments. But instead, there is another issue that to follow the EAEU standard, one has to follow the Russian considerations and has to align with their standards, which, in the case of Pakistan, does not seem like an easier way to do. It is established that Pakistan has also used multilateral diplomacy to establish its relations with Central Asia.

The EAEU, established in 2015, is the institutional centrepiece of Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership. Extending beyond customs harmonisation, it seeks synergies with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and greater outreach to external partners. Although Pakistan is not yet a member, its geostrategic role is central: through CPEC and Gwadar, Pakistan offers landlocked Central Asian states the shortest route to global markets. It represents an economic framework that deepens integration among Central Asian states under the influence of Russia. Potential of economic compatibilities is indicated by the increasing trade volume of Pakistan with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but through this research, it is observed that significant challenges are found in the trade standards led by Russia. Still, it is illustrated through the platforms how the behaviour of countries that are not members can be changed gradually by regional economic values, and it also reflects how neo-functionalism highlights pressure for integration.

The study explored that from the perspective of Russia, Pakistan hold both positions; it serves as an economic partners as well as it plays a crucial role in balancing elements in its policy of Eurasian, especially focusing on the factor of constrained connections with the West. Moscow gets access to South Asia through engagement with Pakistan, while it also serves as a balancing bridge between India and China. Moreover, the EAEU's effectiveness is constrained by inward economic nationalism, Russia's dominance, and persistent geopolitical rivalries. From a neo-

functionalist perspective, the EAEU demonstrates how functional linkages- trade, energy, transit- can generate interdependence and spillovers into broader cooperation, but also how uneven institutional commitment and political rivalries limit the consolidation of integration.

It is found that forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) often discuss Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity and thus offer institutional frameworks of cooperation. As an example, the SCO has highlighted transport and energy connectivity as an aspect of its agenda, whereas the ECO has suggested the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul railway as the broader line that could be connected to Central Asia. It is stated via findings that regional associations such as ECO, SCO and EAEU are achieving establishments in wider ways by means of enhancing coordination and improving dialogues between Central Asia and Pakistan. It is discovered that regional organisations and multilateral cooperation will also determine the prospects. The findings imply that these organisations may become more active and organise trade norms, simplify customs, and create joint funds in infrastructure investments (Dadabaev, 2019). The discussion reveals that active participation in such groups can make Pakistan a mediator between South Asia, Central Asia and others.

It is identified that these organisations provide a significant platform on which different nations can combine to work on their disputes, collaborate with each other by exchanging dialogue. In this way, these platforms improve collaboration in terms of security, economics, and politics. SCO succeeds in achieving trust politically. ECO helps in leading routes for trade and transit, while EAEU promotes agreements on regulating economies. These platforms are referred to as drivers for the upcoming bilateral issues and adaptation to a more unified regional constitutional order (Dadabaev, 2018; Cooley & Laruelle, 2021).

The finding suggests that regional connectivity will move to reality depending on the success of such organisations. It is also discussed how, despite the criticism of regional organisations as slow-moving and bureaucratic, the role of regional organisations is increasingly central in legitimising and maintaining connectivity efforts between Pakistan and Central Asia. The above-mentioned results identify that the regional organisations like SCO, ECO and EAEU are the main factors leading connectivity among nations, as they provide them a single platform to join and create bilateral trust through exchanging dialogues; moreover, they also help organisations to bargain more easily by participating in negotiations being made on such platforms (Dadabaev, 2019).

The study examined that weak Institutional Mechanisms are another barrier. Unlike the European experience, where supranational institutions facilitated deeper integration, Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) rely primarily on ad-hoc arrangements through ECO or SCO, which lack binding enforcement

mechanisms. Without strong institutions, functional spillovers remain fragmented, reducing the prospects of sustained regional integration.

Finally, external actors act as catalysts of integration. China's BRI provides financial and infrastructural momentum, while Russia, the U.S., and the EU contribute involvement on a technical and diplomatic level. Although competition has been created due to rivalries among major powers, they are also a great source of bringing a flow of investments and may help in accelerating integration by institutional pressure. Therefore, outside force is both an opportunity and a challenge at the same time.

In general, the study investigated that regional organisations act as facilitators and inhibitors. They improve communication, the creation of trust, and collaborative structures, although bureaucratic ineffectiveness, geopolitical tensions, and the unstable situation in Afghanistan still hamper the process. In terms of the neo-functional approach, what made these organisations effective is their capacity to shield functional cooperation from political conflicts, thus making advancement in the area of trade, transport and energy, yielding additional spillovers towards the achievement of regional dependency.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that regional organisations play an indispensable yet uneven role in institutionalising Pakistan–Central Asia connectivity. Viewed through the neo-functional lens, these organisations reveal both the promise and limitations of regional integration in Eurasia. Functional cooperation in security, energy, and trade has produced modest spillovers, creating frameworks for sustained engagement. However, political constraints, institutional weaknesses, and persistent geopolitical rivalries have hindered the transformation of these cooperative initiatives into deeper institutionalised structures.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has evolved from a narrowly security-oriented body to a multi-functional platform encompassing trade, energy, and infrastructure development. Through mechanisms such as the Interbank Consortium, Energy Club, and Business Council, the SCO provides a space for Pakistan and Central Asian states to collaborate on energy projects like CASA-1000 and TAPI, which seek to link the energy surplus of Central Asia with the energy deficit of South Asia. Yet, instability in Afghanistan and the enduring rivalry between India and Pakistan often interrupt these functional linkages, demonstrating the fragility of spillovers.

The Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) represents a more institutionalised but less effective model of cooperation. Despite its visionary frameworks such as ECOTA, ETTFA, and Vision 2025, the organisation suffers from a chronic implementation gap. Weak institutional capacity, inadequate financing, and fragmented policy commitments limit its ability to translate agreements into

practice. Nevertheless, ECO remains a key avenue for Pakistan's trade and energy connectivity with Central Asia and the Middle East, reflecting a case of arrested spillover—where intentions of integration exist, but supranational authority and political will remain insufficient to sustain cumulative progress.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), though largely dominated by Russia, presents emerging opportunities for Pakistan's regional outreach. Through CPEC and Gwadar Port, Pakistan provides the EAEU's Central Asian members a vital route to the Arabian Sea, while Moscow views Pakistan as an essential partner in balancing its Eurasian diplomacy. The EAEU thus demonstrates how economic interdependence and geo-economic strategies can converge, but its progress is restricted by economic nationalism and great-power competition.

In sum, the analysis reveals that regional organisations act as both facilitators and inhibitors of connectivity. They generate trust, foster dialogue, and initiate cooperative structures, yet are constrained by geopolitical contestation and institutional inertia. The neo-functional paradigm explains this duality: integration proceeds through incremental spillovers rather than abrupt transformation. For Pakistan and Central Asia, achieving genuine regional connectivity will depend on consolidating these functional linkages into binding institutional frameworks that can withstand political turbulence and foster sustainable interdependence across the Eurasian landscape.

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