

The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) and Its Policy Relevance for Pakistan

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Abstract

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001 with broad aims and one of them was countering the “three evils”, namely terrorism, extremism, and separatism. For this specific purpose, RATS was established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 2004 as a permanent organ of the organization. It functions as a regional hub for intelligence sharing, counterterrorism related coordination, and capacity-building of the member states. Pakistan remains the most affected member of the SCO by the scourge of terrorism. RATS provides a critical platform for Pakistan to align its counterterrorism policy with the regional security framework. This research explores RATS’ policy relevance, institutional importance, and limitations in the context of Pakistan’s security landscape. The research is qualitative and analytical in nature and explores the contributions of RATS in shaping Pakistan’s counterterrorism policies. Semi-structured interviews with analysts and academics, along with the SCO’s charters and official communiques, RATS reports, and Pakistan’s official counterterrorism documents (such as National Action Plan (NAP) and National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) act) provide primary data. In addition, research articles, magazine features and opinion pieces constitute major secondary sources for this study. The article contends that RATS has increased Pakistan’s legitimacy at multilateral forums and helped it in security dialogues with the member states, however, its practical role remains limited. Members’ varied threat perceptions, rivalry between India and Pakistan, and the SCO’s consensus-based decision-making have diminished RATS’ potential. Pakistan has reviewed its focus from its traditional total dependence on western security support and has diversified through closer collaborations with Eurasian forums. Nonetheless, the SCO lacks in the enforcement of some of its decisions which ultimately prevents RATS’ evolution and formulation as resilient operational mechanism for Pakistan. Pakistan’s domestic issues: political instability, economic constraints, lack of advanced technology and inconsistent national priorities are also reasons behind RATS inefficiency in the case of Pakistan. The article concludes that RATS holds symbolic value and diplomatic worth for the country as it provides Pakistan a regional security platform, but its policy relevance has not yet completely converted in tangible outcomes. Pakistan needs to play a leading role in converting RATS’s role into a substantial framework for itself and the member states. As Pakistan is the prime victim of terrorism, it should take initiatives to depoliticize the counterterrorism cooperation within RATS to ensure conversion of concepts and consensus into complete and concrete course of action.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), Pakistan, Terrorism, Counterterrorism, Regional Security, Multilateralism, Eurasia, Three Evils

Introduction

This century has been witnessing an increasing trend of dealing conventional and unconventional security issues through regional organizations. The SCO is a prominent multilateral framework dealing it in Eurasia. In 2001, the SCO transformed from the “Shanghai Five” which was founded in 1996 as a border resolution mechanism between China, Russia and their Central Asian neighbours. Now, the SCO’s agenda has been broadened from confidence-building in border areas to encompassing expanded security, economic and cultural cooperation. The organization fosters regional stability, counters regional security threats and boosts economic cooperation across Eurasia. Under the SCO, RATS was established in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 2004 as main security mechanism specifically to combat terrorism, extremism and separatism. Its functions are intelligence exchange, coordination for joint anti-terrorism exercises and developing legal and technical mechanism for member states.

Pakistan is one of the most affected countries by terrorism and in this context, RATS has great symbolic and practical implications for it. Pakistan’s active participation in RATS bolsters its overall image as a frontline counterterrorism state having vast experience in the field and having conducted extensive military operations against local and transnational terrorists. Though Pakistan is efficiently dealing with it at the domestic front, but for transnational matters it needs the institution’s help. Pakistan’s involvement in RATS is also complementary for the organization. Therefore, the article discusses the policy relevance of RATS for Pakistan. Pakistan’s membership in the SCO and its participation in RATS is not enough for the country. The research tries to explore actual contributions of the organization in Pakistan’s policy alignment, operational harmonization, and strategic implications. Dr. Uzma Siraj (personal communication, December 1, 2025) reiterates that RATS’ role remains limited due to lack of institutionalization, difference in threat perception, politicization in the organization, bilateral rivalry and divergence of national and regional policies. Pakistan’s internal instability and inconsistency also constrain the abilities of RATS in terms of tangible outcomes.

The Formation and Functions of RATS

RATS is a significant mechanism of the SCO which addresses transnational security challenges. The establishment of RATS was a great initiative in Eurasia’s regional security collaboration. It was created in 2004 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan which indicated the SCO’s increasing focus on ‘three evils’ posing grave threats for the regional stability, development and cohesion. Even though security collaboration remained top priority since the era of ‘Shanghai Five’, but 9/11 events made it necessary for the member states to establish a permanent body dealing terrorism. Ultimately, RATS charter was adopted in 2002, and it became operational in 2004 which outlined mandate, structure and principles for cooperation.¹ RATS was established to attain certain objectives. It facilitates the member states with coordination and collaboration to combat ‘three evils’ i.e. terrorism, separatism, and extremism. It also collects, analyse, and disseminate intelligence regarding acts of terrorism, terrorist networks and their financing models. RATS develops legal and technical frameworks to counter terrorism. It helps increasing capacity building and holds joint trainings and exercises for security agencies and law enforcement agencies (LEAs) of the member states.² RATS is governed by the SCO’s

¹ Marcel de Haas and Frans-Paul van der Putten, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Towards a Full-Grown Security Alliance?* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, November 2007), accessed December 20, 2025, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20071100_cscp_security_paper_3.pdf

² Roy Allison, “Protective Integration and Security Policy Coordination: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 4 (2018): 568–595.

highest decision-making body, the Council of Heads of State, and it is supervised by the Council of National Coordinators. RATS has taken many initiatives and there are considerable achievements to its name. It manages unified database of terrorist entities. It facilitated joint border operations in Central Asia to interrupt narcotics smuggling and extremists' movement. RATS has also built partnerships with international organizations including the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee (UNCTC), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which enhances its legitimacy at global level.³

Despite having accomplishments to its name, RATS' consensus-driven structure limits its progress. Divergence in threat perception, for instance Pakistan's concerns regarding cross-border terrorism, Chinese emphasis regarding separatism in Xinjian, and Russia's focus on CARs' stability, remains a hurdle in collective progress. However, RATS is a symbolically powerful mechanism demonstrating diverse interests of regional powers sustaining counterterrorism collaboration while their sovereignty remains intact. For Pakistan, RATS is a learning model as well as it provides practical framework for intelligence cooperation and legal collaboration with regional member states. RATS does not only help Islamabad in operational capacity, but it also reshapes its engagement with Eurasian regional security framework.

Pakistan's Role in the SCO and RATS

Involvement of Pakistan in the SCO and participation in RATS indicates Islamabad's evolving attitude towards regional security. Pakistan is diversifying its security collaborations from traditional alignments to multilateral Eurasian platforms.⁴ It makes Pakistan's full membership in the SCO complementary for each other as Islamabad is a bridge between South Asia, West Asia, and Central Asia.⁵ Pakistan's membership in the SCO was significant for the organization's expanding strategic interests in the region as it entails long experience in counterterrorism and Afghanistan's proximity makes it more attractive. Platform of the SCO is important for Pakistan as it provides opportunity of regional dialogues on economic developments and security issues and RATS particularly as it coordinates for joint counterterrorism exercises along with discussions on the 'three evils'. By this way, Pakistan enhances its security capabilities and boosts its diplomatic interactions with regional players in Eurasia. On the other hand, membership of Pakistan increases the SCO's credibility as it is front-runner state in counterterrorism activities. Although India joined the SCO at the same time and Islamabad and New Delhi's bilateral rivalry creates multiple challenges for the organization, still Pakistan's contributions towards the SCO and RATS are noteworthy.

Pakistan has been contributing to RATS initiatives through intelligence sharing, joints operations and investigations and working for the legislations relevant to counterterrorism. Pakistan's NACTA works closely with RATS' Executive Committee. Pakistan is sharing decades long operational experiences gained from the military operations i.e. Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad with the member states during conferences and dialogues. Sharing of these experiences helps regional neighbours to develop strategies at the domestic levels. Pakistan also holds workshops on counterterrorism and combating extremism and terrorism funding networks. Moreover, Pakistan emphasises on depoliticization of counterterrorism collaboration, particularly in India-Pakistan case which complicates the SCO and RATS discussions.⁶ The practical contribution of RATS is visible in its joint counterterrorism exercises and LEAs

³ Stephen Aris, *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015).

⁵ Mehran Khan and Ferdos Jamal, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Opportunities for Pakistan," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 8, no. 1 (2024): 282–294, [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2024\(8-1\)26](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2024(8-1)26)

⁶ Minahil Zahid, Muhammad Zain Ali, and Muhammad Shahbaz, "Pakistan's Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from 2011–2024: A Comparative Analysis to Other Member States," *Dialogues in Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2025).

engagements held under RATS umbrella. It regularly conducts “Peace Missions” drills to bring the SCO members together to take part in counterterrorism trainings including urban warfare and hostage rescue. Joint trainings are more beneficial and learning-oriented rather than operating in isolation.⁷ Pakistan has been participating regularly in “Peace Mission” drills, most recently, Peace Mission-2023 held in August 2023 in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region of China and along with Pakistan the other participants were China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. Besides this, Pakistan has also engaged with China, Uzbekistan and Russia in bilateral exercises withing broader framework of the SCO. Moreover, Pakistan is contributing through intelligence sharing and participation in joint operations which accelerates its role of frontline state in counterterrorism efforts regionally. However, after Pakistan’s active participation in RATS, its role remains limited in comparison with founding members of the SCO such as China and Russia. Central Asian states have more say than Pakistan and India as later are newer members of the organization. NACTA is responsible for the intelligence fusion and domestic inter-agency collaboration. It is accommodating focal persons from all the intelligence and law enforcement agencies irrespective of their areas of jurisdiction or nature of responsibilities. RATS is closely aligning with Pakistan’s NAP. RATS also assisting member states legally against terrorism as well as extremism, but the concepts remain sensitive, and member states take them differently as per their own positions.⁸ Pakistan’s efforts regarding Counter-Financing of Terrorism (CFT) are also supported by RATS which complements Islamabad’s position under the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). India-Pakistan bilateral rivalry constrains cooperation under RATS, still it remains vital component for Pakistan’s regional security mechanism. Despite multiple limitations, RATS’ practical and symbolic value is beneficial for Pakistan.

Pakistan’s Domestic Terrorism Challenges

Pakistan is facing multifaceted and enduring security challenges particularly after 9/11. It is facing threats from local and transnational militant outfits, extremist networks, separatist movements and cross-border insurgencies. This complex situation is undermining the country’s internal security and stability and also shaping its foreign and security policies along with its cooperation with regional organization such as the SCO and its RATS. Terrorism landscape of Pakistan needs to be understood to assess RATS’ policy relevance for the country’s counterterrorism framework. Historical context of terrorism in Pakistan goes back to the era of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-89) when Pakistan played a role of frontline state in support of Afghan resistance. It militarized the society, proliferated with arms and radicalized the religious rhetoric.⁹ According to Dr. Rizwan Shinwari (personal communication, November 15, 2025) the end of Cold War in 1991 brought internal instability in Afghanistan and sown seeds of extremist ideologies in Pakistan particularly in areas close to western border converting Pakistan’s local populace into extremists.

After 9/11, Pakistan became close non-NATO ally of the US after its invasion of Afghanistan. This alliance further exposed Pakistan’s vulnerabilities. Afghan Taliban fleeing their country and taking sanctuaries in Pakistan’s tribal areas radicalizing locals and committing terrorist activities. Furthermore, emergence of indigenous group Fitna al-Khawarij (FAK) formerly known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) brought unmatched terrorism wave in the country. Since 2007, Pakistan is witnessing significant attacks on civilians, security forces and crucial infrastructure. Since mid-2010’s, Pakistan is facing hybrid threat from proscribed organizations

⁷ Richard Weitz, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Fading Star?* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2011).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the West* (London: Penguin, 2012).

including separatists, sectarian groups, religious extremists and transnational networks.¹⁰ FAK has been most fatal terrorist outfit in Pakistan which took responsibility of many high-profile attacks in the country including APS Peshawar massacre in 2014. After the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021, Afghan government is providing sanctuaries to FAK and working against Pakistan's interests.¹¹ Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) are the sectarian terrorist organizations which target minorities and vulnerable communities intensifying sectarian divide. Baloch separatists, Fitna al-Hind (FAH), use violent means to pursue nationalist agendas getting supported by Hostile Intelligence Agencies (HIAs). Pakistan is also facing foreign jihadist groups i.e. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) further complicating the country's security landscape.¹²

Pakistan has been facing complex threat of terrorism, hence devised a holistic counterterrorism policy which includes all the fronts; socio-political, legal, military and intelligence. Peshawar APS attack in 2014 was a turning point and after that Pakistan developed NAP which is a 20-point agenda to eliminate extremism and terrorism from the country. NAP was a step to intensify kinetic efforts to eradicate terrorism by starting Zarb-e-Azb (2014-2017) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017-present) operations. Pakistan got stronger control in disturbed areas especially former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) after launch of these operations (NACTA, 2020). The government has also taken concrete steps to actualize NACTA. National Intelligence Fusion and Threat Assessment Centre (NIFTAC) has been made functional in 2025 which has collaboration with all the LEAs from all over Pakistan. It will bring actual fruits in Pakistan's efforts to counter terrorism and extremism on all the kinetic and non-kinetic fronts. Pakistan augmented its Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) 1997 and also established Anti-Terrorism Courts (ATCs) for speedy execution of terrorism related cases. Counter financing efforts required for the compliance with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) also institutionalized the country's anti-terrorism framework.¹³ Pakistan is still facing challenges despite all these measures to counter terrorism and extremism. In this situation, RATS as a regional cooperation framework, underscores Pakistan's need for external support and complements its internal policies. Pakistan's geostrategic location is very complex. It is located at the intersection of Afghanistan, China, India and Iran. Pakistan's challenges in countering terrorism need to be understood in regional context. Afghanistan's instability has direct effects specifically in tribal areas of Pakistan along with flooding it with refugees, narcotics trafficking and militant movements across borders. Kabul takeover of the Taliban in 2021 and rise of FAK activities once again noted interdependence of domestic security with regional security.¹⁴

Although Pakistan is achieving significant success in counterterrorism efforts, there are still shortcomings in ideological and structural framework. It is facing governance deficits, political instability and inconsistent enforcement of de-radicalization mechanism which hinders its long-term peace. Moreover, bilateral rivalry between India and Pakistan is also a hurdle in regional counterterrorism cooperation at the platform of RATS. There is another reason of continued challenges is its evolution. Financial resources and weaponry of terrorists have crossed the traditional methods. Moreover, domestic governance apparatus of Pakistan lacks

¹⁰ Mudassar Ali Iqbal and Muhammad Usman Askari, "Mainstreaming of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan: A Theoretical Perspective of Conflict Transformation," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, no. 1 (2023).

¹¹ Zaheer Abbas Chohan, Dost Mohammad Barech, and Naveed Anjum, "The Kabul Takeover: Emerging Threats to the Region," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (July–December 2021): 158-177, accessed October 30, 2025, <https://pjtr.nacta.gov.pk/index.php/Journals/article/view/83>

¹² C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹³ Musarat Amin, Rizwan Naseer, and Nasreen Akhtar, "Pakistan in the FATF Grey-List: Compliance and Policy Readjustments," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 1 (2021): —, <https://pjtr.nacta.gov.pk/index.php/Journals/article/view/89>

¹⁴ Ibid.

infrastructure required to fight the emerging threats. However, RATS emphasized on cooperation related to unconventional threats being faced by the member states. Hence, terrorism in Pakistan is not a national concern for the country but a regional threat. It needs a collective approach under RATS which could be instrumental yet underutilized.

Policy Relevance of RATS for Pakistan

RATS plays a vital role in Pakistan's regional diplomatic engagement and security mechanism. The threat of terrorism has gone multidimensional in Pakistan and RATS platform provides an institutional support which complements its national counterterrorism strategies. RATS provides support to Pakistan on three key areas; policy integration, regional legitimacy, and operational collaboration. Participation of Pakistan in RATS augments its regional legitimacy confirming it a responsible state fighting against terrorism. After 9/11, Pakistan has been aligned with traditional western security mechanism and being viewed according to their lenses which often alleges it with double standards and contingent engagements. RATS provides an alternative Eurasian led platform to project its image to the world.

RATS assists policy integration of Pakistan's domestic policies and initiatives of regional mechanisms. NAP, National Internal Security Policy (NISP), and NACTA's initiatives like NIFTAC stress on coordination and collective steps to eliminate terrorism (NACTA, 2020). RATS helps in channelizing domestic policies and best practices of the world as well as bridging external and internal dimensions of counterterrorism strategies. RATS also renders operational support in shape of Pakistan's capacity-building, intelligence exchange and joint counterterrorism drills. Pakistan's involvement in RATS' technical workshops and regularly conducted joint trainings boost its capacity and inter-agency collaborations.

Relevance of RATS is depicted in its efforts related to functional mechanisms such as intelligence sharing, legal and technical assistance, and prevention of violent extremism. Its database helps Pakistan in understanding the regional threats which especially coming through Pak-Afghan porous border. Pakistan also contributes to the database containing over 7,000 terrorist profiles in the SCO region. The Database is vital for Pakistan in presence of groups like FAK and ISKP who operate transnational. RATS offers legal support to the member states by aligning counterterrorism laws. Pakistan's involvement in RATS has helped it in learning from legislation and extradition mechanism of other member states. RATS also promotes de-radicalization efforts in the region by community engagements and experience sharing. Pakistan has developed multiple de-radicalization programs in the conflict zones which benefits and contributes to this experience sharing mechanism. RATS mostly works in confidence-building and capacity enhancing of its member states through joint efforts. This way, Pakistan has a method of cooperation with its neighbours despite having bilateral tensions. Frontier management and geopolitical stability play key role in national security of Pakistan as it is located at the junction of Central and South Asia. RATS supports on both areas as it facilitated combined border surveillance programs between China, Pakistan and CARs to track terrorists and drug smugglers.¹⁵ Such efforts are crucial on Pakistan-Afghanistan and Pakistan-Iran borders. Pakistan's role in RATS brings it closer to the leading states of the SCO, China and Russia, and their convergence of interests in security domain strengthens their cooperation. Intelligence exchange is another important role of RATS which is critical for Pakistan in monitoring foreign terrorists infiltrating into the country or returning after participating in conflict zones. Pakistan participates in RATS Executive Committee's annual meetings deliberating the relevant areas.¹⁶ Such cooperation augments internal mechanisms of Pakistan like NACTA's NIFTAC which gathers intelligence from agencies across Pakistan. Joint kinetic

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "43rd Meeting of the Council of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO RATS)," *Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO RATS)*, March 7, 2025, accessed September 21, 2025, <https://ecrats.org/en/press/news/16184/>

and non-kinetic trainings and the SCO 'Peace Mission' drills enhance Pakistan's interoperability. Workshops on non-traditional terrorism threats enhance Pakistan's proficiency and resolve the issue of its technological limitations which are a hurdle in result-oriented counterterrorism policies. RATS' relevance for Pakistan is beyond counterterrorism as the framework is addressing "three evils". Pakistan is not only facing threat of terrorism from FAK or ISKP, but also extremism from TLP and PTM, and separatism from FAH and BLA. All of these form a grave security threat for Pakistan. However, RATS provides a multidimensional framework for Pakistan to fight these threats. Counter-extremism narrative dialogues under RATS help Pakistan refining its rhetoric, and consultations on separatist movements empower it in understanding border areas' conflict dynamics. RATS supports member states in tackling issues of cyber-crimes and terrorist financing which are transnational issues. This cooperation is also aligned with FATF obligations for Pakistan. RATS' policy relevance for Pakistan is strategic and practical. However, to fully benefit from its potential, Pakistan needs to maintain a sustained and active engagement. Rather than symbolic participation, it needs to contribute impactfully.

Challenges and Limitations

RATS has symbolic as well as practical value for Pakistan as it offers multilateral platform through which counterterrorism cooperation is possible among the member states. Despite being beneficial for Pakistan's regional security framework, it has certain challenges and limitations. A grave limitation is the SCO's consensus-based structure. A unanimous decision is required for approval of key policies which causes delays.¹⁷ For Pakistan, this consensus-based decision-making hinders through bilateral rivalry with India who occasionally refuse to sign joint policies, for example, it denied to sign a joint communique during SCO's defence ministers' meeting held in Qingdao, China in June 2025, giving a reason that terrorism in Balochistan has been taken on it and Pahlagam attack was not made part of it.¹⁸ It slows down Pakistan's security related concerns, particularly transnational terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan.¹⁹ Divergence in threat perception of the member states is another notable obstacle. China, Russia and Pakistan see terrorism as cross-border threat which needs regional cooperation, but on the other side, CARs seek coordination on internal extremism, border management, and state stability. India, views terrorism in bilateral perspective associating Pakistan. Likewise, Pakistan's focus on FAK and ISKP sometime differs with member states' priorities.²⁰ Thus, RATS political agendas are often competing among member states and undermine Pakistan's objectives of counterterrorism mechanism.

Bilateral rivalries, particularly between Pakistan and India, is most enduring challenge in RATS. More often, this rivalry spills over into RATS and politicize the common security issues. India always tries to classify Pakistan as sponsor of transnational terrorism which constrains Islamabad's endeavours of being an active counterterrorism ally.²¹ Likewise, Pakistan views India's participation in RATS suspicious as it occasionally politicizes the collaboration among member states. The prevailing distrust limits RATS operational capabilities. Despite being ambitious, RATS is institutionally weak. Its Executive Committee plays role of coordination

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Baqir Sajjad Syed, "SCO moot in China unable to adopt joint statement; Pakistan reaffirms commitment to fight terrorism," *Dawn*, June 26, 2025, [SCO moot in China unable to adopt joint statement; Pakistan reaffirms commitment to fight terrorism - Pakistan - DAWN.COM](https://www.dawn.com/news/1812345)

¹⁹ Thomas Ambrosio, "The Legal and Institutional Constraints of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Asian Survey* 58, no. 6 (2018): 1040–1061.

²⁰ Stephen Blank, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Institutional Evolution and Security Implications* (Washington, D.C.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2020).

²¹ Sarwat Rauf and Maira Tariq, "The Bilateral Engagement of India and Pakistan at Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects and Challenges," *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability* 7, no. 1 (2025), accessed December 20, 2025, <https://njips.nust.edu.pk/index.php/njips/article/view/161>

secretariat primarily. The organization is not autonomous in enforcing commitments made by the members. Its internal operations; joint drills, data collection and annual reports seem routine work instead of strategic. This bureaucratic routine does not bring tangible benefits for Pakistan. RATS also fights financial constraints which undermines its effectiveness. Pakistan, due to its economic conditions, pays less than leading states which results in asymmetrical leverage for it. Pakistan faces internal challenges along with external limitations. Recurrent political changes in the country, policy changes and inter-agency competition hinders strategic coordination with regional multilateral platforms. NACTA has been struggling with bureaucratic hurdles, insufficient funding and its mandate which is overlapping with other agencies. Moreover, Pakistan's traditional alliances with the west and anytime resurgence of warm ties with them is another hurdle for its strong commitment with the Eurasian multilateral frameworks. This policy ambiguity undermines Pakistan's position in RATS and diminishes its influence within the region.²² RATS was initially designed to counter security threats which are state-centered. Pakistan is facing threats by non-state actors like FAK, ISKP and Balochistan separatist groups. However, RATS cannot help Pakistan on the ground which requires high-level political trust among member states as the organization does not have any force itself. It also unable help Pakistan dealing with evolving challenges like cyber threat and digital terrorist financing. Ultimately, RATS is best suited as policy discussion rather than direct counterterrorism cooperation.²³

RATS' achievements lack global visibility in comparison to other west-dominated multilateral counterterrorism frameworks like INTERPOL. RATS collaborates in a specific region with already prevalence of multiple challenges. This limitation diminishes Pakistan's leverage of international legitimacy. Bureaucratic hurdles and language barriers in RATS create asymmetric influence leverage for Pakistan and limits its role. According to Dr. H. M. Shahzad Qasim (personal communication, November 25, 2025), RATS has very little role in combating terrorism in Pakistan and that has been sharing about information on terrorists from Central Asian States and China ETIM. Pakistan, despite being most affected member of the SCO, enjoys role of a participant in RATS instead of a driver in counterterrorism policies. Internal hierarchy of the SCO creates structural imbalance. Moscow and Beijing are the two dominant powers in the organization and they have strategic priorities of their own. Security of Xinjiang is China's priority and stability in Central Asia is Russia's necessity. Hence, Pakistan's central issue of transnational terrorism as well as Pakistan-India bilateral rivalry, do not receive priority treatment.

Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

The SCO's RATS has symbolic value for Pakistan while practical outputs are constrained by multiple factors such as structural imbalance, divergence of interests among member states and inconsistencies in Pakistan's national policies. To realize the actual benefits, Pakistan needs to pursue multi-dimensional roadmap to enhance its role in RATS by strengthening its institutional capacity and synchronize its domestic policies with the SCO's broader agenda. Pakistan needs to step-up bilateral and multilateral collaborations particularly with Russia, China and the CARs. This cooperation should be beyond scheduled discussions in fields of intelligence, law-enforcement and technical domains. Pakistan may propose a joint force establishment under RATS with focus on transnational terrorism and border management. Moreover, regular joint trainings like Peace Mission should also be institutionalized. Pakistan can leverage a strategic partnership with its neighbour and close friend China to mould RATS focus on terrorism in South and Southwest Asia.

²² Zahid Hussain, *No-Win War: The Paradox of U.S.-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan's Shadow* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²³ Ibid.

Establishment of NIFTAC under NACTA is a positive step in realization of latter's mandate fruitfully, however, inclusion of more officers from NACTA and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) into RATS Executive Committee may help Pakistan in intelligence exchange and database sharing. More capacity-building initiatives should be proposed under RATS particularly in spectrum of evolving threats. Pakistan can also propose a liaison office for counterterrorism efforts involving South and Central Asian states working under RATS. It will make Pakistan a connecting state across both regions. Pakistan needs to align its domestic policies with RATS regional framework. Clauses related to regional cooperation may be added in NAP and NACTA. Pakistan should establish "SCO-RATS Coordination Cell" dedicatedly monitoring the implementation of recommendations given by RATS. It will cover the gap between Pakistan's domestic counterterrorism policies and SCO-RATS broader agenda. Pakistan has assumed Chair of SCO-RATS for the term 2025-26. It reflects SCO members' trust on Pakistan and its efforts to fight terrorism as a frontline state.²⁴ This is a chance with Pakistan to further attain its objectives while aligning with RATS policies. Transnational terrorism is an evolving challenge for Pakistan as non-state actors infiltrating in the country through borders. Pakistan can utilize its current position in RATS to formulate a stronger policy and secure implementation commitments from the member states.

Evolving terrorism related asymmetric threats demand RATS priority attention. Pakistan should propose working groups to fight online radicalization, cyber terrorism and digital funding to terrorists. Pakistan may also lobby for a "Regional Digital Security Center" working under RATS and countering online extremist content, misinformation and online terrorist recruitments. This digital center will also integrate with Pakistan's domestic ventures.²⁵

Legal harmonization of RATS' members is a very important policy aspect. Pakistan should endeavour for convergence of counterterrorism policies with the SCO like legal assistance, extradition and monitoring of financial activities related to terrorism. Pakistan can actively work for drafting a model for cooperation in intelligence sharing, border management and joint operations. It will also bolster Pakistan's image on the global arena.²⁶ Pakistan may also propose legal workshops under RATS mandatory to attend by all the members. Bilateral rivalry between India and Pakistan has been a reason behind delays and non-implementation of the SCO policies in the region. Concrete steps should be taken to avoid this rivalry at least at the multilateral cooperation frameworks. Terrorism is a problem for the whole region, so, all the stakeholders need to work together to defeat this menace. Pakistan should propose initiatives for confidence building among the member states to resolve common threats including preventing Afghanistan to not support terrorist outfits on its soil.

There is a need of joint research initiatives taken by Pakistan with the SCO members and some of them with particular focus on terrorism. Pakistan can establish "SCO Research Center" preferably in a top think tank based in Islamabad to monitor evolving policies of the SCO and RATS and to train diplomats and regional security analysts accordingly. Pakistan can also encourage Pakistani think tanks to collaborate with those in China, Russia and CARs. Such collaborations already exist with Chinese and Russian academia and research institutes, yet more efforts should be made in this regard particularly adding Central Asian institutes and focusing on terrorism. Conference, seminars, joint studies can be initiated. By working upon the above recommendations, Pakistan can become a proactive leader state instead of passive participant in RATS activities. Pakistan's geo-political and geostrategic position makes it an important member of the organization. This way, Pakistan may play role of a regional stabilizer

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan Assumes Chair of SCO-RATS (2025-26)," press release, September 10, 2025, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan*, accessed December 20, 2025, [Pakistan Assumes Chair of SCO-RATS \(2025-26\)](#)

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

as well. These steps may evolve RATS symbolic value into a functioning regional security framework bringing operational and diplomatic benefits.

Conclusion

RATS structural constraints, institutional imbalances, divergence in members' definition and perceptions of the threat and inconsistent engagement of Pakistan with the organization limit its potential practical value while limiting it to diplomatic and symbolic value. RATS plays role of a confidence building platform based on dialogue and sharing best practices but limited opportunities for mutual coordination and intelligence sharing. The SCO's consensus-oriented decision-making dilutes responsiveness. Pakistan should extend bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the member states particularly with its neighbours. Terrorism is not a domestic problem for Pakistan but a shared regional issue which demands collective efforts by all the stakeholders. Ultimately, a strong political will is required from all the member states for effective transition of RATS from a largely symbolic platform to a functional regional security framework. Moreover, Pakistan's bureaucratic hinderance and inter-agency rivalry constrain its effectiveness. Pakistan needs to take up the role of an agenda setter in RATS instead of only a passive participant. It must be aligning its NAP and NACTA policies with the SCO and RATS.