



# IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

## Pakistan's SCO Chairmanship 2026–27: From Coordination to Delivery

Dr. Faisal Javaid <sup>1</sup>

Pakistan's chairmanship of the SCO Council of Heads of State (2026–27) will be judged by what it delivers by the Islamabad summit in August 2027, not by how well it is hosted. The first meeting of the Council of National Coordinators, held in Islamabad on 28–30 September 2026 with all ten member states present, India included, has given Pakistan a workable start and a clear theme: "Turning Vision into Action: Connectivity, Innovation and Shared Prosperity".

This Insight argues that Pakistan should use the chairmanship to anchor one flagship outcome: an SCO-endorsed connectivity package linking Central Asia and Russia to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan. It should pair this with a push to move the stalled SCO Development Bank from declaration to founding agreement. It identifies five risks to the chairmanship and sets out eight recommendations for Pakistani policymakers.

### From Bishkek to Islamabad

Pakistan took over the SCO's highest rotating office from Kyrgyzstan at the close of the Bishkek summit (31 August–1 September 2026), which marked the organization's 25th anniversary.<sup>2</sup> This is a step up from 2024, when Pakistan chaired the Council of Heads of Government and hosted the prime ministers' meeting in Islamabad. As chair of the Council of Heads of State, Pakistan now steers the organization's political and

strategic agenda for a year, ending with a leaders' summit in Islamabad in August 2027.

The Bishkek summit left Pakistan an agenda that is broad but unfinished. Leaders adopted the Bishkek Declaration, a package of 28 documents and amendments to the SCO Charter. They also approved a 2026–2030 roadmap for ports and logistics centers and new regulations for the SCO Universal Centre for Countering Security Challenges and the Anti-Drug Centre. On the economic side, the declaration endorsed national-currency settlement and recorded "progress" on an SCO Development Bank. However, there is no founding agreement, no capital commitment and no launch date, and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are competing to host the bank.

Pakistan's stated priorities fit this unfinished business closely:

- trade and investment among member states;
- road, rail and port connectivity linking Central Asian markets with the Arabian Sea;
- energy cooperation;
- customs, standards, payments and digital connectivity;
- educational, cultural, media and tourism exchanges;
- regional security and counter-terrorism.

<sup>1</sup> Head, Department of International Relations and Mass Communication, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science and Technology, Islamabad

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Transcript of the Press Briefing by the Spokesperson on Thursday, 01st October 2026," October 1, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/transcript-of-the-press-briefing-by-the-spokesperson-on-thursday-01st-october-2026>

## The Coordinators' Meeting: What Does It Signal?

The Council of National Coordinators is the SCO's working engine: it manages day-to-day interaction among member states and prepares the meetings of the senior bodies. Its first session under Pakistan's chairmanship met in Islamabad on 28–30 September 2026. Pakistan's National Coordinator, Ambassador Dr Mohammad Faisal, chaired it, and senior representatives of the SCO Secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) attended. The coordinators reviewed the chairmanship's program of activities and preparations for upcoming meetings.

Three signals stand out:

### 1. Full Attendance

India's National Coordinator, Alok Dimri, took part despite the freeze in bilateral relations. This shows that the SCO remains one of the few channels where Pakistan and India still sit at the same table. Pakistan has indicated that invitations for the 2027 summit will go to all leaders, including Prime Minister Modi.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. A Delivery-Focused Message

Addressing the coordinators, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar promised an "open, inclusive and constructive" chairmanship. He called for the SCO's shared vision to be turned into practical cooperation and tangible outcomes.<sup>4</sup> That framing sets the standard against which Pakistan's year will be measured.

### 3. A Broad Calendar Is Forming

Early events include an SCO hockey tournament in Pakistan (20 November–2 December 2026). The sectoral priorities were set by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif

in his Bishkek address:<sup>5</sup> IT and artificial intelligence, energy, development and poverty reduction, disaster management, health, culture and sports. He also proposed an SCO Sovereign AI Infrastructure and Governance Framework and invited partners to the SCO Plus meeting in Islamabad in 2027.<sup>6</sup>

The chairmanship also poses a domestic test. When Pakistan hosted the SCO Heads of Government meeting in October 2024, Islamabad was placed under a security lockdown.<sup>7</sup> A repeat at the larger 2027 summit would undercut Pakistan's aim of presenting itself as an open transit and investment hub.

## What Pakistan Has At Stake

The chairmanship gives Pakistan agenda-setting power in the one Eurasian forum where China, Russia, India, Iran, Belarus and all four Central Asian member states sit together.

Four interests are directly at play:

### 1. Connectivity to Central Asia, Russia and Belarus

Pakistan's long-standing claim to be the shortest sea outlet for landlocked Central Asia is now formally part of the SCO's agenda. The Bishkek ports and logistics roadmap (2026–2030) is the natural framework for presenting Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar as SCO gateways. The trans-Afghan railway (Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar) and road corridors through Afghanistan and Iran are the routes that would make that claim real. Through Central Asia, the same corridors extend northward to Russia and Belarus, giving the two Eurasian Economic Union members of the SCO an Arabian Sea outlet as well.

<sup>3</sup> Radio Pakistan, "DPM Reaffirms Commitment to Inclusive SCO Chairmanship," September 30, 2026, <https://radio.gov.pk/30-09-2026/dpm-reaffirms-pakistans-commitment-to-open-inclusive-constructive-sco-chairmanship>

<sup>4</sup> Arab News Pakistan, "Pakistan Opens First SCO Coordination Meeting under Year-Long Chairmanship Today," September 28, 2026, <https://www.arabnews.pk/pakistan/pakistan-opens-first-sco-coordination-meeting-under-year-long-chairmanship-today-3002541>

<sup>5</sup> Radio Pakistan, "PM Reaffirms Pakistan's Resolve to Realise True Potential of SCO," September 1, 2026, <https://www.radio.gov.pk/01-09-2026/pm-reaffirms-pakistans-commitment-to-realise-true-potential-of-sco>

<sup>6</sup> Emin Aliyev, "Pakistani PM Unveils Ambitious Agenda for SCO Chairmanship," Trend, September 1, 2026, <https://www.trend.az/world/4219534.html>

<sup>7</sup> Munir Ahmed, "Violence-Hit Pakistan Locks Down Its Capital for an Asian Security Meeting," AP News, October 15, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-shanghai-cooperation-organization-security-meeting-ded90b37a647a03271192d2aa33daf42>

Two features of the chairmanship can help. Unlike CPEC, which India rejects, an SCO-endorsed connectivity framework is multilateral. It is also sponsored by the chair.

## 2. Economic Diversification

Russia reports that its trade with SCO states now exceeds USD 400 billion, with more than 98 percent settled in national currencies. Pakistan has called for an SCO Development Bank,<sup>8</sup> an SCO Development Fund and an Investment Fund since at least the November 2025 Heads of Government meeting in Moscow.<sup>9</sup> For an economy short of foreign exchange, settlement in national currencies and a regional development lender are practical tools, not just symbolism.

## 3. Afghanistan

Pakistan has said repeatedly that a peaceful, stable and regionally integrated Afghanistan serves every SCO member. As chair, Pakistan can move Afghanistan from a security file to a shared connectivity and counter-terrorism file. That would give Central Asia and Russia, which also depend on Afghan transit, a stake in Pakistan's concerns about cross-border terrorism.

## 4. Diplomatic Standing

Pakistan's mediation diplomacy, including the Strait of Hormuz ceasefire and the Islamabad MoU, raised its profile, although both arrangements broke down in July 2026. The chairmanship offers a chance to rebuild that convening credibility on firmer, multilateral ground. A well-run chairmanship would reinforce Pakistan's image as a convening, consensus-building middle power at a time when the international order is fragmenting.

### Risks to the Chairmanship:

- **The India Factor**

India attended the coordinators' meeting,

but the SCO works by consensus, and India has a record of opposing connectivity language that implies endorsement of CPEC. A summit turned into an India–Pakistan contest, or a downgraded Indian presence, would overshadow every other outcome.

- **Afghanistan's Instability**

Pakistan–Afghanistan relations have moved from strategic patience to confrontation over cross-border terrorism. Every corridor Pakistan promotes to Central Asia runs through Afghanistan or Iran, and both routes are under pressure.

- **The Gulf and Iran War**

The Iran–US conflict and attacks on Saudi Arabia have pulled Pakistan's diplomatic energy westward. They also raise the risk of divisive language on Iran, a full SCO member, at the summit.

- **The Implementation Gap**

The SCO has a history of declarations without delivery; the Development Bank, discussed for over a decade, is the clearest example. A chairmanship that produces only statements will reinforce that image.

- **Domestic Security and Capacity**

A summit run under lockdown conditions, or disrupted by a terrorist incident, would undercut the message that Pakistan is a safe transit and investment destination.

### Policy Recommendations:

#### 1. Publish a Short List Of Chairmanship Deliverables

Pakistan should name five to seven measurable outcomes it intends to secure by August 2027 and report on them at each Council of National Coordinators meeting. A public scorecard turns “Vision into Action” from a slogan into a test Pakistan can pass.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen M. Bland, “SCO Summit Delivers Institutional Reform but Leaves Development Bank Unsettled,” The Times of Central Asia, September 7, 2026, <https://timesca.com/sco-summit-delivers-institutional-reform-but-leaves-development-bank-unsettled/>

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, “Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Leads Pakistan's Delegation at the SCO Council of Heads of Governments (CHG) Meeting, Moscow (17–18 November 2025),” November 18, 2025, GlobalSecurity.org, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/pakistan/2025/pakistan-251118-pakistan-mfa02.htm>

## 2. Make One Corridor Package the Flagship Outcome

Pakistan should propose an “SCO Central Asia–Arabian Sea Connectivity Package” under the Bishkek ports and logistics roadmap. It should cover three things:

- transit and customs facilitation (TIR use, harmonized documentation, single-window links);
- port access commitments at Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar;
- a joint feasibility and financing track for the trans-Afghan railway.

Framing the package as an SCO roadmap item rather than a CPEC extension makes Indian objection harder.

## 3. Broker the Development Bank’s Founding Agreement

As chair, Pakistan is well placed to mediate between the rival hosting bids. It could propose a split: headquarters in one state and a regional project-preparation office in another. Even a signed founding document or agreed capital framework at Islamabad would be the chairmanship’s most concrete economic legacy.

## 4. Advance Practical Payment and Settlement Links

Pakistan should prioritize interoperability of national payment systems and national-currency settlement windows with China, Russia and the Central Asian states. These reduce pressure on Pakistan’s foreign-exchange reserves.

## 5. Use the Chairmanship to Deepen the Russia and Central Asia Tracks

Pakistan should schedule ministerial meetings on transport, energy and agriculture with Russia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and link them to bilateral deliverables. Belarus, the SCO’s newest member, is a natural partner for agricultural machinery and industrial cooperation.

## 6. Reframe Afghanistan as a Shared SCO Agenda

Pakistan should propose a structured SCO format on Afghanistan, building on the largely dormant SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group that combines counter-terrorism through RATS with transit connectivity. This gives Central Asia and Russia a direct stake in curbing cross-border terrorism.

## 7. Run a Consensus-First Summit

Pakistan should keep bilateral disputes out of SCO texts, issue formal invitations to all leaders early, and use neutral, procedurally careful drafting. Pakistan gains more from a summit India attends than from one India avoids.

## 8. Build an Academic and Track-II Layer

Pakistan should fund an SCO expert forum and a network of universities and think tanks to feed analysis into the chairmanship. Exchanges for students, journalists and young researchers would give the year lasting people-to-people value beyond the summit.

On the domestic side, a dedicated inter-ministerial chairmanship secretariat with a published calendar should coordinate delivery. Security planning should protect delegates without shutting down the capital.

## Conclusion

Pakistan has made a sound start: full attendance at the first coordinators’ meeting, a delivery-oriented theme and a credible agenda. The harder part lies ahead. If Islamabad uses the next ten months to secure one connectivity package, one financing breakthrough and one structured format on Afghanistan, the August 2027 summit will mark Pakistan’s arrival as a Eurasian connector state. If it settles for ceremony, the chairmanship will join the SCO’s long list of declarations without delivery.

