

PEACEFUL AND POLITICALLY STABLE AFGHANISTAN: THE ROLE THAT SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION CAN PLAY

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Abstract

Terrorism is one of the leading causes of Afghanistan's insecurity. The conflict and war in Afghanistan has given terrorist groups opportunity to thrive and grow. The current economic crisis in Afghanistan and the quick international recognition of the Taliban are both major challenges for SCO. The situation necessitates a greater sense of responsibility on the part of regional countries to collaborate for the stability of Afghanistan. Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states should take short term and long-term steps for political and economic development of the country. The SCO's participation in Afghanistan can be enhanced through emphasis on the shared interests of Pakistan, China, Russia, and other neighboring countries. The SCO now has the opportunity, given Afghanistan's present need, to take such steps. This paper highlights the concrete measures that the SCO has already taken and more steps that it can take. It is suggested that reconstruction, development, governance, and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan are not only the responsibility of the regional countries but also the international community and international organizations.

Keywords: SCO, Afghanistan, Stabilizing, Withdrawal, Taliban

Introduction

Afghanistan has faced a persistent and concerning security situation for a considerable period of time. However, the invasion by the Soviet Union in 1979 intensified the conflict and instability in Afghanistan. Following the

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9/11 incident, the United States initiated a military operation in Afghanistan and established a provisional government. Following a protracted and challenging conflict lasting over twenty years, the United States military withdrew from Afghanistan, creating an opening for the Taliban to assume control. The group took charge of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and thereafter established their own governing body.¹ The Taliban assumed control of the state due to various factors, such as the withdrawal of the US soldiers, a dysfunctional and corrupt government, and insufficient backing from the Afghan military. The Afghan populace, particularly women and minority groups who had previously been persecuted under the Taliban's rule, experienced widespread anxiety due to concerns about their well-being and protection with the emergence of the Taliban.²

The volatile state in Afghanistan presents threats not only to the region but also to the entire world, since the rebirth of the Taliban has aroused concerns about their connection to global terrorism. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban provided a secure refuge for al-Qaeda, and there are apprehensions that they may repeat this action. Following the Taliban's takeover of the country, some Afghans sought sanctuary in neighboring countries. The refugee crisis is significantly compromising human rights and exhausting the resources of adjacent countries.

The security situation in the area has gotten increasingly complex due to the presence of other terrorist groupings, such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has spawned a faction known as the ISKP, which has carried out many attacks in Afghanistan, deliberately aiming at both civilians and security forces. The attempts made by various militant groups to establish a presence in neighboring countries have aroused concerns regarding the occurrence of cross-border terrorism.

The uncertain state of affairs in Afghanistan has had a significant influence on commerce and investment, as potential investors are cautious about allocating funds in a volatile environment. The security situation in Afghanistan has a significant impact on the political dynamics in the region. Afghanistan has been utilised by various major powers as a base of operations, providing support to multiple armed organisations engaged in the conflict. The Taliban's seizure of power has compelled both regional and international powers to reassess their strategy.³

¹ Vinay Kaura, 'Pakistan-Afghan Taliban Relations Face Mounting Challenges', (Middle East Institute, 2 December 2022), available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pakistan-afghan-taliban-relations-face-mounting-challenges>.

² Lindsay Maizland, 'The Taliban in Afghanistan', (Council on Foreign Relations, 19 January 2023), available at <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>

³ M. Ashraf Haidari, 'Securing Afghanistan Remains SCO's Neglected Mission Possible', *The Diplomat* (16 September 2022), available at

The situation in Afghanistan significantly influences the security of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and adjacent states. To effectively address the Afghan problem, it is crucial for the neighboring states to cooperate and find a solution to the Afghan issue, given that the interests of these states are more significant than those of the international community. Furthermore, adjacent nations are more apt to comprehend Afghanistan's culture and unique attributes. The significance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in relation to Afghanistan, together with its powers and constraints, must not be disregarded in light of the aforementioned circumstances. As a regional body, the SCO has made it a top priority to foster peace and security in the region, which includes Afghanistan.⁴

The SCO, founded in 2001, aims to promote collaboration among its member states in the areas of politics, economy and security. Recently, the SCO has assumed more prominent role in Afghanistan, particularly due to the ongoing peace process and security conditions in the country. The SCO created the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005 to improve collaboration and communication between the organisation and the Afghan government. Since then, the SCO has actively engaged in Afghanistan, working towards fostering peace and security to support the country's growth and reconstruction. As an observer state in the organisation, Afghanistan can take advantage of the SCO's activities aimed at promoting stability and security in the region⁵. Although the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has the potential to be a significant regional security platform, its role in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover has been largely overlooked in recent literature. By analyzing how the SCO—which is made up of Central Asian nations, Russia, China, and other members—has dealt with Afghanistan's new reality since 2021, this research fills that gap.

Theoretical Framework

An influential study on the region is "Central Asian Security: The New International Context," authored by Roy Allison and Lena Jonson. The book employs the concept of the regional security complex to assess the security conditions in Central Asia. It adopts a comprehensive and holistic

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/securing-afghanistan-remains-scots-neglected-mission-possible/>.

⁴ 'CGTN : *Afghanistan: Life Beyond Scars: SCO Secretary-General on Its Role in Helping Afghanistan's Reconstruction and Development*', (2 September 2022), available at <http://eng.sectsc.org/media/20220902/911192/CGTNAfghanistan-Life-Beyond-Scars-SCO-Secretary-General-on-its-role-in-helping-Afghanistans.html>.

⁵ Soumya Awasthi, 'Afghanistan's Centrality to the SCO', *Hindustan Times*, (12 September 2022), available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/international-affairs/afghanistans-centrality-to-the-sco-101662967650884.html>.

method to scrutinize the security environment of the region ⁶. Their paradigm is still useful for evaluating security situations in the region even after 24 years because of several important characteristics, such as the fact that Central Asian governments are still closely linked in terms of security threats, such as transnational terrorism, border disputes, ethnic tensions, etc. The RSC framework by Allison and Jonson aids in illuminating how these problems necessitate regional cooperation or result in shared vulnerabilities rather than being addressed separately. The RSC hypothesis places a strong emphasis on how outside forces influence regional security. The interaction of these powers highlights the RSC's applicability in examining how Central Asia strikes a balance between regional autonomy and great power struggle.

Their research identified Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan as constituents of the Central Asian security complex due to their similar security concerns and geographical proximity. Allison and Jonson contend that Central Asia constitutes a regional security complex, as the security of each state in the region is interdependent on the security of the other states. The region has attracted the attention of major global powers, including the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran, because of its significant geostrategic and geo-economic potential. The involvement of major countries, particularly in the setting of religious extremism, complicates the regional security structure and affects the development of a collaborative regional security network. Examining the influence of dominant nations Allison and Jonson contend that Russian meddling is the primary impediment to the establishment of a collaborative regional society. The major countries caused the region's tumultuous changes by altering the distribution of power within the regional security framework.

S. Neil MacFarlane had a distinct outlook on the future potential of regionalism in the Central Asian security system, but he shared the same opinion as Allison and Jonson. MacFarlane contended that the United States wields a more significant impact on the development of regionalism endeavors in comparison to Russia. As a global hegemon, the United States has significant capabilities to engage in the region to a greater extent, deriving its influence in the region from this position. Furthermore, MacFarlane highlighted that regionalism is not considered a primary priority by the United States. Put simply, Russia's involvement may have obstructed collaboration among neighboring countries. However, MacFarlane proposes that the United States, with its significant capabilities and distinct objectives, has the capacity to influence the future direction of regionalism in Central Asia and Afghanistan.⁷

⁶ Roy Allison and Lena Jonson, *Central Asian Security: The New International Context* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001).

⁷ S. Neil MacFarlane, 'The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia', *International Affairs* 80(03) (2004): 460–61.

This paper aims to analyze the SCO from a broader perspective using the Regional Security Complex Theory, which has been largely neglected in current literature. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of substantial theoretical research on this organization. Nevertheless, based on Matthew Oresman's viewpoint, it is contended that the SCO has importance in carrying out comprehensive studies ⁸. Despite being eclipsed by other regional organizations, the SCO deserves more attention since it offers an opportunity for experts to completely evaluate the several units participating in the region's security architecture simultaneously.

The SCO offers a great framework for comprehending the cooperative, conflictual, internal, and external dynamics of the security arrangements in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The SCO reflects the shared concerns about security among the entities in general and Afghanistan in particular, serving as a deeply ingrained system for ensuring security. The SCO offers a handy opportunity to examine the processes of securitization that take place within the organization, as demonstrated by the speech acts of its members. ⁹

Although there may be criticism for choosing a state-centric approach, it is crucial to acknowledge that the member states of the SCO are internationally recognized, making governments the main actors in undertaking speech actions.

Norms and practices are crucial in shaping the relationships and views of others, which in turn influence the overall regional security dynamics in a complex and interconnected manner. In the realm of international politics, governments are deeply involved in the process of attributing identity to each other. This process has a significant impact on their interactions and is closely linked to the reproduction of individual identities through regular social behaviors. This exemplifies the dynamic nature of a state's identity, which undergoes continuous transformation in response to external perceptions. Consequently, a state lacks full control over the perception it generates in other states. Interactions with others form our identity, as their perception and attribution of characteristics to us hold great significance. Hence, the identity of a state is not predetermined or static but rather susceptible to the interpretations and perspectives of other entities within the global system. Comprehending the intricacies of global politics and the security considerations of nations relies on the attribution and perpetuation of state identities through social activities.

⁸ Matthew Oresman, 'The SCO Summit and Criteria for Analysis', (2004), available at http://www.chinaeurasia.org/files/CEF_June_2004.pdf.

⁹ Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security', in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 02.

While a state-centric policy may face criticism, it is crucial to reminisce that the SCO consists of states as its members. These nations engage in complex processes of ascribing and perpetuating identity, which play a significant role in defining regional security within the organization.¹⁰

The effect of 9/11 on the Central Asian regional security complex is another significant factor that fits with the choice to analyze the SCO. The global securitization process triggered by 9/11 interacts with the corresponding regional dynamics, leading to this impact. The global securitization process that unfolded after 9/11 allowed the United States to engage in the regional security apparatus of Central Asia and Afghanistan, resulting in significant changes to the regional structure. These changes not only signify shifts in regional patterns but also present an opportunity to explore the potential transformation of the regional security complex into a cooperative regional community, primarily through the SCO. The SCO serves as a platform to test and assess the possibilities of fostering regional cooperation and community-building in the aftermath of the changes brought about by 9/11.

It is possible to create realistic predictions for future growth by analyzing the current conditions and dynamics using the insights gained from assessing the Central Asian security complex from the perspective of the SCO. This study aims to explore the prospects of the Central Asian regional security complex with reference to Afghanistan and the threats to regional security originating from it. It will examine the region's characteristics, such as competition, safety arrangements, and human security. Additionally, it will consider the extent of contestations and/or mutual relationships among the states, as well as the key actors, dominant security sectors, and agendas that influence the dynamics of securitization.

SCO A Model of Regionalism

Regional integration has significantly risen since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as evident by the formation of new regional organizations and the strengthening of existing ones¹¹. The European Union and ASEAN can be considered prominent examples of regional integration models that have played a crucial role in promoting regional stability and economic development. The SCO and ASEAN, two prominent regional organizations in Asia, have been instrumental in facilitating economic integration and safeguarding regional security. Despite significant disparities and a few

¹⁰ Ted Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security* 23(01) (1998), 171–81.

¹¹ P. S. Mistry, 'Regional Integration and Economic Development.', in *The New Regionalism and the Future of Security and Development* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan., 2000).

shared characteristics, these two organizations serve as excellent illustrations of regional cooperation beyond Europe.¹²

The SCO provides a platform for collaboration among neighboring governments in response to shared challenges. China and Russia provided support to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) in their endeavors to combat militant organizations and restore law and order inside their territories. Joshua S. Goldstein argues that the concept of collective security has developed in the twenty-first century due to the diminished authority of weak states over their area, which can potentially become a safe haven for terrorists and drug traffickers. The international community bears the duty to not only offer significant assistance to weaker states but also to reinstate law and order within their borders.¹³

The SCO, as a paradigm of regionalism, places emphasis on addressing social, political, economic, and security issues. The agency has orchestrated military drills and instructional programs to enhance regional security, with a particular focus on training the security forces of Central Asian nations that confront the threat of militant organizations operating in mountainous landscapes.¹⁴ In addition, the organization has implemented significant measures to bolster economic growth in the region. This includes the establishment of the SCO Business Council and Interbank Association, which received enthusiastic praise from all member heads of the SCO. They expressed their hope that these organizations would collaborate to enhance regional prosperity. In addition, the organization also established an energy club.¹⁵

Based on the mentioned advancements, it is expected that there will be increased economic integration among the states in the region. All observer states of the SCO also have the opportunity to become permanent members of the group in the future. Furthermore, by employing the SCO as a blueprint for regionalism, the informal collaborations among regional governments may

¹² Stephen Aris, 'A New Model of Asian Regionalism: Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Have More Potential than ASEAN?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, (2009), available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570903104040>.

¹³ J. S. Goldstein, and Jon C. Pevehouse, 'Liberal Institutionalism.', in *International Relations*, (New Delhi: Pearson Education, 2008).

¹⁴ Thomas M. Sanderson, Daniel Kimmage, and David A. Gordon, 'From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists' (Washington D.C: Center for Strategic and International Studies. CSIS., 2010), available at [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/100324_Sanderson_FerghanaValley_WEB_0.pdf)

[public/legacy_files/files/publication/100324_Sanderson_FerghanaValley_WEB_0.pdf](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/100324_Sanderson_FerghanaValley_WEB_0.pdf).

¹⁵ 'Joint Communiqué of Meeting of Council of Heads of SCO Members', (23 August 2007), available at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/200708/t20070823_679182.html.

potentially be institutionalized. According to Stephen Aris, the author of *Eurasian Regionalism and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, the SCO is a significant example in the field of international politics, particularly in terms of regionalism, and is noticeably distinct from Western contexts.¹⁶

Efforts of SCO in Resolving Afghan Issue

The Afghan issue has posed a major challenge for the international community for a long time, and the SCO has played a vital role in efforts to resolve the conflict and promote stability in the region. The SCO, comprising China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and four other countries, has undertaken several steps to foster peace and stability in Afghanistan. It has leveraged its economic and political influence to aid the country's progress.

The SCO has consistently voiced significant apprehensions regarding the state of affairs in Afghanistan. Following the expeditious withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021, the global community has sought the SCO's intervention to address the matter. Prior to the recent SCO summit in Samarkand, the issue of Afghanistan received significant attention in the international media. The SCO has adopted a more constructive approach towards the Afghan conflict compared to the US and Western nations by refraining from ideological interference, rejecting the imposition of Western-style "democracy," and instead positioning itself as a promoter of peace, provider of aid, mediator, and supporter in resolving the Afghan issue. The SCO's guiding philosophy is the "Shanghai Spirit," which emphasizes the importance of respecting multiple civilizations, promoting equality, engaging in consultation, and fostering mutual confidence.¹⁷

The threat that Afghanistan's security situation posed to regional stability prompts the SCO to get involved in Afghanistan by implementing a variety of programs. Additionally, the organization has made efforts to combat terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan as well as the wider region.¹⁸ The SCO has been involved in number of mechanisms to tackle Afghan issue in collaboration with the member states encompassing China, to reassure Afghan sovereign status, providing backing to "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" doctrine and supporting peace and rapprochement in Afghanistan while refraining from meddling in its internal affairs. Since Afghanistan is bordered by the majority

¹⁶ Stephen Aris, *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan., 2011).

¹⁷ Global Times, 'SCO's Role in Afghan Issue Constructive, as US-Led West's Involvement Detrimental, Leaving Only Devastation - *Global Times*', (19 September 2022), available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202209/1275588.shtml>.

¹⁸ SCO, 'Samarkand Declaration of Shanghai Cooperation Organization - 2022', (16 September 2022), available at <https://dig.watch/resource/samarkand-declaration-of-the-council-of-heads-of-state-of-shanghai-cooperation-organization>.

of the SCO members, Afghanistan's security and stability directly affect the security and stability of these countries.¹⁹

Considering the goals of the SCO, which include combating terrorism, discrimination, and radicalism, the member states are actively working to accelerate the peace process in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has historically served as a breeding ground for radicalism and terrorism, which has had ripple effects on neighboring regions such as South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East ²⁰. In 2020, the organization convened a meeting in Moscow between the Afghan government and the Taliban's peace negotiating teams with the aim of fostering discussion and negotiation. The summit showcased the SCO's capacity to function as a platform for promoting peace and stability in the region, marking a significant advancement in the peace process. The Samarkand Declaration emphasized the importance of coordinating efforts to achieve peace in Afghanistan and sustain stability in the SCO region.

In addition to its endeavors to establish peace and security in Afghanistan, the SCO has actively participated in other significant developmental initiatives, including the construction of new roads and bridges. The SCO has leveraged its economic and political clout to expedite the progress and restoration of the nation. Furthermore, it has effectively fostered trade and facilitated economic expansion between Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

Addressing the intricate Afghan matter is of utmost importance for the regional nations and the SCO, along with countering the menace of radicalization and terrorism. Despite numerous humanitarian crises and the plight of its citizens, the SCO and its member nations have been fervent in their efforts to offer aid to Afghanistan.²¹ The organization has endeavored to promote intercultural discourse and reciprocal comprehension between Afghanistan and other member states. As an illustration, in order to enhance educational opportunities and facilitate cultural interactions, the SCO has financially supported the establishment of schools and other educational facilities in Afghanistan. The Samarkand Declaration acknowledged the enduring generosity and efficient assistance offered by neighboring and regional countries to Afghan refugees. It underscored the importance of enabling the dignified, safe, and sustainable repatriation of Afghan refugees to their home country.

SCO Role in Afghanistan Post-US Forces Withdrawal

Afghanistan is currently at a critical turning point in its history, as the two-decade-long War on Terror is concluding with the Taliban assuming control

¹⁹ Times, 'SCO's Role in Afghan Issue Constructive, as US-Led West's Involvement Detrimental, Leaving Only Devastation - *Global Times*'.

²⁰ SCO, 'Samarkand Declaration of Shanghai Cooperation Organization - 2022'.

²¹ Times, 'SCO's Role in Afghan Issue Constructive, as US-Led West's Involvement Detrimental, Leaving Only Devastation - *Global Times*'.

and the withdrawal of Western forces. The US endeavor to establish democracy in the nation has proven unsuccessful, since the governmental apparatus disintegrated within weeks following the commencement of US withdrawal. Afghanistan necessitates both global assistance and regional coercion, specifically from the SCO, not merely to manage the aftermath of the US exit but to attain genuine conflict settlement during this pivotal juncture.

Political forces in Afghanistan are presently in discussions to establish a comprehensive administration, although the nation's historical context implies that attaining a stable government may prove challenging owing to persistent power conflicts. The potential for the Taliban to establish a coalition administration exists, but the presence of divergences among various Afghan factions may impede its efficacy. The preceding decades have been marked by conflicts, political upheavals, targeted killings, large-scale killings, and forced migration of indigenous populations, rendering the establishment of peace in Afghanistan a very challenging endeavor.

The ongoing clashes between the Taliban in the Panjshir valley and nearby regions, together with the threats posed by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), are two significant factors that could potentially worsen the state's instability. The Taliban's diplomatic alliances with different ethnic factions are at risk due to escalating conflicts with anti-Taliban factions, raising concerns of a potential civil war reminiscent of the 1990s conflict. In addition, the region faces other challenges to regional security and stability, including economic collapse, humanitarian emergencies, refugee issues, increased drug manufacturing, the spread of extremist ideologies, and terrorism originating from Afghanistan.

The threat of terrorism causes instability, which is the primary concern for the SCO. The current fragile state of peace is allowing terrorists to persist and thrive. Therefore, it is crucial for the neighboring states in general, and those directly impacted by spill-over effects in particular, to take a prominent role and implement measures that guarantee long-term peace in Afghanistan.

The SCO members, which include the neighboring states of Afghanistan and relevant parties, are coordinating their efforts to establish peace in the conflict-stricken region. Following the withdrawal of NATO soldiers from Afghanistan, the SCO has the chance to step in and occupy the void. Member states such as Pakistan, China, and Russia have a vested interest in ensuring a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, and they are actively engaged in seeking a political resolution to this issue.²²

²² Samran Ali, 'SCO's Role in Afghanistan's Stability', *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research* (blog), 10 September 2021, <https://cscrp.k/explore/themes/politics-governance/scos-role-in-afghanistans-stability/>.

The techniques employed by NATO and SCO to achieve peace in Afghanistan differ significantly. NATO's approach has been predominantly military-focused, while the SCO is actively working towards bringing all relevant parties together on a unified platform.²³ As an observer state of the SCO, Afghanistan fosters collaboration with the regional states through the SCO-Afghan Contact Group.

The SCO's role in addressing the Afghanistan issue mostly revolves around serving as a platform for negotiation and cooperation. However, its credibility and alignment with the interests of the neighboring countries can greatly enhance the effectiveness of its endeavors. The SCO's ability to stabilize Afghanistan would have a substantial impact on the security, stability, and economic prosperity of the region.

The foreign ministers of the SCO members recently deliberated on their vision for Afghanistan, with a firm commitment to transforming it into a self-governing, unbiased, cohesive, tranquil, democratic, and prosperous nation. China, Pakistan, and Russia each have their own distinct connections and interests in Afghanistan. The facilitation of the formation of an inclusive administration in Afghanistan should not solely rest on the shoulders of the SCO. Instead, the SCO should assure the efficacy of its governance. The major powers having an interest in Afghanistan, bolstered by the endorsement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), will wield greater influence.

It is important to note that the SCO emphasizes the peaceful resolution of differences among all Afghan parties. Therefore, it should not be regarded as interference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs but rather as a mediation effort to resolve the conflict.²⁴

Challenges to SCO in Afghanistan

There has been extensive discussion about China assuming the roles left vacant by the U.S. departure from Afghanistan. Some anticipate that China will allocate resources to meet the country's financial requirements, endorse the Taliban government to assume political responsibilities, and offer security aid to bolster the military capabilities of the new regime. Nevertheless, conversations frequently lack a lucid elucidation of the SCO's role in fostering stability within the nation. Based on the organization's historical performance, it appears that the SCO is unlikely to exercise a substantial influence.²⁵

²³ Shakeel Ahmad Ramay, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization Is Distinctly Different from NATO', (21 September 2022), available at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202209/21/WS632a617ca310fd2b29e78cff.html>.

²⁴ Ali, 'SCO's Role in Afghanistan's Stability'.

²⁵ Eva Seiwert, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Will Not Fill Any Vacuum in Afghanistan' - (Foreign Policy Research Institute', 30 September 2021), available at

Can SCO be an Ideal Platform for Resolving Afghan Issue

The SCO has the capacity to function as a model framework for effectively tackling the issue of Afghanistan. With the exception of Turkmenistan, the neighboring countries of the nation consist mainly of permanent members (Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China) or observer nations (Iran) of the SCO. The instability in Afghanistan directly affects the stability of multiple members of the SCO due to its porous borders.

The SCO's goals of fighting "three evils" (extremism, separatism, and terrorism), drug trafficking, and poverty eradication align well with the objective of revamping the security situation in Afghanistan. Since its establishment, just three months before the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan has been a major topic of debate in the organization. Over the years, Afghanistan has increased its engagement with the SCO, particularly after becoming an observer in 2012.²⁶

Security Implications

SCO member countries have chosen to build contacts with the Taliban individually rather than as a group due to trust issues and disagreements. They are seeking assurances related to geography, economics, and security. In January 2021, Iran convened a meeting with a delegation from the Taliban to engage in discussions pertaining to their bilateral ties, Afghan migrants residing in Iran, as well as the prevailing political and security conditions in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.²⁷ Similarly, Moscow hosted a Taliban delegation in July 2021 for security assurances,²⁸ China served as the host for the events in 2019 and July 2021. Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, the former Director General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), held a meeting with the Taliban in September 2021 to

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/09/the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-will-not-fill-any-vacuum-in-afghanistan/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Fatemeh Aman, 'Iran-Taliban Growing Ties: What's Different This Time?', *Atlantic Council* (blog), (16 February 2021), available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-taliban-growing-ties-whats-different-this-time/>.

²⁸ Vladimir Isachenkov, 'Taliban Visit Moscow to Say Their Wins Don't Threaten Russia | AP News', (8 July 2021), available at <https://apnews.com/article/taliban-moscow-europe-russia-51327432f1455020352826281c6c4e73>.

conclude the process of establishing a government,²⁹ while India also held talks with the Taliban to safeguard its geostrategic interests in Afghanistan.³⁰

Member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have engaged in bilateral discussions with the Taliban in order to secure guarantees that Afghanistan will not serve as a breeding ground for the proliferation of terrorism. The Taliban has pledged to obstruct any attempts by other terrorist organizations to exploit Afghanistan as a base for launching attacks against other countries.³¹ The Doha Agreement of 2020 included these assurances, aiming to prevent international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS-K from utilizing Afghan territory to threaten the United States, its allies, and other nations. The agreement also emphasized the necessity of a comprehensive and long-lasting cessation of hostilities in order to initiate discussions and negotiations among Afghan parties. Nevertheless, the Taliban reneged on their commitment to a truce and instead exploited the circumstances to launch a military attack in order to strengthen their control in Afghanistan.

The SCO member states' divergent interests and bilateral approach gave Taliban the courage to be inimical and bellicose in Eurasia as indicated by their dispute with Tajikistan. In his September 2021 address to the United Nations, President Rahmon of Tajikistan underscored the imperative of establishing an all-encompassing administration in Afghanistan. He highlighted the way in which different terrorist organizations were exploiting the unstable political and military situation in Afghanistan to strengthen their positions. The Taliban declared that they would prohibit any adjacent state from interfering in Afghan domestic matters as a response.³² Due to the deteriorating relations between Tajikistan and the Afghan Taliban, Tajikistan and Pakistan feel compelled to interfere.³³ Tajikistan possesses a very modest military contingent of 30,000 personnel, which is smaller in comparison to both NATO and other member states of the SCO. Moreover, the presence of

²⁹ Press Trust of India, "“Everything Will Be Okay”: Pakistan’s Intelligence Chief Faiz Hameed during Visit to Kabul”, *India Today*, (5 September 2021), available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pakistan-intelligence-chief-faiz-hameed-visit-kabul-1849323-2021-09-05>.

³⁰ Suhasini Haidar, 'Indian Envoy in Doha Meets Taliban Leader', *The Hindu*, (31 August 2021), sec. India, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-envoy-in-doha-meets-taliban-leader/article61423725.ece>.

³¹ BBC News, 'Taliban Are Back - What next for Afghanistan?', *BBC News*, (8 September 2019), sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49192495>.

³² Eurasianet, 'Taliban, Tajikistan Embroiled in Battle of Words, Saber-Rattling | Eurasianet', (30 September 2021), available at <https://eurasianet.org/taliban-tajikistan-embroiled-in-battle-of-words-saber-rattling>.

³³ Baqir Sajjad Syed, 'PM Speaks to Emomali to Defuse Tajikistan’s Tension with Taliban', *Dawn.Com*, (3 October 2021), available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649826>.

6,000 soldiers in the Russian army post in Tajikistan may not present a substantial obstacle to the Taliban.³⁴

The divergent viewpoints among members of the SCO have resulted in very minimal concessions from the Taliban in terms of obtaining international recognition. The Taliban's unwillingness to bestow rights on Afghan women and form a government that is inclusive, as supported by Western countries and the SCO, indicates a regression towards fundamentalist governance in Afghanistan. The Taliban has accused the global community of employing the call for diversity as a strategy to surreptitiously insert spies into their government.³⁵

SCO Afghan Contact Group Activities

The establishment of a "SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group" in 2005 highlighted the importance of Afghanistan to the organization. Nevertheless, details regarding the Contact Group's endeavors are limited due to its infrequent convening of meetings prior to its resumption of activity in 2017. In 2009, the Contact Group convened a dedicated conference on Afghanistan, during which attendees endorsed a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. The strategy encompassed collaborative drills, workshops, and educational program for pertinent Afghan entities, the creation of a regional counter-narcotics hub, and a specifically tailored SCO educational facility. Nevertheless, advancements in these endeavors were sluggish until September 2021, when participants engaged in discussions over the establishment of an anti-terrorism center in Dushanbe.³⁶

While the primary objective of the SCO-Afghanistan partnership is to provide aid in counter-drug and counter-terrorism efforts, member nations have increasingly taken on a greater role in supporting Afghanistan's reconstruction in recent years. Several testimonies on Afghanistan by the SCO demonstrate China's promotion of resolving underlying socio-economic problems as a means to eradicate terrorism and extremism.

The activities of the SCO as an organization, however, are indistinct. In a 2016 meeting discussing the Afghanistan issue, Rashid Alimov, a former secretary-general of the SCO, emphasized that member states contribute to the establishment of national defense and law enforcement agencies, revitalizing the economy, developing energy and transportation networks, and offering assistance in anti-drug efforts and personnel training. However, instead of

³⁴ Eurasianet, 'Taliban, Tajikistan Embroiled in Battle of Words, Saber-Rattling | Eurasianet'.

³⁵ Ayesha Tanzeem, 'Russia, China, Pakistan Push Taliban Toward Inclusivity', VOA, (22 September 2021), available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-china-pakistan-push-taliban-toward-inclusivity/6240971.html>.

³⁶ 'Shanghai Cooperation Organisation | (SCO', 17 September 2021), available at <http://eng.sectesco.org/news/20210917/782639.html>.

utilizing the SCO framework, these projects are conducted through bilateral means.³⁷ The SCO largely serves as a platform for member governments to coordinate their policies and involvement with Afghanistan rather than actively promote joint projects. There is presently no evidence of any imminent change.

SCO Summit Meeting After Taliban

The recent SCO conference, convened in the aftermath of the Taliban's assumption of power in Afghanistan, failed to produce any concrete strategy for addressing the problem. The SCO, under China's leadership, is cautious about getting too involved in Afghanistan. It limits its actions to issuing statements and guiding the operations of member nations, according to its policy of non-interference and China's reluctance to participate in Afghanistan's rehabilitation.

Furthermore, the SCO has no obligation to engage in military missions, and military collaboration is not among its goals. The SCO, with its wide-ranging objectives encompassing economic, political, security, cultural, research, education, tourism, and environmental preservation, is not intended to operate as an 'Asian NATO.' Hence, those who expect the SCO to assume the responsibilities that the US has relinquished in Afghanistan misunderstand the fundamental purpose of the organization. SCO Deputy Secretary-General Wang Kaiwen stated that the organization can only enhance the internal security situation of affiliated states by expressing its stance and expecting the country to address its problems using suitable methods. China was not considered a potential replacement for NATO forces in Afghanistan, despite initial speculation that it may fill the void, mostly due to the lack of consideration given to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in assuming that role. The SCO did not formally acknowledge the present Taliban regime and excluded them from the summit convened in Dushanbe in mid-September. However, it can only serve as a facilitator for policy concerns among member states, and it lacks the ability to take any significant position.

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The SCO serves as a valuable platform for member states to engage in negotiation and cooperation, and its significance should not be overlooked. However, it remains uncertain if the SCO will acknowledge the Taliban administration in Afghanistan or choose its approach towards Afghanistan under Taliban rule as an officially recognized observer state. Furthermore, the

³⁷ 'H.E. Rashid Alimov (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Global Sustainable Transport Conference (Ashgabat, 2016), 3rd Plenary Session | UN Web TV', (27 November 2016), available at <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1o/k1og24oz50>.

³⁸ Etienne Combier Smith Judy Harter, Fiona Katherine, 'Hardening Positions on Afghanistan Following Summit in Dushanbe', *Novastan English* (blog), (7 December 2021), available at <https://novastan.org/en/tajikistan/hardening-positions-on-afghanistan-following-summit-in-dushanbe/>.

outlook for ongoing challenges relating to Afghanistan is uncertain. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether the SCO will actively participate in shaping Afghanistan's future.

Conclusion

While the destabilization of Afghanistan presents security risks to the region, the involvement of the SCO in Afghanistan has contributed to the promotion of peace and stability in the area. The organization has significantly contributed to the peace process in Afghanistan by focusing on regional security, peacemaking, economic growth, and cooperation in cultural and humanitarian projects.

Zhang Ming, the Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), emphasized the importance of a stable Afghanistan in ensuring long-lasting stability in the area. The SCO has successfully endeavored over the last twenty years to intervene and resolve the Afghan problem, resulting in an improved state of peace, security, and stability in the periphery. The member states of the SCO concur that Afghanistan necessitates a government that is diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and inclusive nature. Additionally, they hold the same aspiration for a peaceful, egalitarian, non-aligned, and drug-free Afghanistan. The SCO is eager to exert additional efforts to enable Afghanistan to make a meaningful contribution to regional security, stability, and economic development.

The current tumultuous and unstable state of Afghanistan could have serious consequences for the Afghan population as a whole, as well as for regional stability. SCO aims to actively contribute to the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan by convening all relevant parties for negotiations and endorsing initiatives that target the underlying causes of the conflict and regional instability. The international community's endorsement of the Taliban-dominated national unity government will act as a catalyst for Afghanistan's internal dynamics. Furthermore, the perils posed by ISKP necessitate heightened global endeavors to tackle the existing volatile state of affairs in Afghanistan.

While the situation in Afghanistan demands immediate attention, it is crucial to refrain from making impulsive decisions. In order to ensure regional peace and the effective functioning of the state administration, it is essential to establish a unity government that receives genuine support and involvement from all political groups. Significant compromises from all parties will be essential for the efficient operation of the government.

The Taliban's limited resources and capabilities necessitate international assistance in governing Afghanistan. Assisting the future Afghan administration can be used as a means to gain influence and impose control, ensuring political stability in the country. Furthermore, the involvement of SCO in Afghanistan has the potential to be advantageous for the organization.

The significant impact exerted by the SCO in Afghanistan will enhance its credibility and reputation as a formidable regional organization.

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