

# THE STABILIZING ROLE OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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## Abstract

*Terrorism is one of the main reasons contributing to Afghanistan's insecurity. The fragile peace in Afghanistan has given terrorist groups much freedom to manoeuvre and grow. These situations require the countries in the region to assume greater responsibility to stabilise the country. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) member states and Afghanistan relations are based on historical friendship and shared interests. The SCO's involvement in Afghanistan is facilitated by the common interests of Pakistan, China, Russia, and other neighbouring countries. The withdrawal of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) from Afghanistan gave the SCO more room to advance in Afghanistan. This article highlights the concrete steps that the SCO has taken to stabilise Afghanistan, as well as the interests of member countries and their peace efforts. In this study, the theories of the Regional Security Complex Theory and Liberal Institutionalism were used. The current economic crisis and political disruption following NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan highlight the role of the SCO in the situation. Collaboration to boost Afghanistan's economy and growth would be beneficial. Reconstruction, development, governance, and humanitarian assistance are not only the responsibility of the countries in the region but also of the international community and organizations. The economic crisis and the rapid international recognition of the Taliban pose great challenges to the SCO.*

**Keywords:** SCO; Afghanistan; Stabilizing; Withdrawal; Regional.

## Introduction

The SCO was formed in the late 1990s in response to terrorist insurgencies, separatist movements, and religious extremist groups in

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Central Asia and China's Xinjiang province. China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were the founding members of the Shanghai Five in 1996. In 2001, the group was renamed the SCO after Uzbekistan joined. Member states of the SCO had a "single goal" of combating the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. On June 8–9, 2017, Pakistan and India were admitted as formal members of the SCO.<sup>1</sup>The SCO aims to enhance member-state relations, foster cooperation in various fields such as politics, economics, trade, science-technical, cultural, educational, energy, transportation, tourism, and environmental protection, and establish a democratic, equitable international political and economic order.<sup>2</sup>

Afghanistan has been a member of the SCO for over 15 years. When the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was founded in 2005, Afghanistan became a top priority on the SCO's agenda. In the years that followed, the group became the primary means of communication and cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan. The main concerns revolved around preventing terrorism and drug trafficking spillover effects, with top priorities including strengthening Afghanistan's state capabilities, enhancing cooperation with the SCO, and delimiting anti-narcotics security belts around the country.

In addition, the organization established Afghanistan dialogue activities with the European Union. A special summit with the Afghan government was held in 2009, and a plan of action was prepared to address terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime. Support for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process, as well as support for UN activities in the country, were announced during the Astana Summit in 2011. At the 2012 Beijing SCO Summit, Afghanistan was recognized as an observer SCO member.<sup>3</sup> When then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited China in 2012, Afghanistan was admitted as an observer to the SCO. Kabul sought full membership in the organization in 2015.<sup>4</sup> The SCO resumed SCO-Afghan CG activities after a seven-year pause. Representatives from both sides have met four times so far to plan group activities.

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<sup>1</sup> Mariam et al., "Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Conflict Resolution: A Comparative Study of Pakistan and India Bilateral Relations," pp: 89-97 in *NDU Journal* 32(1), (2018), 94

<sup>2</sup> Sohail et al., *SCO Role in Regional Stability Prospects of its Expansion*, pp: 1-203 in *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2013), 39

<sup>3</sup> Guilherme Simionato and João Arthur Reis, "The SCO and Post-War Afghanistan: New Challenges to Regional Cooperation," pp: 132-158 in *UFRGSMUN/ UFRGS Model United Nations Journal*, No. 1 (2013), 140

<sup>4</sup> "SCO Begins in Dushanbe: How This Eight-Member Body Can Help Shape Afghanistan's Future," *First Post*, (September 17, 2021). Available at: <https://www.firstpost.com/world/why-sco-can-play-an-important-role-in-shaping-out-afghanistans-future-9943681.html> (accessed March 24, 2022)

On July 14, 2021, the Foreign Ministers of the SCO and Afghanistan attended the fourth meeting of the CG in Dushanbe.<sup>5</sup> Afghanistan is once again at a serious juncture in its history. For the last two decades, continued war has reached its end with the resurgence of the Taliban and the withdrawal of international forces. Afghanistan requires increased international and regional support to address the severe challenges posed by the withdrawal of international forces. In this connection, SCO has been viewed as an alternative venue for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The present situation in Afghanistan compels the SCO to resume its institutional competence for peace and prosperity in the country. Because of its commitment to non-interference in countries' internal affairs, the SCO cannot be militarily involved, but it has the capacity to deal with a country's chaotic situations. All the SCO member states have serious concerns about peace and stability in Afghanistan.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Regional Security Complex Theory**

Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory suggests that regions are security complexes, where the security of one state is interconnected with the security of others within the region. The theory emphasizes shared security concerns, interdependence, and the role of institutions in managing security issues within a specific region. RSCT views security as a dynamic, socially constructed concept within a specific region. The region is a "complex" made up of interacting states, actors, and issues that influence security perceptions and actions.<sup>6</sup> Afghanistan is a nation grappling with a complex security landscape, characterized by terrorism, drug trafficking, weak governance, and external interference. These factors interact and feed into insecurity, creating a regional spillover effect.

## **SCO & RSCT**

### **SCO's Goals**

- Maintain regional stability through collaborative security approaches.
- Combat terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking.
- Foster economic and cultural cooperation.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Holds a Meeting of Foreign Ministers on the Afghan," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China*, (July 15, 2021), Available at: <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/celr/eng/zgyw/t1892261.htm> (accessed January 10, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> Barry Buzan, "Regional security complex theory in the post-cold war world," In *Theories of new regionalism: A Palgrave reader*, pp: 142, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 140-159

The SCO's goals directly address the security issues identified by RSCT in the Afghan complex. The cooperative approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of regional security and seeks solutions through collective action.

#### Exclusive Links

**Counter-terrorism and Security Cooperation:** The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) coordinates intelligence sharing and joint operations among member states, aiming to dismantle terrorist networks operating in and around Afghanistan. This aligns with RSCT's emphasis on cooperative security measures.

**Economic Development and Connectivity:** The SCO promotes regional economic integration through various initiatives, including infrastructure development projects and trade facilitation measures. This aims to address one of the root causes of instability in Afghanistan: poverty and a lack of economic opportunities.

**Soft Power and Regional Governance:** The SCO's "Shanghai Spirit" emphasizes mutual respect, non-interference, and cooperative problem-solving. This approach resonates with RSCT's focus on non-traditional security threats and collaborative governance practices.

The SCO's potential contribution to stabilizing Afghanistan aligns with several key principles of RSCT. However, its effectiveness hinges on its ability to overcome internal contradictions, address concerns about legitimacy, and adapt its approach to the evolving dynamics of the complex Afghan security environment

### **Liberal Institutionalism Theory**

Liberal institutionalism, or liberal internationalism, is a theoretical perspective in international relations that emphasizes the role of international institutions in promoting cooperation, peace, and stability. According to liberal institutionalism, international institutions create a framework for states to collaborate, resolve disputes peacefully, and pursue common goals.<sup>7</sup>

### **The SCO in Afghanistan and Liberal Institutionalism**

The SCO in Afghanistan has a more indirect and complex relationship with Liberal institutionalism Theory (LIT) compared to Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Here's an explanation of the potential links and limitations:

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<sup>7</sup>John Gerard Ruggie, "Liberal institutionalism and the return of conflict: Rethinking the case for cooperation," pp: 563in *International studies quarterly* 41(4) (1997), 561-585

### **Key Principles of LIT**

**Emphasis on institutions and rules:** LIT posits that international institutions and shared rules can promote cooperation and reduce conflict between states. This cooperation fosters interdependence, builds trust, and encourages peaceful dispute resolution.

**Universal values and norms:** LIT promotes values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as essential prerequisites for peace and stability.

**Multilateral cooperation:** LIT favors multilateral decision-making and collective action through international organizations as tools for managing common challenges and upholding shared values.<sup>8</sup>

### **Possible Links to SCO in Afghanistan**

**SCO's focus on regional cooperation:** The SCO aims to address security challenges through collaborative mechanisms like intelligence sharing and joint operations, aligning with LIT's emphasis on collective action.

**Economic integration and interdependence:** The SCO's promotion of regional economic cooperation and connectivity projects could foster interdependence and shared interests among member states, potentially reducing the likelihood of conflict.

**Soft power and norms promotion:** The SCO's "Shanghai Spirit" emphasizes principles like mutual respect and non-interference, which could be seen as aligning with some aspects of LIT's values, although interpretations may differ.

While the SCO's activities in Afghanistan might show some parallels with LIT's principles of cooperation and interdependence, a more consistent alignment with the theory's core values like democracy, human rights, and transparent governance remains crucial. The SCO's effectiveness in contributing to a stable and secure Afghanistan under the lens of LIT would depend on its willingness to embrace these values and operate with greater transparency and accountability.

### **Member's State's Interests in Afghanistan their Efforts for Country's Stability**

Afghanistan has strategic importance in the region, as well as being a neighboring country to four SCO member states. SCO has a total of eight permanent members, of which the four neighboring states are Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The other four countries Russia, India, Kazakhstan, and Kirghizstan are not neighboring countries but have close

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<sup>8</sup>Stephen D Krasner, "International organization: A state of the art," pp: 477-479 in *International organization* 23(4), (1969), 475-512

relations with Afghanistan. All member states have serious concerns about the stability of Afghanistan. Because peace in Afghanistan paves the way for stability in the region, member states cannot ignore peace in Afghanistan.

**Pakistan**, as the single country in the region most severely impacted by the decade-long terrorist and extremist activities in Afghanistan, was the most crucial country for stability before becoming a permanent member of the SCO. The country is actively involved in Afghan rebuilding, countering terrorism, countering extremism, promoting peace talks, and collaborating on joint infrastructure projects with Iran.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan also strongly condemned the avoidance of financial and humanitarian assistance from Afghanistan by the international community.<sup>10</sup> As a permanent member of the SCO, **India** effectively participates in the reconstruction of the country. India sees SCO as the best platform for the regional countries to work together in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> As Afghanistan is in a needy situation, India is providing developmental, economic, and military aid to Afghanistan. Delhi also tries to integrate Afghanistan into regional economic structures.<sup>12</sup> After the US and China, India is the third-largest aid provider to Afghanistan.

The role of the four permanent **Central Asian countries** in the SCO has major concerns about peace in Afghanistan. The current, newly established Taliban regime in Afghanistan is a serious threat to all countries in the region, especially the Central Asian states. These threats include the current Taliban hegemony, the high flow of drugs, and the long decade of ongoing terrorist and extremist activities. The CARs consider the illegal drug flow and terrorist activities from Afghanistan as national and foreign security issues.<sup>13</sup> According to a report, 90 tonnes of illegal drugs pass through these countries on their way to Europe and Russia each year. On August 6, 2021, the leaders of the CARs convened in Turkmenistan to enhance regional cooperation and address issues like the growing security crisis in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> SCO member states are constructing robust regional

<sup>9</sup>Simionato and Reis, *The SCO and Post-War Afghanistan*, 150

<sup>10</sup>“Pakistan’s Role In Afghan Situation Lauded,” *Daily Dawn* (Rawalpindi, November 11, 2008), Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1657304> (accessed January 13, 2022)

<sup>11</sup>Simionato and Reis, *The SCO and Post-War Afghanistan*, 150

<sup>12</sup> Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, “India’s and Pakistan’s Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region,” *Santa Monica*, (CA: RAND, 2012)

<sup>13</sup>Simionato and Reis, *The SCO and Post-War Afghanistan*, 152-153

<sup>14</sup>Ayjaz Wani, “Resurgent Taliban and its Implications on Central Asia,” (Observer Research Foundation, September 9, 2021), Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/resurgent-taliban-and-its-implications-on-central-asia/> (accessed February 11, 2022)

infrastructure, including rails, roads, and pipelines, along Afghanistan's border to aid in the stabilization of Afghanistan and Central Asia.

**China and Russia**, as prominent members, have a stronghold on the organization. Both countries, being the leading members of the SCO and in the region, have a major concern about Afghanistan's stability. China and Russia appear to be coordinating their strategy in Afghanistan. Both have joint interactions about Afghanistan's situation, whether it's terrorism or extremism, illegal trade or drug trafficking, countering US hegemony, or various types of developments.

China and Russia, along with Central Asia, have various common interests in Afghanistan. The first is the preservation of stability and the prevention of the spread of any radical forces or security threats. Afghanistan was once a haven for the Islamic Movements of Uzbekistan and East Turkestan, posing threats to China, Russia, and Central Asia and affecting their shared interests. To tackle and reduce their influence in the region, Beijing and Moscow cooperated with the newly established regime of the Taliban.

Preservation of political stability in Afghanistan is another common interest of the concerned states. The first step towards political stability in the country is to work with the Taliban on ideological grounds so that they keep their ideology within their borders.<sup>15</sup>

The recent withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan indicates new ways of Sino-Russian coordination. Both states have serious concerns about working in Afghanistan. Beijing and Moscow highly criticize and blame the U.S. for the present situation and disorder in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> Russia and China, through the SCO, are supporting a transitional Afghan government, promoting mutual exploration and development, and combating terrorism, poverty, and drug trafficking. Both states have moved towards the building of a secure regional environment.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene Chausovsky, "China and Russia Have a Shared Playbook for Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, (September 13, 2021). Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/13/china-russia-shared-playbook-afghanistan/>(accessed January 1, 2022)

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, "Prospects for Sino-Russian Coordination in Afghanistan," *War on The Rocks*, (November 8, 2021), Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/prospects-for-sino-russian-coordination-in-afghanistan/>(accessed February 02, 2022)

<sup>17</sup> Zaki Shaikh, "Analysis - Russia, China Propose Initiatives for Peace in Afghanistan," (London: Anadolu Agency July 16, 2021), Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-russia-china-propose-initiatives-for-peace-in-afghanistan/2306561>(accessed February 10, 2022)

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All the SCO member states have serious concerns about peace and stability in Afghanistan. Four neighboring countries are permanent members of the SCO, i.e., Pakistan, China, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The other four remaining states have close ties with Afghanistan. This border's proximity greatly depends on the country's stability.

The SCO member states want to fight against illegal drug production, psychotropic drugs, and their forerunners. Member countries actively participate and cooperate in developing and implementing trans-regional developmental programs to stabilize and improve their socio-economic situation.<sup>18</sup> Afghanistan is a getaway through which CARs (rich in natural resources) and other regional countries transport within the region. Afghanistan's stability is crucial for member countries of the SCO and other regional countries facing larger risks in the region. Abdullah, the Afghan ex-president, pledged at the 2017 summit to enhance regional cooperation, economic development, stability, and prosperity among member countries.<sup>19</sup>

The SCO can play a critical role in the Afghan issue by providing an international voice to transmit SCO member countries' viewpoints and concerns regarding Afghanistan. The foreign ministers of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group will meet in July 2021, according to the SCO member states.<sup>20</sup> SCO member states emphasize the significance of a swift resolution of Afghanistan's situation for enhancing regional security and stability.<sup>21</sup>

## **What has the SCO done about the Afghan Problem till then?**

### **Establishment of an SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group**

The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established between the SCO and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (now Afghanistan). The main purpose of this establishment was to foster a consultative relationship between the country and the organization. The organization was established

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<sup>18</sup> Jamshed Khan and Razia Sultana, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan: An Overview," pp: 1-13 in *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 13(2), (2019), 2-3

<sup>19</sup> "Abdullah Calls on SCO Members to Support Afghan Peace Talks," *TOLO News*, (December 01, 2017) Available at: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/abdullah-calls-sco-members-bring-militants-peace-table> (accessed March 14, 2022)

<sup>20</sup> Wang Jin, "SCO In Unique Position to Address Afghan Issue Despite Different Concerns," *Global Times*, (September 15, 2021), Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234336.shtml> (accessed April 20, 2022)

<sup>21</sup> "Dushanbe Declaration on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Law Info China*, (September 17, 2021). Available at: <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=8155&lib=tax&SearchKeyword=&SearchCKeyword> (accessed March 16, 2022)



to discuss and propose solutions based on shared interests between the two founding parties, as per sources. The Afghan-SCO CG comprises SCO Secretariat officials, senior Afghan embassy diplomats, experts from both sides, and members of other SCO states. All the activities are conducted with consultation and mutual agreement, not with one party's own sweet will. This set of rules was signed on November 4, 2005, in Beijing in Russian, English, and Chinese languages.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Moscow Special Conference on Afghanistan and Afghan Observer Status in the SCO**

The member countries of the SCO, mainly Russia and the CARs, are pleased to see a stable Afghanistan under the prism of the organization. Both countries share a common goal of aiding in rebuilding and demilitarizing a country while also regulating the cultivation of other crops instead of poppy. For the rebuilding of Afghanistan's situation, Russian President Putin summoned a special conference on January 27, 2009, in Moscow. The conference was attended by various officials, including the UN General Secretary, SCO Secretary-General, Patrick Moon, and NATO Deputy Secretary-General Martin Howard. After this conference, SCO gained a special place in the world.<sup>23</sup> Finally, after continued requests, the SCO granted observer status to Afghanistan at the 2012 summit in Beijing.

### **The SCO's Response to Narcotics trafficking and ISIS in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is known for its largest illegal opium poppy cultivation, accounting for 90% of the world's production. This practice, which has been prevalent for centuries, gained popularity after the Soviet invasion. The opium industry accounts for 6–11% of Afghanistan's GDP,<sup>24</sup> causing 100,000 deaths annually. Illegal drug cultivation not only disrupts internal stability but also has significant impacts on regional countries. It also provides significant funds to militants, posing a significant threat to the region's security.

The 2004 SCO summit in Tashkent aimed to control and combat illegal narcotics and psychotropic drug production, with member states agreeing to raise regional awareness. The Coordinating Council of Afghanistan was

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<sup>22</sup>Meena Singh Roy, "Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Afghanistan: Scope and Limitations," pp: 545-561 in *Strategic Analysis* 34(4), (2010), 547-548

<sup>23</sup>Julie Boland, *Ten Years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, pp: 1-62 in *21st Century Defense Initiative*, (2011), 13

<sup>24</sup>"What Does Taliban Control Mean for Afghanistan's Opium Economy," *The Economist Explains*, (September 1, 2021). Available at: <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2021/09/01/what-does-taliban-control-mean-for-afghanistans-opium-economy> (accessed March 28, 2022)

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established for border control and prohibiting actions against illegal drug production.<sup>25</sup>

The world's second-largest city (Mosul) for oil production was captured by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2004. This newly formed movement was supported and joined by Mullah Mansoor and Muslim youth from the Asian countries of India, China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. ISIS was rapidly growing in the region around Afghanistan, which had already been a battlefield since 2001. Some other factions of the Taliban, especially the rebellion, joined ISIS, and they rejected Taliban rule and started fighting for power, gaining inside the country. Both sides' leaders sent formal letters to each other, but ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was adamant about the re-establishment of the Islamic State. This power tussle disturbed the country's internal as well as entire regional situations.

During the 2016 SCO summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin urged member countries to support Afghanistan in its terrorism elimination struggle. He criticized the international military's inability to address the country's security issues, citing the spread of radical Islamist movements in neighboring countries. Uzbek President Islam Karimov also expressed concern:

Being the neighbors of the country, we can never leave Afghanistan alone. He further said that the withdrawal of NATO forces from the country created a vacuum that was easily filled by various military organizations. Member countries do their best and return to Afghanistan to combat terrorism under the auspices of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).

The Deputy Director of the Executive Committee of RATS stated in this regard that:

RATS will not back down from providing any type of assistance to the Afghan forces to counter the expansion of ISIS in the region. RATS also trained the security forces of Afghanistan to stop terrorist penetration in the region. The SCO plans to draft an action plan and collaborate with the UN and other regional organizations to combat global terrorism.<sup>26</sup>

### **Meetings of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group**

The SCO resumed SCO-Afghan CG activities after a seven-year pause. Representatives from both sides have met four times so far to plan group activities. The first SCO-Afghan CG meeting occurred on October 11, 2017, in Moscow. Member countries expressed their willingness to support the war-torn country in achieving peace and security. The primary agenda of this consultative process was to assist the country in countering terrorism, illegal drugs, and crimes. All parties agreed to strengthen the country's national

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<sup>25</sup>Khan and Sultana, "*Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan*," 4

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8

defense and security forces. There is an urgent need for an environment free from terror and violence.<sup>27</sup> Afghanistan's Deputy Foreign Minister, Hikmat Khalil Karzai, led the Afghan delegation delivered a statement at the meeting issued by the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This statement consisted of a mechanism outlining how CG will assist and support the war-torn country.

First, Karzai requested that SCO member states provide Afghanistan with permanent co-chairmanship of future Contact Group meetings, aiming to enhance cooperation and resolve regional concerns.

The second was the country's full membership in the SCO.

Third, the SCO states have requested full support from Afghanistan in tackling terrorism, a common security concern among regional countries.

Fourth, he requested the SCO countries exert influence over militants and bring them to the negotiation table for result-oriented peace talks.

Finally, he underscored the SCO's crucial role in Afghanistan's economic growth and integration with the SCO economies through enhanced trade, transportation, and investment.<sup>28</sup>

The second SCO-Afghan CG was held on May 28, 2018, in Beijing. This meeting was conducted on three agendas based on the country's current situation, the settlement process in Afghanistan, and the SCO's role, as well as steps for SCO-Afghanistan collaboration.<sup>29</sup> In their joint statement, all the member countries stated that "we assure the government of Afghanistan of our commitment to stabilizing the country in respect of territorial integrity, independence, sovereignty, and national unity."

The Secretary-General of the SCO, Rashid Alimov, attended the meeting and stated:

As is evident, there is no simple military approach that can guarantee Afghanistan's stability. Only a holistic approach to security, economics, state governance, and development issues, as well as the UN's coordination role in guaranteeing peace and stability in Afghanistan, can deliver the long-awaited results.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group Meeting, (Moscow), para 2

<sup>28</sup> "SCO Resumes Afghanistan Contact Group Meeting," *TOLO News*, (October 11, 2017). Available at: <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/sco-resumes-afghanistan-contact-group-meeting-after-7-years> (accessed February 12, 2022)

<sup>29</sup> "Beijing Hosts the Second Meeting of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group," *Sect SCO*, (May 05, 2018). Available at: <http://eng.sectSCO.org/news/20180528/434755.html> (accessed April 22, 2022)

<sup>30</sup> "Second SCO- Afghanistan Contact Group Meeting, Beijing," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, (May 28, 2018). Available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/29926/Second+SCO+Afghanistan+Contact+Group+Meeting+Beijing+May+28+2018> (accessed March 21, 2022)

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The third SCO-Afghanistan CG, attended by 40 representatives from eight SCO member states, Afghanistan, and the RATS Executive Committee, was held in Bishkek on April 19, 2019. The meeting co-chaired by Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan, highlighted the need for immediate peace and prosperity within the country and the region. The foreign ministers emphasized the deep historical friendship between the SCO member states and Afghanistan, their sincere emotions, and the proposed road map for further action by the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group. The meeting aimed to ensure Afghanistan's full cooperation and address the current military-political situation.<sup>31</sup>

On July 14, 2021, the foreign ministers of the SCO and Afghanistan attended the fourth meeting of the CG in Dushanbe. In his remarks, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the meeting in his opening remarks that “the hasty withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan created a power vacuum, and various militant groups once again found a smooth path to a safe haven in the country.”

Afghanistan faces a choice between war, peace, chaos, or stability, affecting its people's fundamental interests and the region's stability and development. Wang Yi has presented five proposals to boost the situation and safeguard the interests of the country and the region, aiming to ensure the countries and the region's well-being:

First, all SCO member states should use their influence to remind the United States of its commitment to Afghan stability as the initiator of the Afghanistan issue.

Second, the SCO should support regional counter-terrorism institutions in preventing and spreading the three evils around Afghanistan and urge the Taliban to maintain its promise to cut ties with international terrorist groups.

Third, the SCO should promote flexibility, common ground, and national reconciliation among Afghan factions, adhering to the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" principle.

Fourth, the SCO should address Afghanistan's serious issues and protect its sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. The SCO should envision Afghanistan as an independent, neutral, and self-governing country, pursuing a reasonable Muslim policy, fighting terrorism, and fostering friendly relations with neighboring countries. This will enable Afghans to govern their state according to their will.

Fifth, the SCO should collaborate with Afghanistan in various sectors such as economy, education, culture, trade, public health, community building, and reconstruction to aid in its self-development and long-term

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<sup>31</sup>“SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group Held its Third Meeting with SCO Participation in Bishkek,” *Sects SCO*, (April 19, 2019). Available at: <http://eng.sectsc.org/news/20190419/533099.html>(accessed April 14, 2022)

growth, while also supporting regional economic development and strengthening public health cooperation for COVID-19 combat.

The SCO meeting saw foreign ministers express concern about Afghanistan's unstable situation and the potential resurgence of terrorist or extremist groups. They pledged support for economic development, community building, counter-terrorism, inclusive political structures, and sustainable development. Member states pledged to cooperate with Afghanistan at regional and international levels for peace and reconciliation restoration. The situation is a result of the withdrawal of international forces.<sup>32</sup>

### **Withdrawal of International Forces and the Resurgence of Taliban**

At this point, Afghanistan is once again at a serious juncture in its history. For the last two decades, continued war has reached its endpoint with the resurgence of the Taliban and the exit of international forces. The sweet dreams of the US in Afghanistan of the installation of a democratic system have totally flopped; with the US-backed government machinery collapsing just weeks after the US began its retreat. Over two decades, NATO, ISAF, and US armies struggled to achieve significant achievements in the country due to terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. The country started with another chapter where the Taliban again sat in the driver's seat. Afghanistan requires increased international and regional support to address the severe challenges posed by the withdrawal of international forces. In this connection, SCO has been viewed as an alternative venue for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The present situation in Afghanistan compels the SCO to resume its institutional competence for peace and prosperity in the country. Because of its commitment to non-interference in countries' internal affairs, the SCO cannot be militarily involved, but it has the capacity to deal with a country's chaotic situations.

The Afghan Taliban has taken control of the country, causing instability due to terrorist outfits. The SCO has called for increased cooperation for the country's stabilization and sustainable development. The SCO foreign ministers in Dushanbe condemned ongoing violence and terrorist attacks targeting the public and state authorities. They further argued that the country's instability was caused by the presence of international terrorist organizations. The SCO pledged to help Afghanistan counter terrorism, extremism, illegal drug trafficking, and the economic crisis left behind by America.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Holds a Meeting*, para, 2-7

<sup>33</sup> *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Holds a Meeting*, para, 2-7

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Following the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan, disbursements by the IMF, WB, and other institutions to the war-torn country have been halted, resulting in inflation, poverty, cash shortages, a declining currency, and increasing unemployment among its inhabitants. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the United States froze approximately \$9 billion in Afghan central bank assets held in U.S. banks. This decision aimed to prevent the funds from falling into the hands of the Taliban, which the U.S. and many other countries do not recognize as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The SCO leaders have urged the international community to unfreeze Afghanistan's assets and increase aid to the war-torn country, which is on the brink of collapse due to the Taliban's return to power. They warn that failure to provide necessary assistance could lead to a humanitarian crisis with unpredictable consequences.<sup>34</sup>

For decades, war-torn Afghanistan had not yet emerged from one crisis, but the other had fallen. The emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan, a new threat to the war-torn country, began after 2014 and gradually expanded its position across the country. This shock has not only affected Afghanistan but also other regional countries, as the country is already grappling with extremist and terrorist groups. The Taliban, particularly the rebel faction, joined ISIS and resisted Taliban rule, gaining power within the country. Both leaders sent formal letters, but ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi remained steadfast in his desire for the re-establishment of the Islamic State, causing internal and regional turmoil. At the SCO summit in Ufa, Russian and Uzbek presidents emphasized the failure of international forces to fill a vacuum, causing severe consequences for regional countries, and particularly neighboring ones. They argued that this issue is regional and should be addressed at the regional level. At that time, the Deputy Director of the Executive Committee of RATS, VitalyBurov, said: "That the RATS would provide any type of assistance and train the Afghan forces in responding to ISIS expansion."<sup>35</sup>

The SCO, comprising China and India, is a rapidly growing economy with significant interest in Afghanistan. Both countries have concerns about Afghanistan's stability and are investing heavily in the country. The SCO

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<sup>34</sup> "SCO Leaders Call for Increased Afghan Aid, Unfreezing of Assets," *Gandhara RFE/RL'sTajik Service*, (September 17, 2021). Available at: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-meet-in-dushanbe-with-afghanistan-in-focus/31464685.html>(accessed January 13, 2021)

<sup>35</sup> Betty Lalrinfel and AnuragTripathi, "Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects for Membership," pp: 1114-1119 in *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 5(4), (2018), 1115

aims to become the future economic club, and Afghanistan's inclusion is crucial for gaining economic benefits and rebuilding a war-torn economy.<sup>36</sup>

Regional countries, particularly SCO member states, are committed to peace and stability in Afghanistan, with a shared vision for its solution. The SCO's role in Afghanistan is facilitated by China, Russia, Pakistan, and India's common interests. The current withdrawal offers opportunities for the SCO to fill the US-led vacuum, but failure could lead to undesirable situations for these countries. The SCO stands out from NATO's hostile approach, which has focused on military solutions and a government that has not effectively addressed Afghans or defeated the Taliban, offering a platform for more sincerity and confidence. The SCO foreign minister recently presented a visionary approach to the country, aiming to create an independent, peaceful, prosperous, unified, neutral, and Free State from terrorism, war, drugs, and democracy. China and Russia, along with Pakistan, have economic, political, and military ties with Afghanistan. The collective voice of SCO members will have more weight, and the SCO cannot force Afghan parties to settle differences without providing more assistance and support for conflict resolution.

The Taliban's legitimacy and ISKP threats from Afghanistan may require international support for a united government. Real participation from all sides is crucial for maintaining political stability. The SCO has been a frontrunner for participation in Afghanistan, and its credibility and assertiveness will increase its status as a powerful regional organization. The Taliban's smooth state machinery may require international support.

The SCO aims to balance national interests through talks, political coordination, and mutually acceptable solutions. It aims to tackle security issues, promote human and economic development, and promote social capital development. The SCO also focuses on restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan through the construction of railways, roads, and energy facilities and strengthening regional connectivity between Central and South Asia.<sup>37</sup>

### **Why the Regional Countries' Issue?**

The 20th anniversary of the Dushanbe Declaration highlighted the need for political and diplomatic resolution in Afghanistan, emphasizing the need for a peaceful, autonomous, and neutral country free from terrorism, war, and narcotics. It called for an inclusive government with representatives

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 1117

<sup>37</sup> Khalid TaimurAkram, "SCO Can Play a Positive Role in Afghanistan," *China Daily*, (September 7, 2021). Available at: <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/07/WS6136a6faa310efa1bd66db6f.html> (accessed January 01, 2022)

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from all ethnic, religious, and political groups to restore peace and stability.<sup>38</sup>

China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan asked that the US take responsibility for leaving unstable situations in Afghanistan post-withdrawal of NATO forces and sought that the US work with the Taliban to rebuild Afghanistan. And with good reason! Why should the task of ensuring that Afghanistan's economy does not collapse fall solely on the countries in its immediate vicinity? The United States must be held accountable for spending \$2 trillion in Afghanistan and having no results after twenty years. Despite spending \$87 billion on training, the Afghan military, which has 300,000 soldiers and the strongest military weaponry in the world, was unable to hold off 60,000 Taliban fighters for more than eleven days and surrendered. The US spent \$24 billion on economic development in Afghanistan, but the Taliban took over an economy in disarray, plunging the country into a humanitarian disaster. It is not the responsibility of the SCO countries, particularly Pakistan, China, Russia, and Iran, to reconstruct Afghanistan, rehabilitate its economy, and ensure that the Taliban understand what "inclusive" means under Western standards. If the Taliban were reaching out to the rest of the international community and seeking to learn how to interpret "inclusiveness" into a language they could understand before adopting it, would the rest of the world have an inclusive plan to integrate the Taliban not only regionally but globally?<sup>39</sup>

Reconstruction, development, governance, and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan are not the only responsibilities and contracts of regional countries, and they are not solved regionally. There is nothing at stake for the Taliban. They are free to return to their former ways. Time is of the essence, and leading from the front will require collaborative efforts with global parties, particularly those accountable for the disruption.

### **The SCO's Approach to a Taliban-led Afghanistan as an Official Observer State**

The SCO summit in Dushanbe did not include Taliban representatives due to the lack of official recognition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but the SCO could provide a legitimate identity through member-country coordination. But here some questions arise: "Is the SCO accepting the Taliban rule in Afghanistan? How would it deal with a Taliban-led

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<sup>38</sup> *Dushanbe Declaration on the Twentieth Anniversary*, para, 40-43

<sup>39</sup> "Experts React: 2021 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Tajikistan," (Tajikistan: Atlantic Council, September 22, 2021), Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/experts-react-2021-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-sco-summit-in-tajikistan/> (accessed April 12, 2022)



Afghanistan as an official observer state? And how the current activities related to Afghanistan will be handled.<sup>40</sup>

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in Asia and the world. The aid-dependent country's 40% GDP revolves around aid and other international grants. The continued political instability for decades has led the country's system to be taken away from the formal growth and development of the economy and industries. The current political situation further pushes the country towards an economic crisis. According to a UNDP report, 47.3% of the Afghan population lives below the poverty line, but the current economic collapse could push it to 97%. Over 18 million Afghani residents require significant humanitarian aid, while inflation and the health and education systems are rampant. The Taliban has pledged to address these issues through economic improvement and humanitarian control, while also pledging freedom of the media, respect for women's rights, and international norms. It's also worth remembering that after the Taliban takeover, the IMF, World Bank, and other international donors froze their accounts in Afghanistan. It is expected that the Taliban will receive humanitarian aid without recognition. But there could be no alternative way of getting developmental aid and large types of loans from the international community and international organizations because of the Taliban's global recognition.<sup>41</sup>

Economic crises and political unrest can lead to increased influence and radical ideology, increasing security threats both within a country and the region, including the SCO countries. While economic development may not solve these issues, it will likely contribute to stabilizing the situation.

The SCO has emphasized the need for collaboration to boost Afghanistan's economy and growth. However, Putin emphasized that the best SCO countries can do is providing humanitarian aid to alleviate the country's situation in the short term. Long-term development and stability

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<sup>40</sup>Eva Seiwert, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Will Not Fill Any Vacuum in Afghanistan," (Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 30, 2021). Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/09/the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-will-not-fill-any-vacuum-in-afghanistan/#:~:text=Another%20reason%20that%20the%20SCO,not%20within%20the%20organization's%20mandate.&text=So%20far%2C%20the%20SCO%20has,in%20Dushanbe%20in%20mid%2DSeptember> (accessed April 20, 2022)

<sup>41</sup>Saaransh Mishra, "Can the Shanghai Cooperation Organization make a long-term difference in Afghanistan," (Observer Research Foundation, September 27, 2021). Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/can-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-make-a-long-term-difference-in-afghanistan/#:~:text=Given%20the%20SCO's%20high%20stakes,Afghanistan%20and%20the%20dilapidated%20economy> (accessed April 25, 2022)

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depend on the Taliban changing their behavior and gaining international recognition.<sup>42</sup>

The SCO leaders, dominated by China and Russia, have emphasized the need to address Taliban-led Afghanistan to prevent a humanitarian disaster and economic collapse. President Xi Jinping has called for the Taliban to destroy terrorism, provide additional aid, and encourage other countries to do the same. Instead of abandoning Afghanistan, China and other nations have pressed the US and its allies to provide economic and humanitarian aid.

Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized the need to deal with the Taliban and urged world powers to consider unfreezing Afghanistan's foreign bank assets. The United States and other Western countries have pledged more than \$1.2 billion in emergency humanitarian relief, but they are waiting to see if the Taliban will respect human rights, particularly those of women, and stop terrorism before engaging diplomatically with the group.

At the meeting on Friday, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said that:

The Taliban, for their part, must keep their promises and, above all, work for an inclusive democratic framework that includes all ethnic groups. "This is critical for the stability of Afghanistan," said Khan, who was present at the SCO summit. "It's also critical to ensure that all Afghans' rights are respected and that Afghanistan is never again a safe haven for terrorists.

The Pakistani leader described the power transition in Kabul as "a matter of relief" for neighboring countries, noting that it occurred without considerable bloodshed, civil war, or mass migration of refugees.<sup>43</sup>

However, the Afghan Taliban may find it difficult to inherit the previous government's SCO observer status this year. The Afghan Taliban's observer status is at risk due to their lack of official recognition by competent governments, necessitating acceptance from regional countries and the international community. In reality, international pressure should drive the Afghan Taliban to make their new interim administration more inclusive. On this premise, the Afghan Taliban may be welcomed into the SCO and allowed to operate as a new government inside the organization. The current economic crisis in Afghanistan and the quick international recognition of the Taliban are both major challenges for SCO.

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<sup>42</sup> *Can the Shanghai Cooperation Organization make a long-term difference in Afghanistan*, (Observer Research Foundation), para, 7-11

<sup>43</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Regional Summit Vows to Work With Taliban, Urging That Pledges Be Upheld," *Voice of America News*, (September 17, 2021). Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/regional-summit-vows-to-work-with-taliban-urging-that-pledges-be-upheld/6232827.html> (accessed March 15, 2022)

## Conclusion

The SCO's contributions to Afghan stability should not be underestimated. SCO members express significant concern for a stable Afghanistan, recognizing the interconnectedness of regional and Afghan stability. The member countries seek to fill the vacuum left by U.S. and NATO forces. The SCO sought a stable Afghanistan through all forms of assistance, including combating terrorism or extremism, controlling drug trafficking or the current chaotic situation, existing economic crises, and humanitarian assistance. All the regional countries, along with the SCO countries, on a single platform are making a positive move towards Afghanistan's stability. The present situation in Afghanistan compels the SCO to resume its institutional competence for peace and prosperity in the country. Because of its commitment to non-interference in countries' internal affairs, the SCO cannot be militarily involved, but it has the capacity to deal with a country's chaotic situations. All the member countries agreed on the point that political and diplomatic means are the one and only solution for conflict resolution. Member countries repeated their backing for "They want Afghanistan to become an independent, impartial, united, democratic, and peaceful country devoid of terrorism, war, and narcotics." The Member States believe that Afghanistan needs an inclusive government comprising representatives from all ethnic, religious, and political groups.

Like other SCO countries, China and Russia have serious concerns about Afghanistan's peace and security. Russia now appears to be turning to addressing its immediate security concerns by expanding Tajikistan and Uzbekistan while gently engaging the Taliban. Beijing's regional influence has grown, but it still needs to work with Moscow to figure out how the two superpowers can cooperate in a peaceful, conflict-ridden region. But it should be noted that, as prominent players in the SCO, both are reluctant to enter Afghanistan even after the withdrawal of international forces because they are skeptical of the Taliban's emergence and because they believe the current economic instability in Afghanistan is another trap created by the West or an issue based on reality.

Reconstruction, development, governance, and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan are not solely the responsibility of regional countries. Instead, the global community and international organizations must provide economic support and humanitarian assistance to the war-torn country for humanity's sake. The region and Washington must adopt economic innovation to prevent a severe humanitarian disaster and economic collapse in Afghanistan, as a simple military approach cannot guarantee its stability. The UN's coordination role in ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan requires a holistic approach to security, economics, state governance, and development issues.

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