

## Shifting Dynamics: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Impact on Afghanistan's Security and Regional Stability

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### Abstract

Afghanistan has been the focus of considerable international interest, but recently much of that attention has centered around the evolving role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) within Afghanistan's political and security landscape following the 2021 U.S. military withdrawal and the rise of a new Taliban-led regime. The SCO's capacity for uniting peace and stability in the region while advancing economic cooperation and sustenance has become even more vital largely due to ongoing instability in Afghanistan that remains a huge risk for regional security in general. As a country located at the intersection of Central Asia and South Asia, the political development of Afghanistan has a direct bearing on the larger security dynamic in the region, especially for its immediate neighbors. The challenge of Afghanistan is best met by the SCO - which includes China, Russia, India and Central Asian republics - as this platform alone has the merit of being able to stem cross-border threats of terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking coming out of Afghanistan. This article explores the transformation of the SCO from its traditional security-oriented framework to a complex of economic cooperation, humanitarian assistance and regional development in response to the challenges presented by Afghanistan. This paper provides an assessment of the SCO, its ability to address the multitude of crises facing Afghanistan, and its potential as a mechanism for stability in the region through analysis of existing SCO structures and regional diplomacy, including its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). In particular, the paper examines the geopolitical nature of SCO based on varied political and security interests of the member states, especially the rivalries between China, Russia and India which prevent a common approach. However, the SCO collectively has the ability to play an important role in peacebuilding, development, and connectivity, which will help to ameliorate present-day challenges and proves that it is a regional and global stabilizer for Afghanistan. In conclusion, this paper concluded that whether the SCO manages the multiple complexities at the crux of the Afghan crisis, will prove a key fulcrum for both regional stabilities, and the future of the organization within the framework of global geopolitics.

**Keywords:** Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Afghanistan, regional stability, security cooperation, economic development, multilateral diplomacy.

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### Introduction

Established in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become an essential institution in the region -with increasingly formidable geopolitical and economic power -representing more than 40 percent of the world population and almost a quarter of world GDP. Originally established by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in response to shared security threats, namely, what the member nations dubbed as the "three evils of terrorism, separatism, and extremism," the charter of the SCO has grown considerably over the last 20 years. Since Uzbekistan joined in 2001, then India and Pakistan, the organization has steadily turned from being a security-based alliance to a multilateral political, economic, and cultural platform. The changing global order has the world headed for a multipolar era in which the SCO is seen playing an evolving role key to both guiding the geopolitics of Eurasia and furthering developmental hopes. One of the biggest challenges for the SCO is the ongoing instability of Afghanistan - the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Geopolitically, Afghanistan is the key to regional security, trade, and energy routes, yet decades of war, the heavy impact of foreign occupations, and experience with political disarray have rendered it thoroughly fragile. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021, which allowed the Taliban to regain control, has deepened Afghanistan's political and humanitarian crises. To compound the fate of millions of Afghans, either displaced internally or seeking refuge outside the nation, the international community appears reluctant to recognize any Taliban regime and punishes her with economic collapse, sanctions, frozen assets. The threat of cross-border narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and crime remains a serious challenge to Afghanistan and its neighbors -most of them SCO members -making Afghanistan central to the SCO's global assessment.

Ever since Afghanistan was given observer status in the SCO back in 2012, the organization has been trying to establish dialogue and cooperative mechanisms with Afghanistan and its neighboring countries in order to promote peacebuilding. Establishment of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in 2005 has been a building block in developing coordination of regional involvement. The SCO has repeatedly called for an “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” peace process, with a clear focus on counter-terrorism and drug trafficking, through various summits, declarations and working meetings. It has also assisted in the promotion of economic integration within the regions by supporting connectivity projects. Although restrained by principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty, the SCO offers an important vehicle for dialogue between Afghanistan's immediate neighbors—China and Russia—and also Pakistan and India, to say nothing of the Central Asian republics, all of whom have a vital interest in the stability of Afghanistan. The post-2021 scenario in Afghanistan has compelled the SCO to expand its parameters that go beyond the SCO's transformation from purely security driven cooperation, to an expansive framework of economic development, connectivity, and humanitarian engagement. In this new stage, SCO initiatives related to the creation of economic corridors, energy partnerships, and cultural exchanges for the common well-being resonate with the SCO's vision of stability and connectivity for the Eurasian continent. At the same time, the SCO has several obstacles to address in achieving those aims: differing political and strategic priorities of its members, minimal institutional capabilities, and tricky relations with sanctions-stricken government in Afghanistan established by the Taliban. Such obstacles necessitate the serious inquiry of whether the SCO is able to act as a viable regional security and development actor.

This paper seeks to scrutinize the change in the nature of SCO involvement with Afghanistan, creating a transition from security-centered project to a more comprehensive blueprint encompassing aspects of peacebuilding, development and sprinkling advantages amongst the landlocked state and regional outreach. The Research investigates the multitudes of mechanisms by which the SCO has tried to respond to the crises in Afghanistan, the limitations on the SCO's operations and potential viability as a regional governance model. Contextualizing Afghanistan within a wider Eurasian geopolitical and economic landscape, this paper shows how multilateral institutions such as the SCO can offer fragile, conflict-affected states a security-development nexus. In the end, it contends that the SCO will have to walk this dual line of balancing security with development, as the paths it navigates will not only determine the fate of Afghani stability, but also have implications on the broader peace and prosperity of Eurasia.

## Literature Review

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has transformed from a limited security forum into a wider spectrum platform with a remit covering security, development and regional connectivity issues, with Afghanistan at a central juncture of that transformation. Though underappreciated, recent scholarship counters that the organization-by practicing de-escalating conflicts and cultivating habits of cooperation among a diverse group of member states - allows for a foundation for a wider stabilizing role in Eurasia, (MacAfee, 2023) Spanning the SCO's journey from the Shanghai Five mechanism (1996) to its founding (2001) and institutionalization (MacAfee, 2023), this literature describes an initial emphasis on border security and confidence building that has expanded to encompass economic cooperation and cultural exchange while also deepening tools for conflict management in and around Afghanistan. He writes, that durable cooperation is contingent upon political parameters that are consensual-good fences-and non-interference particularly in a setting characterized by simmering rivalries and territorial disputes (MacAfee, 2023). But he also highlights persistent limitations: different national interests regularly hinder unified action, despite shared risks emanating from instability in Afghanistan being acknowledged by member states (MacAfee, 2023; MacAfee, 2023: p.30).

A key theme in the literature is the security toolset of the SCO, and, in particular, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which was created in 2004 as a dedicated counter-terrorism, anti-extremism, and separatism body (Siddiqi, 2016). Siddiqi records this gradual encroachment of RATS jurisdiction—away from traditional counter-terrorism and towards narcotics trafficking, organized crime, border management, protection of critical energy infrastructure and even epidemic-related threats, mirroring the transnational nature of threats from Afghanistan (Siddiqi, 2016). Joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and legal harmonization, for example, are described as reforming but necessary mechanisms leading to a more integrated security regime (even though results are seen to remain uneven across issue areas and over time) (Siddiqi, 2016). Such evaluations intersect with more general examinations that have contextualized the SCO security agenda within a post-Soviet governance climate that is becoming ever more sensitive to cross-border externalities (Qaiser and Nawab, 2023; Nawab, 2023).

Political economy and strategic incentives around the SCO suggest the organization is not valuable simply because it is big—two of its permanent members are nuclear powers, and it represents a meaningful slice of the world population—but because it brings together states with overlapping interests but often competing interests (Nawab, 2023). Three models of international cooperation based on models of either conflict resolution or management: In emphasizing that the SCO is based on peacekeeping among China, Russia, and Central Asian

republics, and connecting that history to recent developments such as conflict management and Pakistan moving from being an observer to full member state in order to play a more central role in Afghan peace processes (Nawab, 2023). These sources identify Afghanistan both as a challenge and an opportunity: The SCO's balancing act between great-power competition and neighborhood diplomacy will determine the group's credentials as a regional stabilizer (Qaiser and Nawab, 2023; Nawab, 2023).

However, the body of evidence suggests large hurdles exist. Coordination costs increase, MacAfee (2023: p.30) contends, as Russia's interests in keeping a foothold in Central Asia overlap -- and occasionally push against-- China's broadening economic influence. Siddiqi (2016) warns that Afghanistan remains too complex to be wholly stabilized by RATS-enabled cooperation--ethnic fragmentation, factional politics and layered international involvement all restrict the power of the organization to stabilize Afghanistan itself. As Nawab (2023) elaborates, even extra-regional stakeholders like the U.S., tend to look differently at the deepening SCO involvement in Afghanistan, making some additional challenges for coordinated burden-sharing efforts externally. These combined studies suggest that although SCO can ease cross-border pressure and build trust, it fails to insulate Afghan dynamics from great power competition (MacAfee, 2023; Siddiqi, 2016; Nawab, 2023).

Another, complementary body of literature examines the history and institutional foundations of the SCO. Core documents—the SCO Charter (2002) and summit declarations—set forth principles of mutual trust, benefit, consultation, respect for cultural diversity, and non-alignment, which are usually combined under the “Shanghai Spirit” banner, as well as structures and functions of the organization (SCO, 2021). The history of the grouping goes back to 1996 but its formalization only took place in 2001 with the entry of Uzbekistan, with the Charter becoming effective in 2003 (Rowden, 2018; SCO, 2021). The admission of India and Pakistan as full members in 2017 represented a major enlargement, one in which the eight full members comprise approximately 20% of world GDP and roughly 42% of world population, and four of the declared nuclear powers as well; possible future accessions—such as Iran and Turkey—are positioned as additional processes in institutional maturation (Rowden, 2018; SCO, 2021). Such institutional accounts play into the argument that, although the SCO is more representative due to its expanded membership, this also makes consensus more complicated (Rowden, 2018 claim that, despite a broader claim to representativeness, the SCO more difficult to achieve consensus (SCO, 2021).

Moreover, the literature situates the SCO within theoretical and historical perspectives that reveal state actions in the international system of anarchy. Rooted in structural realist arguments that international structure determines state strategies in a systemic anarchy, and that security is the dominant objective around which alliances crystallize (Waltz, 1979; Sagan and Waltz, 2003), analysts interpret the SCO's security cooperation as a rational response to regional threat perceptions and the distribution of power (as elaborated in the provided material). Simultaneously, a classic part of the international organization scholarship emphasizes how institutions allow for the sharing of information and the reduction of uncertainty, while generating points of focality and coordination-values-insofar as their causal origins may diverge (Stephen D Krasner, "International organization: A state of the art," 1969). The simultaneous framing of the SCO in both material and ideational dimensions in turn sheds light on the continued gradual rule making on borders, efforts to establish routine-based confidence, codified counter-terrorism instruments, and semi-regularized summits despite enduring distributional conflicts.

As Afghanistan occupies a unique geopolitical position at the center of West, South and Central Asia, an important number of studies highlight in fact its geopolitical centrality and the diffusion of its security externalities. For regional actors, challenges overlap: cross-border militancy, flows of narcotics and refugees, and breakthroughs of energy corridors. Studies have shown how Pakistan is especially susceptible to the terrorism of Afghan origin, its interests in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, promotion of peace in the war-torn country, and all but including, infrastructure projects with Iran while emphasizing that one of the major determinants of Islamabad's policy preferences are its security concerns and domestic politics (Nawab, 2023). India frames its contributions toward reconstruction, economic assistance, and its plans for the integration of Afghanistan into regional economic structures, as a component of its larger regional plan and as a justification for globalizing engagement through the SCO (Nawab, 2023)). Taliban hegemony, drug trafficking, and terrorism are seen as the main national and regional security threats by Central Asian republics, which have generally aligned their positions in response to escalations; witness the one held on Aug 6, 2021 by Central Asian leaders in Turkmenistan (text extract provided). While the risk hierarchies, and policy toolkits, differ across capitals, these perspectives converge on the need for a stable Afghanistan as a first step and pre-condition to regional connectivity and growth.

Post-9/11 historical analyses contextualize the development of the SCO alongside the U.S.-led War on Terror. While the organization denounced the September 11 attacks, it was then institutionally weak and provided little beyond symbolic support; some of its members even pursued bilateral arrangements with Washington, granting it access to airspace or bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Caldwell 2011; Wright and Tyson 2005; Sestak 2003; Rahimove 2013). Tensions that followed --such as arguments over how long the US could stay in Central Asia, the response to the 2005 Andijan events and Russia's creation of the Kant airbase - are then treated as signs of changing balances of power in the region, and that the SCO is being used as a diplomatic stage to express opposition to external military footprints (SCO Astana Summit, 2005; Johnson, 2004; Human Rights

Watch, 2005; Boyko, 2018; Jalolov, 2016). Analysts interpreted these episodes as indications that the SCO operates as both a forum for practical coordination (e.g., through RATS) and for geopolitics/messaging vis-à-vis extra-regional powers (Kleveman, 2003).

Such regional dynamics are best understood against the broad historical background of Afghanistan's domestic politics. The literature traces patterns of cyclical war and external mediation, from the establishment of the eighteenth-century Durrani state, through twentieth-century regime changes, Soviet invasion, civil war, Taliban rule, U.S. intervention, and finally the 2020 Doha Agreement (Shah, 2020; Barfield, 2010; "Historical Timeline," 2010; "East African Embassy," n.d.; Ghani, 2022). Ravi Gorter recently elaborated on developments and regional conversations that have been characterized as strategic shocks, redefining the calculus of the region - directorates at least — and setting back time on inclusive governance with the shifting of power following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover of Kabul, sparking renewed discussion of variations in sanctions and engagement modalities (Thailand, 2023). The scale of the crisis has been measured by humanitarian analyses: Afghanistan remains one of the lowest-ranked peaceful countries, the economic impact of violence is disproportionately high, drought-based food insecurity is persistently strong, and multi-dimensional displacement pressures on countries neighbors, especially Pakistan and Iran, complicate but also strengthen the relevance of any security-first stabilization project and the need for development and humanitarian access (IEP, 2023; OCHA, 2023a; OCHA, 2023b; IDMC, 2023; World Bank, 2020; UNHCR, 2023, cited in nguyên văn). With little debate, such studies implicitly compel the SCO to evolve "from security to development"—not as a choice, but as a compulsive imperative if the organization is to break the conflict-economy dynamics in place that perpetuate insecurity.

Country-specific accounts deepen this picture. According to the text, Pakistan's positioning involves security externalities, ethnic linkages and historical history to Afghan factions, which are tempered by fear of Indian sponsored groups, thus it desires an Afghan order that minimizes cross border militancy while facilitating trade and transit. Approaching Afghanistan also through the lenses of assistance, economic integration, and counter-terrorism but not sharing land borders, India tends to see Taliban advances reflected in the mirror of Pakistan, the local ally of all Afghan insurgents (Chatterjee, 2022). China ties its priorities related to security in Xinjiang to its policy towards Afghanistan, with the Belt and Road Initiative signaling that if cross-border militancy is to be avoided, it requires reliable guarantees from neighboring states (Xi, 2016; Muir, 2021); Central Asian states cite precisely the threat of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and short-lived Islamists impeding the integrity of their borders (Watanabe, 2023); and Iran balances its sectarian solidarities, echoing its ties with the Hazara community in Afghanistan who are predominantly Shia, with economic engagement that aims to prevent ISIS-K from making inroads into Iranian territory (Mantucci, 2014; Aman, 2022; information provided in the text) In all of these cases, scholars keep coming back to the same conclusion: common vulnerabilities create incentives to cooperate, but distributional disputes and mutual mistrust provide incentives to defect which only institutionalized trust-building routines can slowly dispel (MacAfee, 2023; Siddiq, 2016; Nawab, 2023).

Lastly, the literature describes relevant gaps that drive the current study. Although the security origins and mechanisms of the SCO have often received extensive attention, the more constructive role of the SCO in the stabilization of Afghanistan, and the possible implications of the organizational framework for regional, and possibly global, distribution of power, have been less thoroughly analyzed. Previous work does not sufficiently specify how internal and external actors in SCO processes engage with each other, and how security cooperation interacts with development agendas and humanitarian imperatives over time (MacAfee, 2023; Siddiq, 2016; Nawab, 2023). This argued for relating the SCO's facilities of conflict-management to some tangible progress on Afghan governance, cross-border economic interdependence and human security, all the while navigating complicated geopolitics in which the preferences of members are invented and reinvented.

Combined, the scholarship depicts the SCO as a realistic, interest-based venue, the development of which corresponds to the pressure and constraints of regionalism within Eurasia. Its RATS-enabled security cooperation and expanding economic dialogue have created new avenues of trust despite rivalry (MacAfee 2023; Siddiq 2016; Nawab 2023; SCO 2021; Rowden 2018). But the extended nature of the Afghan crisis shows that the externalities of security and humanitarian tragedy can overwhelm a narrowly focused counter-terrorism strategy. Thus, while the SCO will not always play a mitigating role in regional stability, the emerging consensus around the SCO points to the adoption of a stability notion that increasingly moves beyond a security focus to include development, connectivity, and human security alongside de-escalation - a very transformation that this study interrogates (MacAfee, 2023; Siddiq, 2016; Nawab, 2023).

## Research Methodology

This study is a descriptive analytic exploratory qualitative that aims to see the dynamic role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) regarding its role in security and development in Afghanistan and what efforts the SCO has taken and made an impact on in terms of stability in the region. The study is a qualitative research study based primarily on exploratory research comprising comprehensive assessments of both secondary and primary data sources. Secondary data is from diverse and reputable scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed



journal articles, academic books, governmental reports, and international and non-governmental organizations' publications. They contextualize the SCO's relations with Afghanistan in terms of the geopolitical, security, and socio-economic environments that shape its intentions and capabilities. Primary data, e.g. official SCO materials (press releases, public statements, annual reports) accessed via the SCO's official website, gives direct insights into the strategic objectives the SCO pursues and the activities it implements. This combination of using both the official statements of the SCO as well as academic research on the SCO in Afghanistan ensures that the discourse analysis approach is portraying a broader and balanced discourse angle on the issue. Using a descriptive and interpretative methodology, the paper looks into how regional actors interact with each other and considers the interaction within the context of the Afghanistan crisis leading to broader geopolitical complexities. The policy-relevant research is based on a theoretical frame emphasizing neorealism, which informs our understanding of potential factors driving state behavior and the regional security dynamics resulting in multilateral cooperation in Central Asia. In this study, we examine the evolution of the SCO away from a heavily security-based project towards one that also encompasses economic cooperation, humanitarian interaction, and regional integration. Combining all these different kinds of sources, this research provides a more detailed analysis of the role of the SCO in cooperation with Afghanistan, and expands the literature on regional governance and international security.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is based on the use of two international relations theories: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Liberal Institutionalism Theory (LIT). These theories offer invaluable approach to understand the newly evolving role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to Afghanistan security and development, an understanding one to make in association with given regional cooperation and interdependence theories and the notion of Central and South Asia geopolitics.

### **Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver constitute the main background theory for regional security in Afghanistan and the relationship between Afghanistan regional security and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Regions Rather than States Are the Unit of Analysis for International Security (RSCT) This can be explained by the security concerns and geographical proximity between states in a particular region. This theory states that the security of each state is highly connected with its neighbors and a coherent regional stability or instability is shared (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Afghanistan, nestled at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, is a central case in RSCT. It is a regional security problem state, both affected by and impacting the regional security environment of neighboring states including Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian republics. As RSCT notes, Afghanistan (being the hub of terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking, and state fragility) is characterized by instability which has spillover effects on the entire region. Here enter SCO being a regional organization comprising of countries all having similar security threats, each is interested to counter instability in Taliban controlled Afghanistan. The latter aspect of the theory as it specifically articulates "security interdependence" gets to the point of why states in the region-specifically SCO members-have worked together to solve the security dilemmas stemming from Afghanistan, which include terrorism and extremism (Buzan Wæver, 2003). As RSCT suggests, the SCO acts as a collective security institution: an institutionalized mechanism of managing collective risks. This is reflected in the SCOs projects one of which is the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure RATS where the focus is on sharing intelligence and military operations. Tackling common security threats is the primary purpose of RSCT, and combating terrorism and extremism is one of the areas to which the SCO has always adhered. In addition, the SCO has explicitly drawn on the theory's concept of "securitization," through which issues like terrorism and extremism become an immediate security threat, to guide its strategic moves in Afghanistan. The SCO has securitized the instability in Afghanistan, and in response, member states have coordinated their actions, deploying a combination of diplomatic, military, and economic assets to mitigate the risk of instability spilling into their territory (Buzan et al. 1998).

Nevertheless, RSCT likewise suggests an enduring difficulty of regional cooperation: differences in national interest. Although the SCO's member states are deeply worried about Afghanistan's instability, their political and security agendas often conflict with each other. However, the interest of individual member states -especially those with competing aspirations -- often overshadows its collective appeal; Russia and China, both serious SCO members, have very different ideas on what sort of political outcome they want for Afghanistan (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2013). Nonetheless, RSCT argue that the SCO is a zone of peace as regional organizations help to contain these conflicts by providing governance through institutions and reducing uncertainty and mistrust in the future.

### **Liberal Institutionalism Theory (LIT)**

Alongside RSCT, Liberal Institutionalism Theory (LIT) provides a theoretical ground on how international institutions (including the SCO) help achieve cooperation, peace and stability. The LIT perspective underscores

the importance of multilateral institutions in addressing collective action issues, nurturing interdependence among states and preventing conflict (Ruggie, 1997). The theory itself is based on the idea that states are able to achieve mutual benefits through frameworks established by institutions whereby states can cooperate, de-escalate tensions and disagreements and ultimately work together on common endeavors. In Afghanistan the LIT sheds light on the importance of SCO in enhancing regional cooperation and development. The concept of LIT, where the essence is the struggle for multilateralism through diplomatic channels and economic initiatives is precisely demonstrated in the SCO's engagement with Afghanistan. The SCO emphasis on regional economic integration-primarily through infrastructure, trade facilitation, and connectivity projects-embodies two key tenets of LIT: creating economic interdependence between states and limiting the role of great powers in unilateral coercion. The SCO hopes that by facilitating economic collaboration, it will be able to tackle the conditions underlying instability in Afghanistan, such as poverty and a lack of economic opportunity, which have helped make the central Asian country historically prone to extremism and conflict. In Afghanistan, the SCO's approach also resonates with LIT which primarily emphasizing soft power that is the use of cultural diplomacy, values and norms. LIT values in favor of democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law are consistent with the organization's "Shanghai Spirit" which is based on mutual respect, non-interference and working together to tackle common challenges. While the SCO does not speak as a democracy-promoting organisation, it exerts soft power in a manner that facilitates regional dialogue and cooperation which is a necessary component of Afghanistan peacebuilding. Emphasizing non-interference, as the SCO has done in mediating in Afghanistan, illustrates how international institutions can stabilize globalization by stressing inclusive governance and shared norms (SCO, 2021).

To that extent, LIT does identify some shortcomings in the SCO manner of prioritizing the Afghan question. This theory suggested that the strength of empathy multilateral institutions lent to the universal value of democracy and human rights. SCO practice grounded in the principle of non-interference in member states' internal affairs would also be completely incompatible with a firm commitment to ensuring democracy and peaceful rule in the region after the departure of the Taliban. This example however illustrates some LIT principles the SCO demonstrates in how it can use cooperation and interdependence to bind one of the world's most volatile regions to accomplish stability through joint security and economic development.

### **Synthesis**

RSCT and LIT together provide a holistic basis for the examination of the SCO's ameliorating position in Afghanistan and stability in the region. Geopolitically RSCT empowers the potentially relevance of regional organizations such as the SCO to ensure security against threats at length connections such as Afghanistan, which affects nearby countries; thereby RSCT elaborates; In contrast, LIT provides insight into the ways in which the SCO helps encourage cooperation, stability, and economic and political integration in the region through institutional mechanisms. Collectively, these concepts indicate that the security strategy around engagement with Afghanistan as envisioned and implemented by the SCO is a mere part of the wider regional development and cooperation vision. The SCO's insistence upon working together to stabilize Afghanistan in terms of counterterrorism, transportation, and economic links reflects RSCT's emphasis on regional security interdependence and LIT's emphasis on institutional interaction and peaceful conflict management. While divergent national interests and convoluted domestic political circumstances create challenges for the SCO member states, the multilateral framework which the organization has created in respect to the Afghanistan situation constitutes an essential component for regional peace and progress. RSCT and LIT together provided a solid theoretical basis for understanding SCO status and its evolution in Afghanistan. Through the SCO, we can see how regional or multilateral organizations not only are able to successfully weather the fickle nature of the international political economy but can also contribute to peacebuilding and development in fragile state by tackling security issues and economic incentives for cooperation and collaboration with an eye towards developing a more stable region.

### **The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Afghanistan: An Evolving Partnership**

**Milestones & Challenges: An Evolving Engagement Between Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)** - Since its inception, the engagement between Afghanistan and the SCO has undergone considerable evolution, marked by both milestones and challenges that have shaped the partnership. Afghanistan has been officially interacting with the SCO in a meaningful way since 2005, when the SCO set up the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group (SCO-ACG) to develop a cooperative relationship on mutual security, political and economic issues. The group was suspended in 2009 and continued voting on its own in Afghanistan. The following year, Afghanistan also received observer status within the SCO framework in 2012, enabling Afghanistan to strengthen its relations with the member states, especially China, Russia and the CARs. In the same year, President Hamid Karzai's visit to Beijing demonstrated Afghanistan's eagerness to be part of the SCO processes concerning Afghanistan, especially given the deteriorating security situation in the country. Afghanistan's ties with the SCO evolved over the next years. China has since institutionalized its prioritization of counterterrorism and regional security cooperation via a number of agreements, including a 2015 protocol with

the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which aimed to deepen joint action on countering terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism, and on drug trafficking. The only change in 2017 was in Kabul, where the government, first under President Ashraf Ghani and then by Afghan Chief Executive Officer Dr. Abdullah in 2016 and again in 2017 by Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai-reiterated Afghanistan's appetizing for full SCO membership. Particularly during the unrecognizable rule of the Taliban, these calls for entreaty are described the wish of some sections in Afghanistan to constructively engage with the impasse of their security and economic challenges (Khalil, 2021).

There are few strategic imperatives behind Afghanistan's interest to become full member in SCO. It goes on: First, Afghanistan's leadership has interpreted the conflict in Afghanistan, since the arrival of Ashraf Ghani's National Unity Government in 2014, as regional conflict while Pakistani role in fueling instability is regarded as central. Ghani of a greater need for regional cooperation to tackle the threat of Afghanistan's security with regional neighbors most notably, Pakistan. With a sound regional architecture, it [SCO] offered the ideal vehicle for the achievement of this aim, especially in light of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the political vacuum this left behind in the region. Full SCO membership would allow Afghanistan to bolster its role as a 机构 within the organization, thus prompting a more proactive role on the part of the SCO in peacekeeping and stability efforts in the region. A second important reason for Afghan desire to join the SCO relates to the developmental agenda of the organization. The National Unity Government of Afghanistan has proposed partial plans beyond Afghanistan as the country depends on regional cooperation to accelerate economic momentum and sustain peace in the region. In Afghanistan, increasing security and economic cooperation from member states, especially China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics resonates with its national interests in counter-terrorism, counter-extremism, and counter-narcotics, along with higher regional connectivity. Joining the SCO would also complement Afghanistan's more recent and dynamic foreign policy strategy of "multi-alignment neutrality" which aims to deepen economic connections with its neighbors while attempting neutrality between them and other global powers in flux (Akhtar & Javaid, 2024).

Afghanistan has a unique geopolitical location which makes it a natural partner for the SCO and an ideal candidate for deeper integration into the organization. Located as a bridge between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan borders a total of four SCO member states, including China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. None of these countries shares a direct border with Russia, but the deep historical and economic ties that Afghanistan has with India, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan should not be ignored. The ethnic diversity of Afghanistan with several ethnic groups straddling internationally recognized boundaries, particularly with Central Asian republics, also strengthens the centrality of Afghanistan as the cultural and strategic bridge between the core member states of the SCO. Connectivity with Afghanistan enriches the narrative of SCO concerning regional cooperation and security.

From an economic perspective, Afghanistan is a crucial component of the SCO trade landscape. SCO member states are the largest trading partner of Afghanistan, as they represented over 87 percent of Afghanistan imports and more than 57 percent of its exports in 2017-18, according to the Afghan Statistical Yearbook. Afghanistan hopes to be further integrated into SCO-economic projects related to the development of infrastructure and energy corridors, which are essential for its long-term economic recovery and stability. In addition to that, the U.S.-Taliban agreement signed in February 2020 that led to the U.S. military exit from Afghanistan has eased some of the worries among certain SCO members regarding the political and security environment in Afghanistan, thus enabling a greater integration of the country into the organization (Khan et al., 2022). The SCO dug its feet and roots into Afghanistan, primarily because of regional security risks, which mainly are reflected in terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking that had both been festering in Afghanistan and counter-measures launched by Afghanistan, against its neighborhood countries for decades. These challenges were at the heart of the SCO's establishment mission, which was created to address the perceived threats of the so-called "three evils" that were sweeping Central Asia, especially Afghanistan. The SCO has constantly tried to counter the trans-border flow of these threats through concerted efforts at the regional level. Afghanistan is a key player in the SCO \* counter-narcotics and counterterrorism initiatives because Afghanistan is one of the worlds largest producers of opium which fuels much of the international drug trade and acts as a source of international terrorism. RATS (Regional Anti-terrorism Structure), set up in 2004 as part of the security component within the SCO, acts as a hub for counter-terrorism coordination and assists the member countries in sharing intelligence on terrorism and related aspects. It would also allow for a much more comprehensive and coordinated response in addressing these regional security challenges through mechanisms like full membership in these efforts (Agostinis & Urduinez, 2024).

However, the full membership of Afghanistan is problematic due to the internal political situation in that country, especially because the influence of the Taliban and its close relationship with terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda, have yet to be eliminated. Although the Taliban assured the US that there would be no connection to extremist groups, reports have suggested that ties with the Haqqani Network and their various terror groups within Afghanistan are still present (Kerry, 2010). Compounding these ongoing security fears is the fact

that the Taliban have long been supporters of groups that operate in Central Asia and China. While Afghanistan's eventual full membership in the SCO is a necessary element of ensuring regional stability, the existence of such entities renders this a difficult feat for members to achieve.

Afghanistan has been looking to build stronger relations with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and obtain full membership for more than a decade now. But Afghanistan's place in geographical, political and economic to offer a candidate for deeper integration within the SCO umbrella. It provides Afghanistan with a bigger space to contribute indirectly towards regional security and economic collaboration and ultimately in realizing its national development objectives. There is an element, though, to deal with in Afghanistan as it tackles its internal political dynamics, to the extent the Taliban keeps relations with terrorist groups and a challenge for the SCO. With the apparent disintegration of the post-U. During this S. withdrawal phase of history, and the development of Afghanistan post-S withdrawal, Afghanistan's interactions with the SCO will be key for future regional security balance and regional progress in Central and South Asia.

### **The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Approach to Afghanistan: Challenges, Opportunities, and Regional Implications**

Over the years, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), has risen to become one of the important entities in the regional security and economy of Eurasia. Afghanistan is strategically located between Central and South Asia, so given 2021 the return of the Taliban and the exit of U.S. Forces, the SCO's stance on Afghanistan becomes more significant than ever. The SCO has faced fundamental questions as to its capacity to facilitate peace, stability and development in a geopolitically complex and also long-term unstable Afghanistan. This paper examines the SCO's Afghan policy, reviewing its strategic priorities, drawbacks, and the difficulties it encounters in achieving its goals in the conflict-riddled nation.

#### **SCO's Engagement with Afghanistan**

Right from 2005, the SCO initiated formal action by creating the SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group (SCO–ACG) to enable closer engagement with Afghanistan. It was meant to facilitate interaction between Afghanistan and members of the SCO on key matters of concern, including terrorism, drug trafficking and economic cooperation. A big step towards Afghanistan's gradual closer association with the organization was its observer status which was given in 2012. Despite the increasing interest of the SCO in Afghanistan because of mutual security threats-especially related to terrorism-TFI has held that the reluctance of the organization to give full membership to Afghanistan remains crucial. This hesitation comes from several reasons: the internal political divergences of SCO members, the lack of a coherent military solution to the challenges posed by Afghanistan, and the geopolitical prerogatives of key players such as China and Russia (Singh, 2010).

Afghanistan's interaction with the SCO occurred in two periods-it was primarily about security cooperation in the first. From its foundations, the SCO's agenda has been defined by its commitment to fight against the "three evils"-terrorism, extremism, and separatism. Since terrorism and traffics in drugs is a considerable problem of regional security environment for Afghanistan, announcement of the fact that the SCO is ready to cooperate with Afghanistan on these issues has been repeatedly stated. On the other hand, Afghanistan's substantive role in the SCO has been suspended because of the political intricacies inside the country and the doubts concerning the legitimacy of the Taliban regime.

#### **China**

China - a key SCO partner -holds unique strategic interests in Afghanistan. China has been engaged with Afghanistan mainly on a bilateral level since the early 2000s and has always leveraged economic diplomacy. China has predominantly focused on developing infrastructure in Afghanistan, with projects like the Aynak copper mine and a number of oil exploration endeavors – worth more than \$3 billion in total (Devonshire-Ellis, 2021). Even though China has promised billions in regional infrastructure, such as road and rail projects in Central Asia, Beijing has not put Afghanistan high on the agenda within the framework of the SCO. It suggests China is pursuing a more unilateral approach in its investments, not willing to get dragged down by the multilateral mechanisms of the SCO.

By not just keeping the Afghanistan border secure but also ensuring a peaceful handover, China is able to focus on securing its energy resources and the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) implementation with relative ease. Moreover, due to issues of separatism in its Xinjiang province wherein China is worried about Islam extremism penetrating there, China has put counter-extremism high on the list in its Afghanistan agenda. This sustains SCO in the same situation with no common purpose due to China, which prioritizes belletrism and is adamant against dovetailing bilaterally provided support under the SCO umbrella. Also, China's economic approach is regarded by some as its growing influence and hegemony within the SCO, with implications for some member states such as Russia and India, in the aspect of power relations in the organization (Pantucci, 2021).



## **Russia**

Like China, Russia has a stake in the stability of Afghanistan, but its role under the SCO has been more limited. Russia's role in Afghanistan has been preconditioned by Moscow's need to retain dominant sway over the Central Asian republics -near abroad nations which Russians see as vital to their security and geopolitical interests. Though the SCO has given a venue for the discussions on Afghanistan, Russia has not recognized the full potential of the mogul as a leading agent in jointly tackling Afghanistan's security questions. This is in part due to Russia's pre-existing security obligations as a member to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) -a defense alliance of former Soviet republics. Consequently, Russia has tended to deal with Afghan security issues in bilateral or, in some cases, CSTO format instead of even broader SCO framework (Sharma, 2015).

Financial interests also play a role in Russia's cautious approach to Afghanistan. Russia has provided some security cooperation and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan but has not significantly advanced economic aid via this platform. Half-hearted Russian support for enhancing the role of the SCO in Afghanistan is part of Russia's larger effort to prevent China from seizing a monopoly of the SCO's economic agenda. Thus, Russia wants to combine its policy in Afghanistan with its interests across the region and the world.

## **Political Divisions Within the SCO and Their Impact on Afghanistan**

One of the major obstacles to the SCO indirectly seeking to influence Afghanistan is the political fractures among its member states. Such divisions-especially between India and Pakistan- have long prevented the organization from taking a coordinated position on Afghanistan. Difference in policies regarding Afghanistan is just one reflection of the India-Pakistan rivalry, which permeates much of the agenda, not just for the SCO (both India and Pakistan are permanent members), but also of the BRICS (India and China carry a grudge of the 'bomb' on the one hand and, in the case of Pakistan, of infiltration across the border?) Pakistan has been the long-time backer of the Taliban; India has supported the post-Taliban governments in Afghanistan and invested a great deal in its reconstruction. This difference of interests have led to frictions in the SCO which is detrimental to its role as a united and capable body to formulate a policy regarding Afghanistan (Khan et al., 2023).

In addition, between the absence of an institutional cohesion and common political outlook within the SCO, the organization has not been able to develop a collective response to the challenges and threats posed by Afghanistan to regional security. Although RATS does hold a core place in counterterrorism, a lack of overarching military or political strategy leaves the organization ill-equipped to counter the increasing threat of ISIS-Khorasan Province (ISIS-KP) and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

## **SCO's Humanitarian and Economic Assistance to Afghanistan**

The exit of U.S.-led coalition forces and the return of the Taliban have plunged Afghanistan into an economic crisis deepened by global sanctions and frozen foreign assets. In response to the crisis, the SCO has offered to provide humanitarian assistance, although the spending power of the organization remains minimal. While China, Russia, and Pakistan have committed some significant humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan in the form of food, medicine, and vaccination, this is far from being enough for long-term development needs (Gandhara RFE/RL, 2021). China in particular has been a top donor, offering \$31 million in assistance, and stresses that Afghanistan needs economic recovery. Russia offered 108 tons of humanitarian assistance, and has called on the international community to help Afghanistan to be restored. Still, the SCO has neither the means nor the institutional capability to guide Afghanistan's recovery. The absence of a dedicated development fund and coherent approach for Afghanistan's economic recovery still are limiting the organization's reach.

## **What Role Could the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Play in Afghanistan's Peace Process? The SCO's Potential for Peace and Stability in Afghanistan**

As a regional organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has set itself as one of the most important platforms within Eurasia where member states combat for cooperation as well as stability between one another. Given its location between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan is a vital player for the stability of the greater region, and with the complex number of intra-linked conflicts, it could be argued that its stability is essential for most of Asia. SCO includes China, Russia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Mongolia – with members warning that terrorist, narcotic trafficking and insurgence activity launching from Afghanistan could shake them. The SCO's role as a potential peace broker is further driven by Afghanistan's historic and current geopolitical significance. This paper outlines the points SCO could play for a peaceful Afghanistan within its own strengths and limitation considering the regional context.

## **Afghanistan's Geopolitical Significance**

Afghanistan's evolution as a land between empires, notably during the "Great Game" of the British and Russian empires has established its strategic relevance in Eurasia. Afghanistan has been a hub of trade but a theater

of conflict as a crossroad for many ethnicities, religions, and cultures. The legacy of its intricate history has made the region more unstable and perpetrated multiple interventions from foreign powers, starting with the Soviet invasion in the 1980s to the U.S. military intervention after the 9/11 attacks. Much of this history sees Afghanistan at the crossroads of regional powers, and today the same geopolitical interests found among SCO states.

### **The SCO's Mandate and Its Role in Afghanistan**

Formed in 2001, the SCO was originally centered on regional security, particularly counterterrorism, economic cooperation, and stability in Central Asia. Its mission is wide-ranging, including military cooperation, economic integration and people-to-people exchanges. The SCO has historically been oriented around dealing with the "three evils"-terrorism, separatism, and extremism-however regional overlap in security threats has brought Afghanistan into the SCO fold. The catalyst of SCO has been Afghanistan, where instability and conflict can have a contagious effect on countries - especially those with shared borders - such as China, Russia and the Central Asian republics.

According to the SCO, their focus on Afghanistan reflects a regional cooperation, multilateral diplomatic approach. The SCO, as a forum for dialogue, perhaps still be able to become a platform for negotiating peace in Afghanistan between the conflicting parties — Afghanistan and the Taliban -as well as regional stakeholders such Central Asian states and Iran. This position fits into the organization's larger goal of helping peace and stability in the region. On a strategic level, the SCO may potentially play a role in Afghanistan peace, but only if it can manage the challenges of fragmented intra-SCO dynamics, with various member-states pursuing diverse agendas in the country.

### **The Role of SCO Member States in Afghanistan's Peace Process**

When it comes to Afghanistan the interests of the SCO's member states are particular, and often opposed. China and Russia have seen the impacts of terrorism and extremism next to their borders in Afghanistan for a long time, worrying about the destabilizing effects on their regions. On the other hand, the respective economic interests in the region by China which is primarily through the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) and Russia in terms of energy and security are the motives behind its engagement with Afghanistan. But this is where their approach to the Taliban, along with the wider peace process differs. China has, in particular, focused on economic development and stability through its investments, while Russia has been more concerned with security, notably through counterterrorism support in the region.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all have a strong interest in Afghanistan. Such nations are under direct threat from insurgent and extremist groups operating from Afghan soil, and they have been particularly insistent that these issues cannot be contained without a regional tack. The SCO serves as a venue for those nations to align their policies and collaborate with Afghanistan on issues of bilateral concern, including counterterrorism and economic development. Also vital is Pakistan as long one of the dominant forces in Afghan politics and security. In the past Pakistan has been a patron of the Taliban, but its strategic game has changed, and at this SCO summit, it would be about how Pakistan is able to find a way out to reconcile its priorities in the region with other members of SCO.

### **Opportunities for the SCO in Facilitating Afghanistan's Peace Process**

A few significant opportunities: The role of the SCO in the country's peace process.

**Security Cooperation and Counterterrorism:** A particularly important issue for the SCO is coordination of counterterrorism efforts between member states, which is facilitated by the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). The resilience of militant groups, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda, means that Afghanistan will remain a source of security instability in the region. RATS could serve as a vehicle for enhancing counterterrorism cooperation, increasing intelligence sharing between Central Asian states, and aiding Afghan state forces in fighting against terrorism with the SCO. The SCO could help prevent the proliferation of terrorist groups and contain Afghanistan to be a sanctuary for international terrorism by cooperating with the Afghan government or by partnering with the Taliban.

**Economic Development and Infrastructure to Joint collaborate:** Economic recovery is key for the long-term stability of Afghanistan. The SCO, therefore, has considerable capacity to facilitate Afghanistan's reconstruction through regional economic integration. The establishment of trade routes, railways, and energy pipelines can bolster Afghanistan's links with Central Asia, China, and South Asia. What can SOC be leveraged with, to enhance regional trade and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors, is that China already has invested on infrastructural development within the region through its BRI.

**Political Dialogue and Mediation:** SCO can be a platform for dialogue between Afghanistan neighbors and the world. It might allow communication between the Taliban and other Afghan opponents, but also communication between Afghanistan and external powers such as the USA. SCO could facilitate bringing all

stakeholders together to hold broad-based negotiations for a political settlement that preserves Afghanistan autonomy, territorial integrity, and peace.

**Help with Humanitarian Aid and Development:** There is currently a humanitarian situation in Afghanistan where millions of people require food, health and education. The SCO could initiate coordination of humanitarian and economic recovery assistance through its member states and observer countries. Central Asian states with their close cultural and historical relations with Afghanistan may be the best place to offer assistance (food aid, medical supplies, education and so on). These efforts could be coordinated under the umbrella of the SCO to address the short-term needs of the Afghan people in balancing these demands alongside long-term goals towards sustainable development.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

However, the path for the SCO to assume the role of the leading player in the peace process in Afghanistan remains blocked by multiple problems.

**Rivalries Within the SCO:** As noted above, not all SCO members share the same priorities and interests with regard to Afghanistan. China, Russia and India these neighboring countries of Afghanistan looks at Afghanistan from their own perspective maybe due to economic, security concerns and geopolitical aspirations. The rivalry among these powers may make it difficult for the SCO to adopt a common position towards Afghanistan.

**The Legitimacy of The Taliban:** A key challenge to the SCOs involvement in the peace process is the Taliban lack of international legitimacy. We can say that some of the SCO members have already opened up towards Taliban, especially Pakistan and China, but Taliban are not really a 'government to be dealt with? That means the Taliban regime has not received a stamp of approval from the international community and particularly from the US and to some extent EU, as a result, this will surely weaken the SCO mediation on this matter.

**Geopolitical rivalries:** The SCO has two of its most important members: India and Pakistan. This rivalry is another obstacle for cooperation within the SCO. India strongly opposed the Taliban takeover and remain suspicious about Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan, which may prevent the SCO not to remain neutral in the interests of peace process. Finally, the long historical role of the United States as a central player in Afghanistan complicates the SCO role in mediating the positions of the Taliban and other Afghan factions.

### **Regional Balance of Power Implications: The SCO's Role in Afghanistan's Stabilization**

#### **The Shift in Afghanistan's Geopolitical Landscape**

*The impact being felt by the west from the rapid American forces withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's quickly regained strength and influence in the region. The return of the Taliban to power and the collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government represents a seismic change in the balance of power in the region. It has triggered concerns among the neighboring states especially those associated with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that have been worried about the spillover effects of Afghanistan's instability for many decades. As a powerful regional organization, the SCO is in a unique and vital position not only to shape the post-Taliban future of Afghanistan but also essentially lead the way in peace and stability efforts.*

#### **The Formation of the SCO-Afghan Contact Group**

The SCO-Afghan Contact Group was one of the initial measures taken by the SCO to deal with the situation in Afghanistan. This platform was created to facilitate interaction between SCO member states and Afghanistan on the main issues of mutual concern, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and economic reconstruction. The SCO-Afghan Contact Group has been established and convenes regularly since then, serving as an indispensable platform for concerted action against the Afghan crisis. SCO members have acknowledged that the instability in Afghanistan has direct implication on regional peace and needs a regional response. The Contact Group remains central in promoting dialogue and cooperation between Afghanistan and its neighbors and other regional powers.

## **Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation**

*The long-running civil war in Afghanistan and the terror threat pose serious challenges to regional stability. Terrorist groups (like Islamic State Khorasan Province, or ISKP) add to this threat- not just to Afghanistan, but wider afield too. The Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of SCO has played an important role in achieving coordination in counternarcotics and counterterrorism operations, intelligence sharing and joint military exercises. This collective resolve of the SCO to deal with terrorism is significant for Afghanistan stabilization and containing the expansion of extremist ideologies to other Central and South Asian countries. ISKP's emergence in Afghanistan is especially troubling. Though ISKP, which began with a focus on the Taliban, has expanded the scope of its operations and in turn, makes the entire region more unstable. The SCO, via its counterterrorism body, might provide assistance in forming some kind of a unified regional task force to deal with this emerging menace. This will ensure that Afghanistan remains out of groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda and by incorporating Afghanistan into the wider framework of the regional counterterrorism strategy within the SCO the organization will be able to act in ways necessary to support Afghan security forces in fighting these insurgent groups.*

## **The SCO's Humanitarian and Economic Support for Afghanistan**

*Beyond security, Afghanistan's economic collapse has posed an important challenge to the SCO and the global community. The economic situation has worsened dramatically since the August takeover, followed by the foreign forces' withdrawal and the freezing of Afghanistan's central bank reserves, by the U.S. and other financial institutions. The inflation, the poverty and the unemployment have multiplied to a threshold of a humanitarian crisis. The SCO has also promised large-scale support for Afghanistan — both financial and humanitarian, and the SCO countries have spoken about providing millions of dollars of aid collectively. Such help is vital in stabilizing the Afghan economy, and averting further collapse. SCO efforts at revitalizing Afghanistan economy are bolstered by initiatives to enhance regional connectivity. For fostering economic growth and regional integration, infrastructure projects like development of trade routes and energy pipelines is essential. Afghanistan's involvement in these initiatives may assist in the reintegration of the nation into Central Asian economic space, where trade and economic development can take place.*

## **Regional Cooperation and Political Stability**

Afghanistan has a crucial geopolitical position in Central Asia, which is the heart of world powerful states interests. The stability of Afghanistan is connected with the stability of the states that surround it, in particular the Central Asian Republics (CARs), CHINA doing the neighboring States, and as for Pakistan being a part of Afghanistan, such stability and stability being a part of Afghanistan, providing Regional Stability. As a multilateral platform, the SCO is uniquely positioned to build bridges of regional cooperation and introduce political stability. The problem is that uniting them will have to cut through a thicket of regional rivalries and interests. The two leading powers of the SCO, China and Russia, are investing much in Afghanistan in terms of infrastructure and energy projects. Instability hinders any hope of economic growth in the long-term due to the region's vested interests in Afghanistan. Also, Pakistan shares a border and is just as eager as the United States to see that the Taliban government abides by security and economic agreements. India, another SCO member, has its concerns too, primarily on the implications of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan for regional security and the fate of ethnic minorities in that country. The SCO should be able to thread the needle to promote a more broadly based political process and respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It includes dialogue among the political factions of Afghanistan — including the Taliban -and a commitment by the country to democracy and peace in the region. Moreover, infighting within the SCO limits its ability to take concrete action in Afghanistan. Develop issues It is hard to find a consensus on Afghanistan because the interests of the SCO members, especially China, Russia, India, and Pakistan, differ. India's concerns about Pakistan's leverage on Taliban may make the SCO dysfunctional in some form of collective action for instance. Finally, the SCO will have a short supply of its institution and financial power to execute big promotion plans or liabilities. Additionally, the SCO's focus on regional cooperation and multilateral diplomacy makes it one of the pillars of regional geopolitics across the broader Eurasian space. However, the future of Afghanistan, as well as the role of the SCO in stabilizing it, is an important matter with far-reaching implications not only for the organization itself, which is actively seeking to strike a balance between the interests of its unique membership, but also for global security and stability for years to come.



## SCO's Current Cooperation and Future Pathway for Strategic Collaboration

Member States active and political level dialogues, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) continues to grow into an important regional and world player. The ongoing issues in many parts of the world brought about a set of challenges to the effective implementation of developmental programs in SCO region thus regular meetings of the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Prime Ministers and the Council of Foreign Ministers highlight the determination of the SCO to address these issues. At the core of SCO principles is a commitment to coexistence, mutual respect, non-interference in internal affairs and a commitment to international law. The group aims to promote a more balanced international security order, strengthening stability through cooperative responses to transnational challenges. SCO members remain committed to strengthening cooperation within the framework of the organization to bring together resources and expertise to solve international problems and, thus, help ensure an secure and stable world. The SCO follows the policy of open cooperation, and it shows readiness for cooperation with all countries and international organizations. With a focus on regional security, economic development, cultural exchange and humanitarian cooperation, its development strategy also underscores the role of the bloc in global development. SCO member states seek to resolve conflicts by diplomatic and political means, and promoting discussions on peacekeeping, arms control and transparency on the globe. The organization is committed to initiatives that foster goodwill and respect among its members who are attempting to forge a fairer global monetary order. Central to the SCO's activities are the security needs of its Central Asian members, which are regularly under threat from terrorism, separatism and extremism. Through its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which has been a bedrock of counterterrorism, drug trafficking, and cyber warfare, the SCO has addressed these security challenges, which have systemic implications for social development. The SCO, however, emphasizes the multidimensionality of security and that without the SCO no alternative multilateral structure can ensure regional stability by providing prompt and effective responses to all security related threats (Article 1). The SCO is also still focused on economic cooperation among its members, in addition to security cooperation. Providing for free trade among its members, Intra-organizational trade has experienced astonishing growth which is evident in SCOs achievements of economic cooperation among its multitude of members. The SCO has turned into an important app for infrastructure development and trade route improvement with key projects like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A greater focus on economic efforts like free-trade zones and collaborative energy projects also demonstrate where the organization plays a leading role in achieving regional economic integration. The emphasis on enhancing business climate and easing investment is indicative of the long-term objective behind the SCO, which is regional prosperity.

In addition, the SCO is also keen on promoting cultural exchanges between the different member states to foster greater mutual understanding. Focusing on heritage preservation and interfaith dialogue, the organization nurtures respect towards the long history and customs of multi-ethnic societies. That cultural diplomacy is backed up with economic and security underpinning and is contributing to a more integrated and cooperative regional community. The future roadmap for cooperation of the SCOs the SCO is being enlarged and as its activities are being tailored to the changing dynamics of global developments, a number of priorities will figure high on its agenda. Boosting regional security, enabling economic development, improving cultural awareness, and bringing efficient cooperation in the face of global issues are all part of the future direction of the organization. The SCO will attempt to play a central role in determining the fate of Eurasian and even general stability worldwide through deepening state members and extending observers.

## Conclusion

There is no denying that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become a key player in establishing regional stability and security, especially in relations with Afghanistan. The unstable situation of Afghanistan, being located in the middle of Central and South Asia, had made Afghanistan the matter of great concern for the member states of the SCO since long. This shift in its role in Afghanistan illustrates the organization's endeavor to be more than just a security-oriented platform and become a regional entity focusing on areas related to peace, economic development and long-term stability as it transitions from being a primarily military-driven institution to something broader operating more of a regional level. Based on its core ideals of respect for sovereignty, non-interference in local affairs and collaboration, the SCO has ensured a vital discussion and joint efforts based on issues like counterterrorism, economic rehabilitation and regional linkages with Afghanistan. However, set against the backdrop of setting up of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group and work in progress on SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), they show the extent of commitment of the organization in addressing the multi-directional threat that Afghanistan holds to regional as well as international peace. Where the SCO has proven its mettle has been in coordinating security initiatives, sharing intelligence, and

supporting counterterrorism efforts that are key in addressing the types of cross-border threats that emanate from Afghanistan that will only grow in strength in the face of ISIS-K and the Taliban's ties to groups across the region.

Nevertheless, despite these accomplishments, the limited nature of efforts driven by the SCO as an organizational body to bring about durable peace and stability in Afghanistan will be hindered by a range of challenges. But the contrasting political ambitions of its member states - most prominently China, Russia, India and Pakistan - have a tendency to block efforts to devise a common policy on Afghanistan. This schism is also being exacerbated by the fact that the Taliban regime has not been fully recognized internationally further complicating the SCO's diplomatic efforts and its ability to influence affairs. Likewise, the reality of political factionalism in Afghanistan, and the continued humanitarian emergency, urge for a deeper mix of soft action and long-term growth. Hence, counter terrorism and security footprint does not singularly define the SCO's role in the Afghanistan peace process. From here on, the organisation needs to adopt a more comprehensive approach that encompasses the promotion of conjugation of economy, infrastructure initiatives and regional cohesion. Such steps are critical to create sustainable peace in the country, resolve the driving forces of instability, and provide Afghanistan with the opportunity to become a contributing member of the wider Eurasian space. With its regional partners, and with China at the forefront through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the SCO could also help drive Afghanistan's economic recovery, needed for sustained peace.

Meanwhile, the Eurasian organization can also contribute to political cohesion in Afghanistan, which is essential to the stability of the country. Promoting dialogue between Afghanistan's many political and ethnic factions as well as linking Afghanistan more to regional trade and economic systems will minimize in-fighting and lessen the need for international assistance. To ensure that the organization remains relevant and contributes maximally to its purpose, its future direction must enhance its institutional capacity to meet security as well as development needs, while it continues to facilitate a diplomatic forum for regional cooperation. To sum up, while the SCO is crucial for Afghanistan's peace process, it needs to adapt its role to the many-sided, dynamically changing challenges that it faces in the region. The SCO can further contribute to regional stabilization by framing its agenda around security, economic development, political reconciliation, and humanitarian support. It will remain critical both for Afghanistan stabilization and for wider Eurasia security and prosperity as Afghanistan continues to grapple with its post-conflict reality setting up a home-grown polity. While the SCO has already made certain foundational contributions, its future achievements will solely depend on whether interests can be substantially harmonized, the capacity for regional cooperation can be broadened, and the long-term Afghan development tailored to fit the neighboring capacities towards joint regional responsibility can be firmly prioritized as an essential component of the Eurasian integration process.

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