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## Transboundary Interactions Between Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization After the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to examine the functional utility of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for regional stability after the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan. The instability in Afghanistan may become a serious regional challenge for the SCO to seek an acceptable solution. The study addresses the question that how the SCO members are dealing with the emerging crisis in Afghanistan. Hence, the prospective role of the SCO in building consensus among member states is unravelled with a conceptual framework, based on two theories of international relations namely regional security complex and functional cooperation theory. These theories provide a conceptual understanding that the interests of states, belonging to a general geographical region, are integrated and their mutual cooperation is more durable than the states outside the region. Subsequently, the study explored the role of the SCO in maintaining regional security and traced its efforts for stability. To explore the complexities within the SCO while managing the nascent government of the Taliban (forbidden in Russia) in Afghanistan, qualitative data has been collected. The data includes government websites, official statements and documents, books, research articles and newspapers, published in different countries. It is found that the worsening security situation in Afghanistan is a common threat to all the members of the SCO, so consensus is required to promote practical measures including the development of Afghanistan. Therefore, the SCO is focusing on addressing the immediate and tangible consequences of the Taliban's takeover after the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan and supporting regional states to adopt functional cooperation to reconstruct Afghanistan.

**Key words:** Taliban, terrorism, security, China, stability

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## Трансграничное взаимодействие Афганистана и Шанхайской организации сотрудничества после вывода войск США из Афганистана

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**Аннотация.** Проанализирована роль Шанхайской организации сотрудничества (ШОС) в укреплении региональной стабильности после вывода войск США из Афганистана. Нестабильность в Афганистане становится серьезной проблемой регионального масштаба, которая требует от ШОС поиска приемлемого решения. Рассматривается вопрос о том, как страны — члены ШОС справляются с углубляющимся кризисом в Афганистане. Роль ШОС в достижении консенсуса между государствами-членами в долгосрочной перспективе раскрывается с опорой на концептуальные рамки, состоящие из двух теорий международных отношений — теории комплекса региональной безопасности и теории функционального сотрудничества, которые обеспечивают понимание того, что интересы государств, принадлежащих к единому географическому региону, схожи, и их взаимное сотрудничество оказывается более прочным, чем у государств, находящихся за его пределами. Рассматривается роль ШОС в поддержании региональной безопасности и прослеживаются ее усилия по обеспечению стабильности. Для изучения сложных проблем внутри ШОС при формировании отношений с зарождающимся правительством «Талибана» (запрещен в РФ) в Афганистане были собраны и проанализированы фактические данные, полученные из официальных документов и заявлений, опубликованных на правительственных веб-сайтах, материалы научных публикаций, статей в СМИ, изданных в разных странах. Установлено, что ухудшение ситуации в сфере безопасности в Афганистане представляет общую угрозу для всех стран — членов ШОС, поэтому необходим консенсус для продвижения практических мер, включая содействие развитию Афганистана. Таким образом, ШОС сосредотачивается на устранении непосредственных и ощутимых последствий захвата власти талибами после вывода войск США из Афганистана, с одной стороны, а с другой — на поддержке региональных государств в налаживании функционального сотрудничества для восстановления Афганистана.

**Ключевые слова:** Талибан, терроризм, безопасность, Китай, стабильность

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### Introduction

The withdrawal of United States (US) forces from Afghanistan abetted the Taliban's<sup>1</sup> rule in Afghanistan while giving birth to new fears about who will fill the void in Afghanistan and keep terrorism at bay in South and Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, this changing regional

situation has become a litmus test for China's growing influence in the arena of South and Central Asia. In this scenario, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) appears to be the most relevant regional grouping to deal with the said quandary.

Many scholars postulate that the role of the SCO in Afghanistan will be impactful and it will raise the stature of the SCO as a powerful and credible regional organization.<sup>3</sup> Chung (2006),

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the list of terrorist organizations in the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> Motwani N. No Good Options for Central Asia After US Withdrawal from Afghanistan // East Asia Forum. August 11, 2021. URL: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/08/11/no-good-options-for-central-asia-after-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>3</sup> Ali S. SCO's Role in Afghanistan's Stability // Center for Strategic and Contemporary Research. September 10, 2021. URL: <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/scos-role-in-afghanistans-stability> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

while highlighting the role of the SCO in managing the regional stability, maintains that this organization is designed to resolve the common border issues among the member states. Others claim that the SCO strives for regional cooperation and withstands stability, security and peace in the whole region.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, some scholars have shown their concerns over China's overstretch while searching for a common solution for Afghanistan. They say that the SCO has no capabilities to deal with the issue (Godehardt, 2014, p. 149). Inevitably, there are huge hurdles that could hamper the SCO from playing its coveted role in stabilizing Afghanistan (Roy, 2010). Nevertheless, it is obvious that through the SCO, Beijing could test its brand of multilateral leadership in the region (Qingguo, 2007).

In addition, the SCO proclaims itself to be a regional coordination forum for counterterrorism. It is largely because the members of the SCO accept each other's understanding of security concerns. For example, for Central Asian countries, it is terrorism and extremism, for China, it is the Uighur separatist movement (Omelicheva, 2010, p. 70). This shows that the SCO member states are adopting a regional approach to solving regional problems, where neighbouring great powers have security responsibilities, as the security concerns of their neighbours can affect their national security as well (Amable, 2022, p. 6).

This is particularly important against the backdrop of Afghanistan's economic vulnerability, which is directly related to the domestic political situation. The economic vulnerability of Afghanistan is being reported and estimated to be nearly 9 billion USD have been frozen in the foreign reserves of Afghanistan's Central Bank.<sup>5</sup> The International

Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and some donors have suspended payments to Afghanistan too,<sup>6</sup> making people's lives difficult in Afghanistan. As a result, the problems such as inflation, dropping currency, poverty, and rising unemployment are being surfaced. Thus, the urgency of an intensive political settlement and economic improvement has been calling for a multilateral solution by integrating Afghanistan into regional economic activities.

In general, the current situation and geographical realities make Afghanistan a cornerstone for further SCO activities. Consequently, the question arises that how the SCO member states will adjust their activities to solve the Afghan problem.

In this article, the author has attempted to examine the role of the SCO in the framework of resolving the situation in Afghanistan. The study is interpretive and based on primary and secondary data sources. The data collected is mainly based on three areas:

- 1) conceptual understanding of the involvement of the SCO in regional affairs;
- 2) views on the role of neighbouring countries in the solution of Afghanistan's problems;
- 3) voices on how the SCO members should solve problems in Afghanistan.

The article is divided into three parts to expound on the puzzle and possible solutions. The first part conceptualizes the importance of the SCO with theoretical support. The second part discusses the capacity of the SCO member states to deal with the complex issue of Afghanistan. The last part highlights the possible challenges for the organization.

## Methodology and Conceptual Framework

The dynamic interactions among SCO members have shaped the relations of member states with Afghanistan since the withdrawal of the U.S. from the country. This article bears a presumption that the SCO has sought to become a pivotal player in the neighbouring state of

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shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-meet-in-dushanbe-with-afghanistan-in-focus/31464685.html (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>4</sup> Matveeva A., Giustozzi A. The SCO: A Regional Organisation in the Making // Crisis States Working Papers Series. 2008 (September). No. 2. URL: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csdc-working-papers-phase-two/wp39.2-sco-a-regional-organisation-in-the-making.pdf> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>5</sup> SCO Leaders Call for Increased Afghan Aid, Unfreezing of Assets // Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. September 17, 2021. URL: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/>

Afghanistan. Therefore, the data collected were not locally garnered but news and articles from regional states were also collected. The database of this article includes scholarly work such as books and journal articles. The publicly available official documents were examined to establish the pattern of the functioning of the SCO. To critically examine the actions of the SCO, the published works that appeared in various studies of think tanks were consulted.

The theoretical perspective (model) of this study is based on the regional security complex theory (RSCT), which helps to understand the patterns of security threats to the neighbours of Afghanistan. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver pointed out that regions have their peculiarities; therefore, the solutions to regional problems should also be regional (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 40). From this perspective, the national security concerns of adjacent states of Afghanistan appeared as interlocked together which cannot be tackled independently. Since Afghanistan is the area of concentration of Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Russia and China, it makes, the SCO the only organization to ensure the security of the Eurasian space and to provide an inclusive solution for all. Moreover, the SCO has acquired an identity for itself as a platform for permitting the regional states to discuss common problems and possible solutions to them (Olcott, 2008, p. 250).

The security factor brings all the neighbouring states of Afghanistan closer to each other to cooperate under the framework of the SCO. China has already established good bilateral relations with all the neighbouring states of Afghanistan (Opacin, 2014, p. 32). The shared goal of China and Russia with the SCO is to provide a framework with which to manage their relations in a common Eurasian space while keeping the other powers out of their vulnerable hinterlands. For the Central Asian states, membership in the SCO serves to legitimize these countries' weak regimes, which are battling political, ethnic, and religious divisions.

The well-known philosophy of the SCO is cooperation among its member states; the organization seeks protection from external

threats (Niblock, 2018) and makes the member states interdependent. This is in line with the theory of functionalism in the discipline of International Relations, which emphasizes that states are more likely to collaborate when they have common interests and when they work under the same rules in an institution that facilitates cooperation (Mitrany, 1948).

The functionalist regional cooperation also constructs a frame to fathom the regional settings of South and Central Asia.

Firstly, for the member states, many problems, emanating from Afghanistan, are similar such as refugees, illegal migrants, arms and drugs smuggling, and others.

Secondly, China has shown a continued interest in uniting South Asia, Central Asia, Europe and other parts of the Eurasian space through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing has consolidated its project through infrastructure development in remote regions and that is why the SCO is increasingly regarded as a security and economic regional bloc (Telò, 2023). Hence, both the SCO and the BRI are envisaging development through increased ties between member countries (Akhtar & Javaid, 2024, p. 56).

Thirdly, a number of countries bordering Afghanistan are generally aware of the situation there, and the current regime change is of little concern to them. Arif Rafiq, associated with Vizier Consulting LLC, opined that “regional states are at the very least uncomfortable with a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan ... have no choice but to engage whoever is the de-facto power on the other side of the border.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, by the time the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, the United Nations (UN) announced that Afghanistan's neighbours should keep their borders open to the refugees and urged the international community to support the countries hosting Afghan refugees.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Rafiq A. Afghanistan's Neighbors Contend with Taliban at Their Borders // Middle East Institute. July 29, 2021. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistans-neighbors-contend-taliban-their-borders> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>8</sup> Afghanistan: How Many Refugees Are There and Where Will They Go? // BBC News. August 31, 2021.

In general, the countries of South and Central Asia are interconnected both politically and economically. Now, Afghanistan's neighbouring states, seeking internal security, have shown their willingness to renew their relations with Afghanistan and push Kabul to be active in a regional scheme. In this scenario, the SCO is emerging as a ray of hope, calling on its members to find a genuine diplomatic solution through political, economic, and security cooperation.

### Concerns of the SCO Members

Theoretically, the SCO could bring optimal solutions to Afghanistan as it aims to settle the border issues among member states and emphasize regional integration (Chung, 2006). Practically, it faces many challenges in mobilizing its members and persuading them to take collective action. If the SCO does not get involved in Afghanistan, it will intensify terrorism and regional power politics, which will lead to proxy wars in the region.

There are numerous reasons for the SCO member states to be concerned about Afghanistan. Firstly, Afghanistan is situated at the crossroads of Central, South and West Asia, making it an epicentre for the SCO. Secondly, all neighbours of Afghanistan have an association with the SCO and almost all member states face the same challenges such as terrorism and separatism (Opacin, 2014, p. 34). Thirdly, the strong ties between Afghanistan and the SCO states are mainly because of their common Islamic identity or geographical proximity.

Due to Afghanistan's fragility and its porous border, neighbouring countries have been taking defensive measures, for instance, Pakistan began fencing its border with Afghanistan in 2017, fearing the spread of criminal networks and illegal drug trafficking.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, India believes that Afghanistan's soil could be used

against it.<sup>10</sup> Some Western thinkers have similar views, for example, famous American analyst Micheal Kugelman explains: "Not only has the Taliban, traditionally an anti-India group, seized power, but India's rivals, China and Pakistan, are now poised to deepen their footprints in Afghanistan."<sup>11</sup> He goes on to argue that a Taliban government would be favourable to Beijing because it could secure ongoing infrastructure projects in cooperation with Kabul.<sup>12</sup>

The Central Asian states' leaders are most concerned about the rising regional instability, as they have also experienced volatility in their respective states resulting from the ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, for example, is concerned about radicalization and religious extremism emanating from Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> The Central Asian states are concerned as their territories could become a haven for extremists / terrorist / and separatist groups working to bring down the incumbent regimes in these countries. History has also shown that many of the challenges faced by the Central Asian republics have been linked to the security situation in Afghanistan. For example, the civil war in Tajikistan (1992–1997) was fuelled by groups operating from Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, a number of Central Asian countries have developed their own approach to relations with Afghanistan. For instance, the government of

<sup>10</sup> We Expect Afghan Territory Should Not Be Used for Sheltering, Training and Financing Terror Acts, Says India // *The Hindu*. March 09, 2023. URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/we-expect-afghan-territory-should-not-be-used-for-sheltering-training-and-financing-terror-acts-says-india/article66598634.ece> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>11</sup> Choudhury S. R. From India to China, the Taliban's Return Leaves Afghanistan's Neighbors Scrambling to Adjust // *CNBC*. August 17, 2021. URL: <https://www.cnb.com/2021/08/18/afghanistan-taliban-impact-on-pakistan-india-china-russia-iran.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Kaura V. Uzbekistan Ups Its Involvement in Afghanistan // *Middle East Institute*. January 31, 2018. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/uzbekistan-ups-its-involvement-afghanistan> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>14</sup> Tajikistan and Afghanistan // *Institute for the Study of War*. URL: <https://www.understandingwar.org/tajikistan-and-afghanistan> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58283177> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>9</sup> Basit A. Pakistan — Afghanistan Border Fence Is a Step in the Right Direction // *Al Jazeera*. February 25, 2021. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/25/the-pak-afghan-border-fence-is-a-step-in-the-right-direction> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

Turkmenistan had opted for good relations with the warlords in Western Afghanistan. Even President Saparmurad Niyazov in the late 1990s officially recognized the Taliban rule believing that the Taliban would create the stability required to export Turkmen gas across Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

Although the Taliban, after coming to power in 2021, has made a concerted effort to appear much different from the Taliban of 2001,<sup>16</sup> its assurances on regional security are mistrusted. Neighbouring states of Afghanistan preferred to reach a reliable mechanism for conflict resolution with the help of great powers, namely Russia and China.

China's concern is that Afghanistan, under its current rulers, will provide a haven for the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), a separatist group in Xinjiang. The Islamic State — Khorasan Province (ISIS-K)<sup>17</sup> has formed a strong foothold in the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan bordering China. Moreover, a large number of followers of ETIM are also joining ISIS-K.<sup>18</sup> However, Chinese leaders have long believed that good living standards and economic growth are the best mechanisms to maintain stability (Cheng, 2015). Therefore, maintaining good relations with Afghanistan would be the best strategy to evade these threats.

For Russia, the issue of Afghanistan brings many problems, the key one being the spread of instability from Afghanistan to Central Asia, a region it considers its sphere of influence.

As a result, both Russia and China have been seeking the cooperation of the bordering states. So far, the SCO has demonstrated that it can be a cooperative forum for both Russia and China to harmonize their international policies (Patnaik, 2016, p. 183).

### SCO's Efforts for Regional Peace

For the SCO member countries, Afghanistan is not a new issue added to the agenda, because even in the early years of the SCO, it began to emphasize the solutions to Afghanistan's problems. The member states have been closely monitoring the situation in Afghanistan to make possible efforts to improve the situation in Afghanistan (Sheraliyev, 2014). The formation and expansion of the SCO was largely based on the vision to establish a stable Eurasian region. The Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO defines the objectives of the SCO as the enhancement of mutual trust and good neighbourliness between member-states (Vasilyeva & Lagutina, 2016, p. 48). The organization emphasizes cooperation in preventing conflicts and joint search for solutions to problems.<sup>19</sup>

Generally, the SCO considers terrorism as one of the main factors contributing to instability in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the SCO member countries have long perceived that religious extremism spilling over from Afghanistan as their main security concern (Ahmad, 2018, p. 123). For this purpose, the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) oversees the cooperation of member states against terrorism, separatism, and extremism, in its functioning. Moreover, there are limits to interstate cooperation among the SCO member countries which is restraining RATS from success.

<sup>15</sup> Tadjbakhsh S. Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia // *PRIO Paper*. 2012. P. 48. URL: <https://www.prio.org/publications/7214> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas C. Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress // *Congress Research Service*. November 2, 2021. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46955> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>17</sup> Hereinafter, an organization included in the list of terrorist organizations in the Russian Federation is mentioned.

<sup>18</sup> Fischer S., Stanzel A. A. Afghanistan: The West Fails — a Win for China and Russia? // *SWP Comment*. September 22, 2021. URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/afghanistan-the-west-fails-a-win-for-china-and-russia> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>19</sup> Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization // *Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat*. P. 2. URL: <https://eng.sectesco.org/files/203013/203013> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>20</sup> Ali S. SCO's Role in Afghanistan's Stability // *Center for Strategic and Contemporary Research*. September 10, 2021. URL: <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/scos-role-in-afghanistans-stability> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

Interstate rivalries, porous borders, and ethnic disputes are the main obstacles to cooperation.

The current government of the Taliban has also been making gestures to cooperate with neighbouring states and to follow the principles of good governance. Incidentally, Beijing as an active member of the SCO devised a regional strategy for Kabul by integrating it in commercial activities. In this regard, the assurances of the Chinese leadership are not unrelated, the Chinese president Xi Jinping reiterated that “the SCO should support to drive a smooth transition in Afghanistan.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the SCO is paying great attention to the Afghan issue while making efforts to mediate and resolve it. The Secretary-General of the SCO, Zhang Ming, emphasized that Afghanistan should establish an inclusive government with the participation of various tribes and political parties.<sup>22</sup> The Secretariat of the SCO released a statement in August 2021, which said, “The member states of the SCO reaffirm their commitment to helping Afghanistan build a peaceful, stable and prosperous country free from terrorism, warfare, and drugs.”<sup>23</sup>

The political commitment and the fast-growing economy of China as one of the SCO leaders indicate the Chinese capabilities to fill the security vacuum left by the U.S. with its departure from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Chinese strategy for dealing with Afghanistan

appears different from that of the U.S. The only difference is that the U.S. had used military tactics in Afghanistan and relied on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to wrangle the Taliban. The US support was for only the Afghan government, but it did not work well. China, on the other hand, is taking a multilateral approach to stabilizing Afghanistan and developing a comprehensive political settlement.

### **Formation of SCO — Afghanistan Contact Group**

The SCO — Afghanistan Contact Group (SACG) was established in 2005 to expound proposals and recommendations for cooperation on issues of mutual interest between the SCO and Afghanistan (Rahimov, 2013, p. 221). The primary goal of the formation of the group was to cooperate with Afghanistan in preventing the illegal spread of narcotics, counterterrorism, and organized crime.

Beijing was hopeful to take effective measures to root out terrorism with the help of neighbours located around Afghanistan. However, the activities of the Afghan Contact group were suspended in 2009<sup>24</sup> and no change could occur in the social, political, and economic sectors. According to R. Pantucci, “China sought to push the SCO to do more in Afghanistan by bringing the country into the organization as an observer member and fostering the creation of an SCO Afghanistan Contact Group.”<sup>25</sup>

In 2012, after a three-year quiescent, Afghanistan got the observer seat in the SCO. In 2015, a new protocol was signed by Afghanistan on counterterrorism with the RATS of the SCO; the same year Kabul applied for full membership

<sup>21</sup> SCO Leaders Call for Increased Afghan Aid, Unfreezing of Assets // Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. September 17, 2021. URL: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-meet-in-dushanbe-with-afghanistan-in-focus/31464685.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>22</sup> CGTN: Afghanistan: Life Beyond Scars: SCO Secretary-General on Its Role in Helping Afghanistan's Reconstruction and Development // Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat. September 2, 2022. URL: <https://eng.sectsc.org/20220902/CGTNAfghanistan-Life-Beyond-Scars-SCO-Secretary-General-on-its-role-in-helping-Afghanistans-911192.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>23</sup> Chaudhury D. R. SCO Assures to Build Peaceful and Prosperous Afghanistan // The Economic Times. August 26, 2021. URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sco-assures-to-build-peaceful-and-prosperous-afghanistan/articleshow/85569896.cms?from=mdr> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>24</sup> Omelicheva M. Y. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan: Old Fears, Old Barriers to Counterterrorism Cooperation // ISPI. August 26, 2021. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/shanghai-cooperation-organization-and-afghanistan-old-fears-old-barriers-counterterrorism-cooperation-31398> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>25</sup> Pantucci R. Central Asia and Afghanistan: Old Fears, Old Actors, New Games // RUSI. July 27, 2021. URL: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/central-asia-and-afghanistan-old-fears-old-actors-new-games> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

in the group.<sup>26</sup> Thereby SACG meetings also resumed in 2017 to facilitate stability in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> Later, in January 2020, a roundtable dialogue on Afghanistan was held by the SCO Secretariat in which the key assessment of SACG was given by Secretary-General Vladimir Norov and the future agenda was also presented.<sup>28</sup>

All the SCO meetings on Afghanistan indicate that efforts to convert Afghanistan into a source of opportunities are underway. However, Afghanistan cannot participate in the SCO Afghan Contact Group; the members are reluctant to give the Taliban a seat, as this would imply extending international recognition and legitimacy to the latter.

### **Afghanistan and the Cluster of States Within the SCO**

In order to understand the different objectives of the SCO member states in the context of the Afghan problem, the key states are classified in three ways.

The first group of great powers in the SCO, namely Russia and China, can be examined through their popular objectives. Moscow seems to be more interested in the security facets the SCO displays, whereas Beijing has been trying to broaden the scope of the SCO by including economic aspects and development plans. Russia's official stance appears optimistic about the Taliban's takeover of Kabul; however, there is uncertainty in Moscow about the ability of the Taliban's government to stabilize Afghanistan. To curtail threats, Russia has been consolidating its military presence in the Central Asian region as a security guarantor as well as a key diplomatic partner. Russia already has a reasonable mechanism under the Collective Security

Treaty Organization (CSTO) to counter the threats emanating from the border areas between Afghanistan — Central Asia. Thus, developing counter-terrorism capabilities is the most achievable goal of the CSTO (Krasnopolsky, 2022, p. 64). Moscow also shows a willingness to link the economy of Afghanistan with South, Central, and West Asia.<sup>29</sup>

As far as China is concerned, it does not want to follow the trails of the U.S. in Afghanistan rather Chinese policymakers practice a multilateral approach and collective response to deal with issues.<sup>30</sup> Beijing is currently not complaining about the Taliban government and has initiated dialogue with the Taliban in bilateral and multilateral formats. In late July 2021, the Taliban representatives visited China and had meetings with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi.<sup>31</sup> These visits indicate the willingness of Beijing to signal that it is disposed to recognize a Taliban government in Kabul in return for assurances of the prevention of terrorist groups from entering Xinjiang.<sup>32</sup> China has been in talks with the Taliban regarding access to minerals and rare-earth metals; it is unlikely that Afghanistan, under the Taliban, will be prioritized in China's mega projects. Hence, at most, China is keeping its relationship with Afghanistan at a functional level, while avoiding gestures that could be

<sup>29</sup> Abbas N. *Russia & Post-US Withdrawal Afghanistan // South Asian Voices*. September 24, 2021. URL: <https://southasianvoices.org/russia-post-us-withdrawal-afghanistan/> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>30</sup> Standish R. *Afghanistan in Focus at Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit // Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. September 13, 2021. URL: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-shanghai-summit/31458262.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>31</sup> *China Says Taliban Expected to Play 'Important' Afghan Peace Role // Reuters*. July 28, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/taliban-delegation-visits-china-taliban-spokesperson-2021-07-28/> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>32</sup> Fischer S., Stanzel A. A. *Afghanistan: The West Fails — a Win for China and Russia? // SWP Comment*. September 22, 2021. URL: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/afghanistan-the-west-fails-a-win-for-china-and-russia> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>26</sup> *The SCO in Afghanistan // Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations*. April 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/the-sco-in-afghanistan/> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *SCO Secretariat Holds Roundtable Discussion on Afghanistan // Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat*. January 9, 2020. URL: <https://eng.sectsc.org/20200109/621306.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

interpreted as legitimizing the Taliban as the ruling party in Afghanistan.

Second, the other group is governments of Central Asian states which aspire to be connected geographically with the world market and pursue border security through diplomatic means. Therefore, these states have relied on the regional powers, members of the SCO, to find new avenues for economic cooperation. The Central Asian republics started productive engagement with Afghanistan at the bilateral level earlier in 2018. Overall, the frequency of meetings between politicians and officials increased vividly in 2018 (Nourzhanov & Saikal, 2021, p. 153). For instance, Kazakhstan used its position as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in finding a solution through negotiation to the Afghanistan imbroglio (Iqbal & Rauf, 2018). In Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the successor of the late President Islam Karimov, initiated a new program of reforms including the normalization of relations with neighbours and focused on a cooperative approach to build peace in Afghanistan (Starr & Cornell, 2018, pp. 43–46). Even in the current situation, Uzbekistan appears willing to be engaged with the Taliban government as it has considerably invested in regional transportation infrastructure to reach global markets by connecting itself with South Asian states.<sup>33</sup>

Third, the cluster of states within the SCO is India, Pakistan, and Iran. Both India and Pakistan take Afghanistan as a serious problem; India considers Afghanistan as a hub of terrorism and Pakistan fears that Afghan soil could be used for cross-border attacks. Therefore, the security situation in Afghanistan is a point of central attention for Pakistan and India. Certainly, divisive issues within the organization have increased with the entry of India and Pakistan as permanent members of the SCO. India assumed the role of chairmanship of the Council of RATS of the SCO in October

2021, and a meeting was held in New Delhi in May 2022 to effectively deal with the issue of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> This meeting proved that regional countries have a consensus to work together to prevent likely threats from Afghanistan.

The outlook of Pakistan is not different from the changing situation in Afghanistan, but it exhibits a gesture to help Afghanistan at this crucial time. The then Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan, while addressing the 20th anniversary meeting of the SCO, informed the audience about Pakistan's vision of peaceful coexistence based on settlement of the situation in Afghanistan, which excludes any manifestation of bloc politics.<sup>35</sup> However, it is not certain that all members of the SCO share Pakistan's vision of cooperation with the current government in Afghanistan.

Besides, the SCO is accumulating power by including Iran in the organization and expanding its influence in the Middle East. Tehran considers the membership of Iran as auspicious and views the SCO as a “concert of non-Western great powers.”<sup>36</sup> However, Iran and Afghanistan had not been in good relations in the past due to sectarian differences in their respective states.<sup>37</sup> The fear of opium smuggling in Iran is another concern,<sup>38</sup> but Iranian media called this new

<sup>33</sup> Stronski P. How Taliban Victory Will Reshape Regional Dynamics in Central Asia // East Asia Forum. November 3, 2021. URL: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/03/how-taliban-victory-will-reshape-regional-dynamics-in-central-asia/> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>34</sup> Wani A. India's Unaddressed Concerns from the SCO-RATS Summit // Observer Research Foundation. May 26, 2022. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-unaddressed-concerns-from-the-sco-rats-summit> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>35</sup> Akhtar R. Experts React: 2021 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Tajikistan // Atlantic Council. September 22, 2021. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/experts-react-2021-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-sco-summit-in-tajikistan/> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>36</sup> Motamedi M. What Iran's Membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Means // Al Jazeera. September 19, 2021. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/19/iran-shanghai-cooperation-organisation> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>37</sup> Kaura V. Iran's Influence in Afghanistan // Middle East Institute. June 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-influence-afghanistan> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>38</sup> Synovitz R. Regional Powers Seek to Fill Vacuum Left by West's Retreat from Afghanistan // Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. December 25, 2021. URL:

association evidence of Iran's closeness to China.<sup>39</sup> This development is a manifestation of an evolving regional consensus on the need to improve the security and economic situation in Afghanistan as it is contingent on regional prosperity.

Given the fears of all member states, a regional consensus on preparing the Taliban for regional peace is becoming indispensable. A peaceful solution for Afghanistan is indeed impossible until the mistrust and disagreements on the issue of terrorism remain.

### Prospects for Growing Interaction

In general, the historical and geographical proximity of the SCO countries to Afghanistan, cooperation in the sphere of economy (where China is especially active) and regional security (Rytövuori-Apunen, 2016, p. 10), has a great impact on the dynamics of geopolitical processes in the region. The future performance of the SCO depends on its ability to effectively address the ongoing economic and security problems of neighbouring Afghanistan. Some features of the SCO suggest that the multilateral approach could be a convenient manner for the development of Afghanistan. It can still be regarded as the only available platform for the solution to the Afghan issue for the following reasons.

Firstly, Afghanistan has been attending the meetings of SACG since 2012, believing in its potential for solving political, security, and economic problems. Given the familiarity of Afghanistan with procedures, members, and the overall environment of the SCO, the resolutions of the organization will be more effective. However, there is an urgent need of reinventing the SCO Afghan Contact Group from a consultation mechanism to a crisis coordination centre which can help all parties involved to coordinate their respective national responses to Afghanistan.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-power-vacuum-russia-iran-china-pakistan/31624955.html> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>39</sup> Fathi N. What Will SCO Membership Mean for Iran? // Middle East Institute. September 28, 2021. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-will-sco-membership-mean-iran> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

Secondly, all the members of the SCO, including China and Russia, have Muslim populations. This factor gives weightage to the SCO to persuade the local government of Afghanistan to improve the social, political, and economic situation by introducing modern trends. Undoubtedly, the neighbouring Muslim countries can understand the problem of Afghanistan more deeply than any other state. Furthermore, Türkiye, other Muslim state, has shown its concern about the Afghan issue, and it can exert certain influence as a dialogue partner of the SCO.<sup>40</sup>

Thirdly, the RATS of the SCO has created a database of terrorist organizations dwelling in Afghanistan, this data could be helpful for governments and relevant institutions to combat terrorism. The familiarity of the SCO with terrorist organizations, their working, and objectives, will make it an efficient organization to mitigate the terror in the region by employing unique strategies.

Fourthly, the SCO, as a combination of developed and developing countries with the demonstration of China's supremacy in the Eurasian heartland, provides its members with mechanisms for conflict resolution, which gives them confidence to believe in the SCO's capabilities. It has always been the SCO's tradition not to interfere in the business of other states and always worked with differences. The most vulnerable area is the neighbourhood of Afghanistan, as the dangers of terrorism and Afghanistan's deteriorating economy could spill over into neighbouring states.

Thus, new collective security arrangements for all neighbouring countries have become inevitable under the umbrella of one organization, i.e. the SCO. The huge landmass of the SCO gives regional actors the confidence to use this multilateral forum to address regional issues at the regional level.

<sup>40</sup> Jin W. SCO in a Unique Position to Address the Afghan Issue Despite Different Concerns // Global Times. September 15, 2021. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234336.shtml> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

## Conclusion

Afghanistan has never been a stable country, characterized by infighting among its numerous tribes and ethnicities which casts serious doubts on its cohesion. Today, however, the SCO is trying to lay the foundation for future regional stability based on a developed regional structure. While dealing with the Taliban some member states are a little uncomfortable, but everyone agrees that regional security and stability need to happen, and all the member states should accommodate it to stop the spread of the issues like terrorism and the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and its spill over. Moreover, the member states have realized that instead of bilateral dealings with the Taliban, a functional cooperation plan should be executed from the platform of the SCO. Functional cooperation can

lay the groundwork for the eventual reconstruction of Afghanistan under the Taliban.

The study has also identified some common themes in the SCO's statements on Afghanistan to construct the organization's narrative. First, the situation in Afghanistan shows the limitations of Western approaches to nation-building based on military intervention and implanting liberal democratic norms which are alien to Afghanistan's culture and society, which resulted in a protracted war and a disastrous military withdrawal. Second, the SCO promotes an alternative way of nation-building and peacekeeping operations, focused on its norms of non-intervention, consensus decision-making, and non-use of military force. In this sense, it adopts functional cooperation as the basic principle for its actions in Afghanistan.

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