



# Margalla Papers

Volume: 27, Number: 1 (2023)

Journal Homepage: <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site>

e-ISSN: 2789-7028

ISSN-L: 1999-2297

---

## RESEARCH PAPER

### Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Afghanistan: Interests and Limitations

**AUTHOR(S):** Hameed Ullah Khan, Muhammad Farooq Shah and Muhammad Ilyas Khan

Mr Hameed Ullah Khan is a PhD Scholar at the Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad. Mr Muhammad Farooq Shah is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Government Degree College, Takht Bhai, Mardan. Mr Muhammad Ilyas Khan is an MPhil Scholar at the Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad. The author(s) can be reached at hamidsrhk123@gmail.com.

**KEYWORDS:** Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Eurasia, Afghanistan, SCO-Afghan Contact Group, Multilateralism.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.27.1.153>

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY ENTRY

Khan, Hameed Ullah, Muhammad Farooq Shah and Muhammad Ilyas Khan. 2023. "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Afghanistan: Interests and Limitations." *Margalla Papers* 27 (1): 82-95.

#### ARTICLE HISTORY

- **Received:** March 30, 2023
- **Peer Reviewed:** April 29, 2023
- **Revised:** May 18, 2023
- **Accepted:** June 15, 2023

**COPYRIGHT:** © 2023 Hameed Ullah Khan, Muhammad Farooq Shah and Muhammad Ilyas Khan. For detailed information, please visit our webpage <https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/copyright>.

**LICENSING:** This is an open-access research paper published under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and citation provided the original author(s) and source are credited.



**COMPETING INTERESTS:** The author(s) have declared that no competing interest exists.

**DATA AVAILABILITY:** All relevant data are within the paper and its supporting information files.

## SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION AND AFGHANISTAN: INTERESTS AND LIMITATIONS

*Hameed Ullah Khan, Muhammad Farooq Shah and Muhammad Ilyas Khan\**

### **Abstract**

*Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has greater relevance in Afghanistan because of its strategic importance and geographic proximity. For years, the country has harboured numerous extremist groups and insurgents. It has remained a battleground for US-led coalition forces and the Taliban for about two decades. Despite efforts by the US and its allies, peace has yet to be restored in Afghanistan, and the responsibility now rests on regional countries. It is crucial for these states, especially Eurasian nations, to work together to stabilise the war-torn country and bring lasting peace to the region. Therefore, the study examines the push and pull factors of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's interests in Afghanistan and the challenges that come with implementing their peace plans. The data has been collected from various primary and secondary sources, including websites, newspapers and research articles. The paper also highlights two major concerns for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the economic crisis in Afghanistan and the international recognition of the Taliban government.*

**Keywords:** Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Eurasia, Afghanistan, SCO-Afghan Contact Group, Multilateralism.

### **Introduction**

**S**hanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an international intergovernmental Organisation led by Eurasian countries, was established in 1996, with the consultation of the heads of five states: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Originally known as the 'Shanghai Five,' this consultative forum was later renamed the 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization' after Uzbekistan became a full member in 2001. SCO Charter was signed in St. Petersburg on June 7, 2002, as the fundamental legal document specifying the organisation's objectives, principles, structures and processes. In 2017, SCO expanded its membership to include Pakistan and India; later, Iran was also admitted as a member. As the organisation grew, it focused on regional activities, which is essential for any such organisation. SCO's main activities are cooperation on security, military affairs, economic matters and cultural exchanges among member states.

---

\*Mr Hameed Ullah Khan is a PhD Scholar at the Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad. Mr Muhammad Farooq Shah is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Government Degree College, Takht Bhai, Mardan. Mr Muhammad Ilyas Khan is an MPhil Scholar at the Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad. The author(s) can be reached at hamidsrhk123@gmail.com.

In its early years, SCO focused on eliminating the three evils, i.e., terrorism, extremism and separatism, from the region in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that threatened the international community regarding the spread of terrorism and extremism. After 9/11, US-led coalition forces invaded Afghanistan to fight the terrorist and militant groups, as the country had become a hideout for such non-state elements. The presence of international coalition forces and militant groups in Afghanistan rang alarm bells for regional countries. At that time, the whole world was on a single platform to counter terrorist and extremist activities in the region. SCO also had a frontrunner for eradicating these evils from the region when they signed a protocol with Afghanistan named SCO-Afghan Contact Group on November 4, 2005. The consultative group comprised SCO's permanent members and Afghan officials. In 2009, a terrorism-related Plan of Action was initiated at the SCO summit. In 2012, Afghanistan was given observer status in the organisation. So far, four meetings have been held by the SCO-Afghan Contact Group, which discussed the Afghanistan situation at length. To address the dire circumstances, Afghanistan requires more international and regional assistance to fill the void by withdrawing international coalition forces. In this regard, SCO has been considered an alternative forum for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

The current scenario in Afghanistan urges SCO to resume its responsibility for the country's stability and prosperity, as all member states provide humanitarian assistance to the war-torn country to address its economic crisis. This study, therefore, finds reasons that drew SCO towards Afghanistan, such as strategic importance and geographical proximity, establishing regional connectivity, uprooting the three evils, controlling illegal drug trafficking, and filling the void of coalition forces. Besides, the study includes critical factors of internal rivalries, an individualistic approach towards regional issues, the absence of a unifying force, poor financial management, and China-Russia's leading role in Afghanistan. This research paper has used qualitative methods and analytical and historical approaches. Primary and secondary sources have been analysed to determine SCO's interests and limitations in Afghanistan.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Regional Integration theory attempts to explain the emergence and growth of regional organisations, having four characteristics. They have state members, organisational capacity, multilateralism and geographical proximity.<sup>1</sup> First, SCO has member states which founded it. It also promotes regional integration by overcoming differences among member states based on geography, populations, government systems, poor infrastructure, strong economic growth, social and religious beliefs, etc. Other elements of regional integration include mutual benefit, equality of rights, consultations, tolerance for cultural diversity, non-interference, and non-involvement in the internal affairs of any member state. Second, SCO has a legitimate organisational setup with a headquarters in Beijing, personnel, regular procedures like member state meetings, and the capacity to make decisions by consensus. Third, SCO has eight permanent members (including Iran, the number would be nine) with

observer and guest attendance that are more than two. Fourth, SCO member states – China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan – have geographical proximity.

In accordance with the Regional Integration theory, regional integration, development and dynamics are the main subjects of SCO. First, SCO members decided to create an organisation (RATS as a permanent SCO body) to deal with the three evils, resolve border disputes, stop illegal trade and deal with other issues affecting member states. Second, these factors drive SCO to gradually increase its tasks, capabilities and membership based on their interest, genuine concerns about regional issues, and any member that satisfies the requirements for permanent membership. Third, organising regular official meetings, combating terrorism, extremism and separatism, conducting joint military exercises and peace missions, promoting economic connectivity and encouraging interpersonal interactions are the primary factors that have significantly impacted states and societies within the SCO region. Conversely, the biggest obstacles to SCO's future development include internal rivalries among member states and individualised rather than collective approaches to regional issues.

### **Push and Pull Factors Regarding SCO Interests in Afghanistan**

There are factors involved compelled SCO to focus on Afghanistan. Afghanistan holds a strategically important position in the region. Also, most SCO member states are neighbouring Afghanistan, having direct concerns regarding peace and stability in their neighbourhood. The complete elimination of the three evils and preventing illegal drug trafficking from the region are the shared objectives of SCO and Afghanistan.

#### **a) Strategic Importance and Geographical Proximity**

Afghanistan is the 42nd-largest country in the world by area, with 250,000 square miles. Afghanistan has seen repeated foreign military interventions throughout its history. The vast Hindu Kush mountain range separates Afghanistan's northern and southern regions. Tajikistan, Afghanistan and China meet northwest where Pamir mountains, known as the 'roof of the world,' are located. Khyber Pass, which offers entrance to the Indian subcontinent, is surrounded by mountains like Koh Suleiman. Many imperial aspirations have been dashed by the country's ominous topography of mountains and deserts.<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan is a landlocked, mountainous country in South Asia. It has been the centre of interest for many foreign powers. So why are SCO members interested in Afghanistan, and what makes it so unique?

Afghanistan is important because of its strategic location. It lies at the crossroads of Central and South Asia. It borders countries like China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Pakistan. Because of its geographical location, goods passing through the region have to pass through Afghanistan. Since the ancient Silk Road, it has been a vital centre for trade. It is the only country in the region

providing access to major powers like Britain, Russia and the US. Since the 19th century, Afghanistan has been the centre of power struggles. It was a buffer state between the Russian and British Empires during the Great Game. In 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan to save the communist Afghan government but could not succeed because of the involvement of the US.

In 2001, the US and its NATO allies invaded Afghanistan to conduct operations against al-Qaida and the Taliban regime. Although the US and its allies toppled the Taliban government and suppressed them to some extent, they could not eliminate extremist elements. Joe Biden's adoption of a decision to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan by saying that "We are on schedule to reach our September departure date, as I previously stated. On August 31, our military operation in Afghanistan will come to an end,"<sup>3</sup> created a sudden power vacuum that extremist groups took advantage of. The reemergence of the Taliban created concerns among regional powers, such as India, that had invested more than \$3 billion in Afghanistan's civil development projects.<sup>4</sup> It had also invested in constructing Chabhar port in Iran, which would further connect roads with major cities in Afghanistan and stretches alternative roots to Central Asian states.

China's Belt and Road initiative could expand to other countries through Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, China has already invested \$65 billion in the CPEC project in Pakistan<sup>5</sup> to expand its trade and infrastructure network into the region. Since 2007, China has sought to invest \$1 trillion in Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources. Pakistan also does not want India's presence in Afghanistan because of its covert activities against Pakistan. Similarly, Russia has interests in the region. In the 19th century, the Soviet Empire wanted to expand its territories beyond the Afghan border; therefore, Russia aimed to protect its former Soviet territories from those entering the Central Asian sphere of influence. Russia's concerns are militancy and illicit trade activities in Afghanistan, especially the flow of narcotics that could create problems. Russia, China and Pakistan are cooperating and holding talks with the Taliban government to achieve peace and stability in the region.<sup>6</sup> Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries are also interested in Afghanistan due to gas pipeline projects and energy reserves. Pipelines are as vital today as railway construction was in the 19th century. They can connect trading partners and influence the balance of power in the region. Afghanistan is important in the region's geopolitical struggle for dominance and power. It is essential to bridge the regions effectively; every major power must have it for geopolitical reasons.<sup>7</sup>

#### **b) Regional Connectivity**

In the context of trade, Afghanistan is known as the 'Heart of Asia,' linking different regions of the world, especially South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia and the Middle East. Afghanistan is also the gateway to Western and Eastern Asia. Because of its strategic location, the country is in the neighbourhood of the former Chinese and Persian empires.<sup>8</sup> Afghanistan is the hub of different initiatives, of which the most important are the Lapis Lazuli Corridor (LLC), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

(CPEC), Central Asia-South Asia Power Project (CASA-1000), Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline (TAPI), Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and the Silk Road Rout. These are valuable measures of regional connectivity.<sup>9</sup> All SCO member states have high hopes for these regional initiatives to improve their economies, infrastructure, trade and other provisions. Through these projects, they could use land routes instead of air routes, which would be less expensive. Afghanistan's former president, Ashraf Ghani, shared views while attending the SCO summit in Qingdao:

*We want help in significant ways and wish to communicate what our shared interests are. One is regional connectivity, and the other is a shared threat—terrorism—where we need to make progress in order to improve our collaboration... Afghanistan was once a significant crossroads on the old Silk Road. Now, our goal is to restore Afghanistan to its former role as a geographical link connecting East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia. Regional connectivity means a new way of doing infrastructure. For instance, we are working in earnest to be able to transmit tens of thousands of megawatts of electric power from Central Asia that is surplus to South Asia, that is in desperate need of it (to build railways, fibre optics, pipelines of gas, and pipelines of oil).<sup>10</sup>*

### c) Uprooting Three Evils and Preventing Drug Trafficking

The third reason that drew SCO's attention towards Afghanistan is the elimination of the three evils. Terrorism and extremism are issues that all SCO member states face, and they have serious concerns about these issues. SCO's main objectives are to counter terrorism and extremism and tackle the issue of separatism inside member countries. For this, SCO established Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in 2005. SCO also established the SCO-Afghan Group, a consultative forum about terrorism and extremism issues in the country. The US-led coalition forces staying in Afghanistan for two decades could not bring possible results, while SCO is the only alternative organisation that could fill the gap left by the US.

The spread of illegal trade and drug trafficking has greatly disturbed regional and neighbouring countries. Afghanistan produces almost 90 per cent of illicit narcotics in the world. It is equivalent to 11 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP.<sup>11</sup> SCO summit in Tashkent in 2004 made preventing this evil a priority. A statement by Ambassador Zhang Yishan to UN General Assembly reads:

*Afghanistan must first maintain stability and foster growth in order to accomplish comprehensive progress in social and economic endeavours as well as long-lasting peace and order. We welcome a stable Afghanistan devoid of terrorism, conflict, drugs, and destitution. It is crucial for Afghanistan to create a welcoming and cooperative neighbourhood environment, uphold cordial connections with its neighbours, and engage in comprehensive cooperation with them in accordance with the Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations of December 2, 2002.<sup>12</sup>*

The Afghan Coordinating Council was established to address this issue. The SCO Tashkent summit's closing statements focused on the region's fight against illegal drug cultivation. SCO member countries declared their support for developing regional awareness concerning eradicating illicit trade and unlawful drug cultivation. They stated, "We have decided to work closely together to combat both terrorism and drug use."<sup>13</sup> They are also prepared to take an active role in trans-regional development programs that will benefit war-torn Afghanistan. With the implementation of these measures, Afghanistan's socio-economic status will improve. The neighbouring countries of Afghanistan are greatly affected by the free flow of illegal trade and drugs that can be overcome through cooperation and coordination of SCO.

### **Steps Taken by SCO for Afghanistan Stability**

The recent withdrawal of US-led coalition forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's resurgence create concerns for regional states, particularly SCO member countries. For decades, US-led coalition forces failed to bring peace to the war-torn country, and the vacuum they left in Afghanistan must now be filled through SCO members' cooperation. Therefore, SCO appears to be an alternative platform for restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan. The most recent meeting of the SCO-Afghan Contact Group took place in July 2021 and was attended by foreign ministers of all member states. They strongly condemn the withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan, which has left the country in chaos. They offer their support for Afghanistan, which is currently going through a financial crisis.

Afghanistan and regional peace depend highly on each other; therefore, SCO member states cannot disregard peace and stability in the war-torn country. The first and most crucial step toward Afghanistan's stability was the establishment of the SCO-Afghan Contact Group. The protocol formally signed on the formation of the SCO-Afghan Contact Group was to foster cooperation on issues of mutual interest, including the fight against drug trafficking, the prevention of international terrorism and the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. The group's primary duty is to suggest collaboration on matters of shared interest and offers a route for discussions at predetermined intervals or as needed. Making an anti-drug belt around Afghanistan is another task.<sup>15</sup> The SCO-Afghan Contact Group has held four sessions so far (as mentioned earlier) to discuss the chaotic state of the country. Recently, SCO member states provided Afghanistan with humanitarian and economic assistance to deal with the economic crisis. The Special Conference on Afghanistan in Moscow (March 2009) was the second step toward stabilisation.

With time, SCO became more serious about a peaceful Afghanistan, and on June 7, 2012, at the Beijing summit, it granted Afghanistan formal observer status. In the same year, a protocol was signed between SCO-RATS and the Afghan government. It consists of Afghan military training for countering terrorism and extremism and terrorism-related information sharing.<sup>17</sup> Earlier, a Coordinating Council of Afghanistan was founded during the SCO summit in Tashkent (2004) to prevent illegal drug

trafficking.<sup>19</sup> Saliient of the summit included the fight against illegal trafficking and developing a regional anti-drug centre. SCO member states will use the Central Asian Regional Anti-Drug Information and Coordination Center capacity and Afghan departments to combat cross-border gangs. In order to effectively combat the threat of terrorism, it is essential to increase counter-terrorism cooperation and employ all available tools. Border control, screening of individuals suspected of terrorist activity, and cooperative action against terrorist threats are some of the areas of cooperation. Other areas include integrating Afghanistan into SCO's regional counter-terrorism cooperation, collaborating to gather information on terrorist groups posing a threat to the security of SCO member states and Afghanistan and creating a system for expert consultation between the SCO-RATS and Afghan authorities. SCO member states will also work with Afghan authorities to fight illegal trafficking in weapons, ammunition, explosives and other forms of transnational organised crime. Mutual support in criminal investigation, evidence collection and transfer and timely exchange of knowledge and expertise about organised crime are also included.<sup>20</sup>

At present, the Afghan Taliban are facing two internal challenges, i.e., economic crisis and the presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-KP) terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Both groups seriously threaten the war-torn country that has been a battlefield since 2001. As soon as ISIS set foot in Afghanistan, its first target was to eliminate the presence of the Taliban in the country. In a recent meeting of SCO, the Deputy Director of RATS said, "The withdrawal of NATO forces from the country created a power vacuum that was filled by different militant groups." SCO counter-terrorism body RATS is in a position to support and train Afghan forces to control ISIS expansion.<sup>21</sup>

The country's current chaotic situation paved the way for the expansion of IS-KP, which may become a serious security threat for Central and South Asia. IS-KP is an active group affiliated with ISIS across South and Central Asia. They consider the Taliban, their enemy and target them along with Pakistani and Afghan nationals. They are also allies of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and their primary goal is to establish the Islamic State. SCO is the only hope of tackling these terrorist elements in the region.<sup>22</sup> SCO should coordinate its members' efforts to neutralise regional terrorist threats coming from Afghanistan, like IS-KP, promote political reconciliation in Afghanistan and develop a strategy for maximising connectivity in the war-torn country to guarantee long-term stability.

So far, four SCO-Afghan Contact Group meetings about the country's current chaotic situation have been held. The first meeting occurred in Moscow on October 11, 2017, in which member states expressed their willingness to support the war-torn country in achieving peace and security. The primary agenda was to assist the country in countering terrorism, illegal drug trafficking and crimes. All parties agreed to strengthen the country's national defence and security forces.<sup>25</sup> The second meeting was held in Beijing on May 28, 2018. In their joint statement, all the member countries stated, "We assure the government of Afghanistan of our commitment to stabilising



the country in respect of territorial integrity, independence, sovereignty, and national unity."<sup>26</sup> The third meeting was held on April 19, 2019, in Bishkek, attended by 40 representatives of eight SCO member states, Afghanistan and the RATS Executive Committee. In their opening remarks, foreign ministers declared that "based on all types of efforts and initiatives, there is a need for the immediate attainment of peace and prosperity inside the country as well as in the entire region." They further argued that "SCO member states' and Afghanistan's relations are based on deep historical friendship and that they have sincere emotions regarding each other."<sup>27</sup> The fourth meeting was attended by SCO foreign ministers in Dushanbe on July 14, 2021. In his remarks, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the meeting that "the hasty withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan created a power vacuum, and various militant groups once again found a smooth path to safe haven in the country."<sup>28</sup> SCO is the only politico-military forum that expresses the expressions of member states about the Afghanistan issue internationally.<sup>29</sup>

Following the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and other contributing organisations froze accounts and blocked payments to Afghanistan, leaving ordinary Afghans reeling from skyrocketing inflation, rising poverty, cash shortages, collapsing currency and rising unemployment. Afghanistan's central bank accounts were also blocked when the Taliban took control of Kabul. At a recent SCO meeting of foreign ministers on Afghanistan's current situation, they asked IMF and especially those who have frozen their accounts, to release those as the country is passing through a critical situation and not put pressure on it.<sup>30</sup> SCO member states also pledged to provide approximately \$40 million in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, of which \$15 million has been provided to Afghanistan so far. Russian President Putin said at the SCO summit via video link, "I believe it makes sense to cooperate with the US and other Western nations to gradually unfreeze Afghanistan's reserves and implement recovery plans through the World Bank and the IMF." He added that Washington should bear the main part of the costs associated with the reconstruction process. Chinese President Xi said, "Afghanistan should be assisted in creating an inclusive political system that would allow it to pursue moderate domestic and external policies by SCO member countries to facilitate a seamless transition." Pakistan has also requested financial assistance for Afghanistan to avert a humanitarian crisis and an economic collapse.<sup>31</sup>

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

During the troika plus meeting in Moscow, Russia, China and Pakistan agreed to provide humanitarian aid and economic support to Afghanistan, but crucially, none officially recognised the Taliban.<sup>32</sup> However, like others, SCO member states are not far from supporting Afghanistan in its current economic crisis. China is the first country to pledge 200 million yuan (\$31 million) worth of aid to Afghanistan in critical situations. China has also criticised the US for leaving Afghanistan in a 'wreaked havoc' situation and asked to cooperate with Afghanistan as it has provided 3 million vaccine doses to Afghanistan. A Taliban official expressed that China is the only

neighbour helping to reconstruct and rebuild Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> Russia also promised to send 108 tons of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, of which 36 tons have already been sent through three planes that landed at Kabul airport. This aid included flour, cooking oil, blankets, and other necessities. A Russian pleaded with other countries to assist Afghanistan, which is facing a severe food shortage.<sup>34</sup>

After China and Russia, Pakistan promised the war-torn country \$28 million worth of humanitarian aid. These include 50,000 metric tons of wheat, blankets and winter goods, food, medical supplies, and other necessities, of which 1,800 tons of humanitarian aid had already been handed to Afghan officials. Pakistan has always adopted a brotherhood attitude towards Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> India also provided medical assistance to Afghanistan, consisting of food and life-saving medicines besides one million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. They promised to send over 50,000 tons of wheat through Pakistan's transitway.<sup>37</sup>

The Central African Republics (three of which are neighbours of Afghanistan, and four are permanent SCO members) have suffered directly from the chaotic situation and have serious concerns about peace and stability in Afghanistan. They attended Foreign Ministers' meeting in New Delhi. They stated: "We all demand that the Afghan Taliban establish an inclusive and representative administration and uphold the rights of minorities and women." They also promised urgent humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> Uzbekistan has contributed 3,700 tons of goods, including food, fuel, and winter clothing.<sup>39</sup> Kazakhstan also sent a 1.5-ton humanitarian aid package, \$1.9 million worth, to Afghanistan. This aid included medicine, food and other necessities. The Kazakhstan government also assured Afghan officials of allocating more than 5,000 tons of flour.<sup>40</sup> Kyrgyzstan provided 81 tons of food products, including flour, sugar, cooking oil, salt, rice, etc.<sup>41</sup> The other regional countries also participated significantly in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

### **Limiting the Role of SCO in Afghanistan**

Despite being a strong regional player and having serious concerns about Afghanistan's stability, SCO is struggling to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan. Whether SCO has limited resources to combat terrorism and extremism issues in the country or its political differences among member states is unclear. It is the conduct of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and SCO member states or China and Russia's role in leading organisations. It is the lack of a united military force and institutional mechanism or the current resurgence of the Taliban. Through the given, the study finds the key reasons behind SCO limitations.

Afghanistan is the only country through which SCO established direct contact when the former president, Hamid Karzai, was invited to the SCO summit as a guest in June 2004. The SCO-Afghan Contact Group was formed in 2005, and Afghanistan was granted observer status in the SCO in 2012. Besides this, SCO has serious concerns about peace and stability in Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> The four permanent members of SCO have

a direct border with Afghanistan, while the remaining four have no geographical proximity but have close ties with Afghanistan. However, the question is raised about why SCO feels sceptical about giving full membership to Afghanistan. Previously, the presence of coalition forces and the US considering SCO as an anti-US organisation were the main hurdles to granting Afghanistan full membership in SCO.<sup>43</sup> The recent withdrawal of US-led coalition forces and the resurgence of the Taliban have once again cast doubt on SCO to give Afghanistan's full membership in the organisation. The absence of the Afghan representative in recent meetings of foreign ministers and heads of SCO states about the current situation in Afghanistan is a matter of concern. If the Taliban wishes to participate in the organisation's meetings without reservation, it must first gain international recognition. This decision may also pave the way for the SCO to grant it a permanent membership. Besides all these, Afghanistan's full membership in the organisation can build regional consensus and further encourage SCO about the country's stability.

The other reason hindering SCO's role in Afghanistan is that China's goals are linked to Afghanistan. China pursues economic diplomacy on a bilateral level in Afghanistan rather than through SCO. China is involved in infrastructural projects, and currently, it is the biggest investor in Afghanistan, allocating \$3 billion in contracts with Afghan officials. The Aynak copper mine and oil exploration projects with an estimated \$700 million are also included.<sup>44</sup> China has pledged \$900 million for regional infrastructure building, with some of the money spent on road and railway construction between China and Central African Republics, but China has allocated no separate funds to Afghanistan under the auspices of SCO.<sup>45</sup> Most analysts consider SCO China's vehicle for expanding its influence, helping and advancing China's interests, links and norms across the region.<sup>46</sup> China uses SCO for its political means through which it influences the Central Asian region for acquiring energy resources, economic cooperation and tackling separatist movements in Xinjiang province. They believe China has arisen as a challenger to India and Russia in financial and energy markets, affecting their articulated cooperation within the organisation.

On the other side, under the umbrella of SCO, Russia's involvement in Afghanistan has also been limited, but it minimises China's increasing influence in the region. SCO and Afghanistan have economic and security ties so far; that is not a compelling factor in maximising SCO's role in Afghanistan because of Russian obstructionism and scepticism about China's dominance in the organisation. Russia and Central Asian Republics tackle their security issues through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); therefore, it cannot be imagined that Russia prefers SCO over CSTO in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of coalition forces.<sup>47</sup> If the current situation in the country goes towards chaos and affects Central Asian Republics, then Russia will move with massive military troops to protect the order of Central Asian states instead of Afghanistan.

SCO members have different interests and orientations towards Afghanistan, and they all carried out their plans to establish bilateral ties instead of a collective

approach towards Afghanistan. They have invested millions of dollars in Afghanistan for their gains. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are affected by the worst situation in Afghanistan, but they have resorted to Russia and the US. Despite this, Central Asian states assist Afghanistan through military and economic assistance and education.<sup>48</sup> Their preferences for bilateral ties weakened SCO's influence in Afghanistan. They should support and help the war-torn country through a multilateral rather than a bilateral approach. Their bilateral attitude, on the one hand, minimises the SCO spirit of regional stability. On the other hand, they will be unable to fill the vacuum the US-led coalition forces left.

Another factor challenging SCO's role in Afghanistan is the existence of political differences among member states. SCO can work as a multilateral organisation, but the inner differences and lack of trust are the major factors hindering its ability to do so. Russia and Central Asian Republics had some differences in their relationship, which affected their cooperation within the organisation. Although they resolved their disputes, the border issue between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan remains a contention. Another side is the unstable bilateral relationship between India and Pakistan, which is no secret. Pakistan and India are permanent members of SCO, but the South Asian region is in the tens due to their rivalry, as both countries have conflicting interests in Afghanistan, thus limiting the multilateral potential of SCO.<sup>49</sup> Despite being leading members of SCO, China and Russia have different approaches, especially in economic cooperation. On the one hand, China is offering large bilateral loans to member countries, while Russia's financial support for Central Asian Republics has significantly impacted the organisation's multilateralism policy. Both countries have failed to provide economic assistance to Afghanistan through the SCO mechanism.

SCO's key objectives are eliminating three evils and establishing RATS to tackle these issues. Additionally, military exercises among member states are conducted regularly, in which they participate actively. Being a political and military organisation, SCO has no united force. China and India maintain good relations with the Taliban government to secure their investments. Central Asian Republics fear the Taliban's resurgence and voice support for SCO's construction role in Afghanistan. Pakistan asked the international community for Afghanistan's humanitarian aid. Russia calls for establishing an inclusive government in Afghanistan consisting of different ethnic and political forces.<sup>50</sup> SCO is unlikely to play a significant role in Afghanistan, as seen by member countries' differing stances on the Afghan Taliban regime.

SCO lacks the institutional framework and financial resources to increase its influence in Afghanistan. The development fund for SCO has yet to be established. It has an impact on the multilateral organisational potential. SCO does not have the financial resources to sustain its Central Asian initiatives. It will be difficult for the organisation to deliver economic support to Afghanistan unless poverty, transportation routes, hydropower cooperation and water difficulties in Central Asia

are addressed. One of the critical reasons why SCO will not be able to play a significant role in Afghanistan is its financial disadvantage. With a budget of about \$4 million and lacking political will and capacity, SCO cannot play an active role in Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

Afghanistan's strategic significance has made it the focus of the international community. Despite its observer status, SCO is deeply concerned about the stability and peace in Afghanistan. It has always prioritised the Afghan issue as its resolution is crucial for the region's long-term stability. Therefore, the organisation has been working to mediate and resolve it for the past 21 years. SCO aims to eliminate the three evils from the region. The member states unanimously support an independent, peaceful, neutral and democratic Afghanistan. For this, an inclusive government with the participation of diverse tribes, religions and political forces is necessary.

Afghanistan is also considered a hub for regional connectivity within the SCO region. However, the organisation faces obstacles in playing an effective role due to internal contradictions, economic and military limitations, and bilateral engagement with Afghanistan by its member states. China and India's conflicting interests and investments in Afghanistan minimise the organisation's role. The current economic crisis in Afghanistan and international recognition of the Taliban are significant challenges for SCO. It remains to be seen if the Taliban will cooperate with the organisation or if "it is good sometimes to hold the candle to the devil."

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig, "Regional Integration Theory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press (February 26, 2018): <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.599>.
- <sup>2</sup> "The Geopolitical Significance of Afghanistan," *KJ Reports*, August 10, 2017. Available at <https://youtu.be/sMXfMonBWGc>.
- <sup>3</sup> "Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan," *The White House*, July 8, 2021, 2-3. Available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.
- <sup>4</sup> "India invested more than \$3 billion in Afghanistan: MoS Muraleedharan," *Business Standard*, February 5, 2022, 3. Available at [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-invested-more-than-3-billion-in-afghanistan-mos-muraleedharan-122020500307\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-invested-more-than-3-billion-in-afghanistan-mos-muraleedharan-122020500307_1.html).
- <sup>5</sup> Asif Shahzad, "Pakistan's Sharif lands in Beijing to discuss economy debt," *Reuters*, November 2, 2022. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-sharif-lands-beijing-discuss-economy-debt-2022-11-01/>.
- <sup>6</sup> "Why Afghanistan is strategically very important? Geopolitical Significance," *Him Fact*, August 18, 2021. Available at <https://youtu.be/bwfx367Xypl>.
- <sup>7</sup> The Geopolitical Significance of Afghanistan. Available at <https://youtu.be/sMXfMonBWGc>.
- <sup>8</sup> Mohammad Yonus Noorzi, "Afghanistan: Regional Connectivity Hub," 2021, 290-295, DOI: 10.4467/20827695WSC.21.014.14721.
- <sup>9</sup> Ihsanullah Omarkhail, "The Importance of Regional Connectivity for Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Center for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, August 3, 2021. Available at <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/trade-economics/the-importance-of-regional-connectivity-for-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>.
- <sup>10</sup> "SCO Summit to Enhance Security, Boost Connectivity: Afghan President," *New China TV*, June 9, 2018, 3-4. Available at <https://youtu.be/LNdCoUugBNY>.
- <sup>11</sup> "What Does Taliban Control Mean for Afghanistan's Opium Economy?" *The Economist Explains*, September 1, 2021. Available at <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2021/09/01/what-does-taliban-control-mean-for-afghanistans-opium-economy>.
- <sup>12</sup> "Statement by Ambassador Zhang Yishan on behalf of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization at the plenary meeting of the UNGA 60th session on the situation in Afghanistan," *Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN*, November 29, 2005, 4-7. Available at [http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/200511/t20051129\\_8398997.htm](http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/200511/t20051129_8398997.htm).
- <sup>13</sup> "Statement by the Foreign Minister at the SCO Special Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Government of Pakistan*, November 27, 2009, 16. Available at <https://mofa.gov.pk/statement-by-the-foreign-minister-at-the-sco-special-ministerial-conference-on-afghanistan/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Betty Lalrinfel and Anurag Tripathi, "Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects for Membership," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 5, no. 4 (2018): 1115.
- <sup>15</sup> Huasheng Zhao, "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives (Washington, DC: CSIS [Center for Strategic and International Studies], March 2012)." (1981): 1158-74; Matveeva, Anna, and Antonio Giustozzi. "The SCO: a regional organisation in the making." *Crisis States Research Center LSE, Working Paper 39* (2008); Lalrinfel and Tripathi Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects for Membership, 1117; Seiwert Eva. "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Will Not Fill Any Vacuum in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, September 30, 2021; Singh Roy Meena. "Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Afghanistan: scope and limitations," *Strategic Analysis* 34, no. 4 (2010): 545-561. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2010.483149>; Richard Weitz, (2015, July 14). "Afghanistan, Not New Members, Will Determine SCO's Relevance," *World Politics Review*, July 14, 2015. Available at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16223/afghanistan-not-new-members-will-determine-sco-s-relevance>.
- <sup>16</sup> "Declaration of the Special Conference on Afghanistan Convened under the Auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Moscow Declaration*, March 27, 2009. Available at <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/847>; Eva, The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Will Not Fill Any Vacuum in Afghanistan, paras 1-8.
- <sup>17</sup> Weitz, Afghanistan, Not New Members, Will Determine SCO's Relevance, paras 3-8.
- <sup>18</sup> What Does Taliban Control Mean for Afghanistan's Opium Economy? Para 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Jamshed Khan and Razia Sultana, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan: An Overview," *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 13, no. 2 (2019): 2-3.
- <sup>20</sup> "Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan fight terrorism, drug smuggling and organised crime action plan," *SCO and Afghanistan Action Plan*, June 17, 2004. Available at <http://chn.sectsc.org/load/45816/>.
- <sup>21</sup> Khan and Sultana, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan: An Overview, p 7; Andrew Korybko, (2021, July 10). "What's the SCO's Game Plan for Afghanistan?" *Global Village Space*, July 10, 2021. <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/whats-the-scos-game-plan-for-afghanistan/>; Lalrinfel and Tripathi, Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects for Membership, p 3.
- <sup>22</sup> Khan and Sultana, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Afghanistan: An Overview, p 7-8; Korybko, What's the SCO's Game Plan for Afghanistan? Para 7-10.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ayjaz Wani, "Resurgent Taliban and its Implications on Central Asia," Observer Research Foundation, September 9, 2021. Available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/resurgent-taliban-and-its-implications-on-central-asia/>.

- <sup>25</sup> "SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group Meeting, Moscow," *Media Center Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India)*, October 11, 2017. Available at [http://www.mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/29022/SCO\\_Afghanistan\\_Contact\\_Group\\_Meeting\\_Moscow\\_October\\_11\\_2017](http://www.mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/29022/SCO_Afghanistan_Contact_Group_Meeting_Moscow_October_11_2017).
- <sup>26</sup> "Second SCO- Afghanistan Contact Group Meeting, Beijing," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, May 28, 2018. Available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/29926/Second+SCO+Afghanistan+Contact+Group+Meeting+Beijing+May+28+2018>.
- <sup>27</sup> "SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group Held its Third Meeting with SCO Participation in Bishkek," *Sects SCO*, April 19, 2019. Available at <http://eng.sectsgo.org/news/20190419/533099.html>.
- <sup>28</sup> "Shanghai Cooperation Group Calls for End to Violence in Afghanistan," *NDTV New Delhi*, July 15, 2021. Available at <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/shanghai-cooperation-group-calls-for-end-to-violence-in-afghanistan-2487301>.
- <sup>29</sup> Wang Jin, "SCO in Unique Position to Address Afghan Issue despite Different Concerns," *Global Times*, September 15, 2021. Available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234336.shtml>.
- <sup>30</sup> "SCO leaders Call for Increased Afghan Aid, Unfreezing of Assets," *Gandhara RFE/RL's Tajik Service*, September 17, 2021. Available at <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-meet-in-dushanbe-with-afghanistan-in-focus/31464685.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> "The Troika Plus Meeting: Russia, China and Pakistan Agree to Give Aid for Afghanistan," *WION News*, October 20, 2021. Available at [http://youtu.be/Uw9s9FtU\\_io](http://youtu.be/Uw9s9FtU_io).
- <sup>33</sup> "China Offers \$31m in Emergency Aid to Afghanistan," *BBC News*, September 9, 2021. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58496867>.
- <sup>34</sup> "First Batch of Russia's Humanitarian Aid Arrives in Afghanistan," *Business Standard Russia*, November 19, 2021. Available at [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/first-batch-of-russia-s-humanitarian-aid-arrives-in-afghanistan12111900189\\_1.html#:~:text=The%20first%20batch%20of%20Russia's,Disaster%20Management%20Authority%20\(NDMA\)](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/first-batch-of-russia-s-humanitarian-aid-arrives-in-afghanistan12111900189_1.html#:~:text=The%20first%20batch%20of%20Russia's,Disaster%20Management%20Authority%20(NDMA)).
- <sup>35</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Sends Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," *VOA News*, December 30, 2021. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-sends-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-/6375649.html>.
- <sup>36</sup> Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Commend India for Sending Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," *VOA News*, January 7, 2022. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-commend-india-for-sending-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan/6386809.html>. <https://doi.org/10.4467/20827695WSC.21.014.14721>.
- <sup>37</sup> Gul, Taliban Commend India for Sending Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan, 2022 para 2.
- <sup>38</sup> "Meeting Between India and Central Asian Republics Underscores Shared Concerns on Afghanistan," *The Indian Express*, December 21, 2021. Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/afghanistan-crisis-taliban-take-over-central-asian-countries-meet-7682631/>.
- <sup>39</sup> "Uzbekistan Provides 3,700 Tons of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," *Xinhua Net Asia Pacific*, December 24, 2021. Available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/20211224/ac200d45cbb54c10a5765ba268c7f103/c.html#:~:text=Uzbekistan%20provides%203%20700%20tons%20of%20humanitarian%20aid%20to%20Afghanistan,Source%3A%20Xinhua%207C%202021&text=MAZAR%20DI%20DSHARIF%20C%20Afghanistan,people%20in%20the%20chilly%20winter>.
- <sup>40</sup> Vusal Abbasova, "Kazakhstan Sends \$1.9 Million in Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan," *Caspian News*, December 28, 2021. Available at <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-sends-19-million-in-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-2021-12-28-8/>.
- <sup>41</sup> Sadyr Zhaparov, "Bishkek Sends Humanitarian Aid to Afghan Kyrgyz," *Central Asia News*, October 6, 2021. Available at <https://centralasia.news/11632-bishkek-sends-humanitarian-aid-to-afghan-kyrgyz.html>.
- <sup>42</sup> Huasheng, China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives.
- <sup>43</sup> Singh Roy, Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Afghanistan: Scope and Limitations, p 11-12.
- <sup>44</sup> Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have Key Roles to Play in Restructuring and Securing Afghanistan," *Silk Road Briefing*, July 16, 2021. Available at <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/07/16/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-have-key-roles-to-play-in-restructuring-and-securing-afghanistan/>.
- <sup>45</sup> Singh Roy, Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Afghanistan: Scope and Limitations, p 12.
- <sup>46</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, "Afghanistan Crisis Lingers Over the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit," Observer Research Foundation Online, September 15, 2021. Available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/afghanistan-crisis-lingers-over-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-summit/>.
- <sup>47</sup> Raj Kumar Sharma, "SCO's role in Afghanistan: Prospects and challenges," *Mainstream Weekly* 53 (2015): 24.
- <sup>48</sup> Singh Roy, Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Afghanistan: Scope and Limitations, p 3.
- <sup>49</sup> Pantucci, Afghanistan Crisis Lingers Over the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, p 9-10.
- <sup>50</sup> "Regional Powers Back Aid for Afghanistan as Russia Hosts Taliban," *Aljazeera News*, October 20, 2021. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/20/russia-hosts-taliban-for-talks-but-warns-no-recognition-for-now>.