

## **Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Regional Peace: An Opportunity for Afghanistan**

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On the 21<sup>st</sup> Summit (16-17 September) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, regional leaders stressed the importance of engaging with Afghanistan after the Taliban retook control and named a new interim government in Kabul. Amid the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the multilateral association in the Eurasian region, leaders of the member states emphasized the significance of regional cooperation to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the war-torn country led by the Taliban. The SCO Council Summit also witnessed the acceptance of Iran as a full member of the organization – after being an ‘observer member’ since 2005. Iran’s formal joining of the China/Russia-led bloc made headlines, but the primary agenda of the meeting was focused on grappling with changing security dynamics in the region given the uncertain security situation in Afghanistan.

Although Afghanistan was not invited to the Summit as the member states are yet to recognize the government in Kabul, regional leaders emphasized the need to form an inclusive political dispensation and take strong measures to counter terrorism in the country. Chinese President Xi Jinping, for instance, urged ‘relevant parties’ in Afghanistan to eradicate terrorism and emphasized the need to ‘put in place a broad-based and inclusive political framework.’ Russian President Vladimir Putin, while speaking at the Summit via video link, urged the Taliban to ‘fight against extremist groups’ and warned of a return to drugs and arms trade in Afghanistan if Washington did not unfreeze the Afghan Central Bank’s assets. Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan also highlighted the need to ‘prevent a humanitarian crisis and economic meltdown’ in the neighboring state.

With Iran accepted as a member of SCO, all the countries in Afghanistan’s neighborhood (except Turkmenistan) are member states of the organization, which was established to ensure security and friendly relations among this alliance. All the states in the region share a common goal in Afghanistan: stability and peace in the war-torn country to avoid security concerns spilling across the borders in the form of terrorism, refugees, and extremism. As regional leaders fear economic meltdown in Afghanistan – in the background of frozen Afghan assets and withholding of aid by international financial institutions – SCO could provide a platform for the regional countries to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Being a major regional institution with a crucial platform to facilitate dialogue, SCO could provide the member states with an opportunity to engage with the Afghan Taliban collectively and persuade them to form an inclusive political framework, and link counter-terrorism measures of the new Taliban government with economic assistance and rehabilitation efforts under the new dispensation.

While representing 44 percent of the world population and 20 percent of global GDP, SCO should use its economic and diplomatic potential to prevent an economic meltdown in Afghanistan. To prevent the vulnerable Afghan population from witnessing a humanitarian disaster in post-conflict Afghanistan, these efforts are indispensable. This would be possible if the platform could be used to stimulate collective economic efforts, start rehabilitation programs for

Afghan citizens, and provide international aid and financial assistance while linking these efforts with the Taliban's intent to curb terrorist activities on Afghan soil.

Iran's admission also raises the prospect of garnering regional efforts to bring Afghanistan's neighbors on one page regarding the fast-evolving security situation in the region. Moreover, it is a welcome development for Pakistan, which has a border with Iran, shares concerns about Afghanistan's stability, and sees potential in the SCO platform to engage further with Tehran on security cooperation and economic connectivity. Pakistan's premier Imran Khan met for the first time with Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi after he assumed presidency last month.

Pakistan's constructive role in making efforts to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan and develop close cooperative relations with countries in the broader Central Asian region is growing. The increasing coordination and consultation between Russian and Pakistani leadership on the Afghan situation, along with the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, to Islamabad to enhance economic and security engagement, indicate the growing bilateral relationship between the two countries. This coincides with the high-level interactions that have lately taken place between Pakistan and Central Asian states to enhance regional connectivity and security cooperation; the latest, in this case, was between PM Imran Khan and his Central Asian counterparts on the sidelines of the SCO Summit. Pakistan's geopolitical significance in the region is growing, and this is coupled with receding Indian influence in the region, with New Delhi having fraught relations with the new government in Kabul. This will also hamper the Indian role as a spoiler both in Afghanistan and in the region.

This is also due to the fact that the Ghani regime in Kabul sharing greater convergence with India has been replaced by the Taliban, who appear keen to maintain strategic autonomy, territorial sovereignty, and independent foreign policy while assuring regional states that Afghan soil would not be used against any other state. With SCO being a China/Russia-led Eurasian security organization, it is seen by many as an antidote American presence in the region. The focus of this latest summit to engage with the Afghan Taliban and urge Western powers not to abandon Afghanistan is a promising sign for Pakistan's bid to see peace and stability across its western neighborhood. This goal is possible if the multilateral SCO plays a crucial role in determining a common mechanism to deal with the Afghan situation collectively for preventing security predicaments, ensuring Afghan rehabilitation, and restoring peace and stability in the war-ravaged country.

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