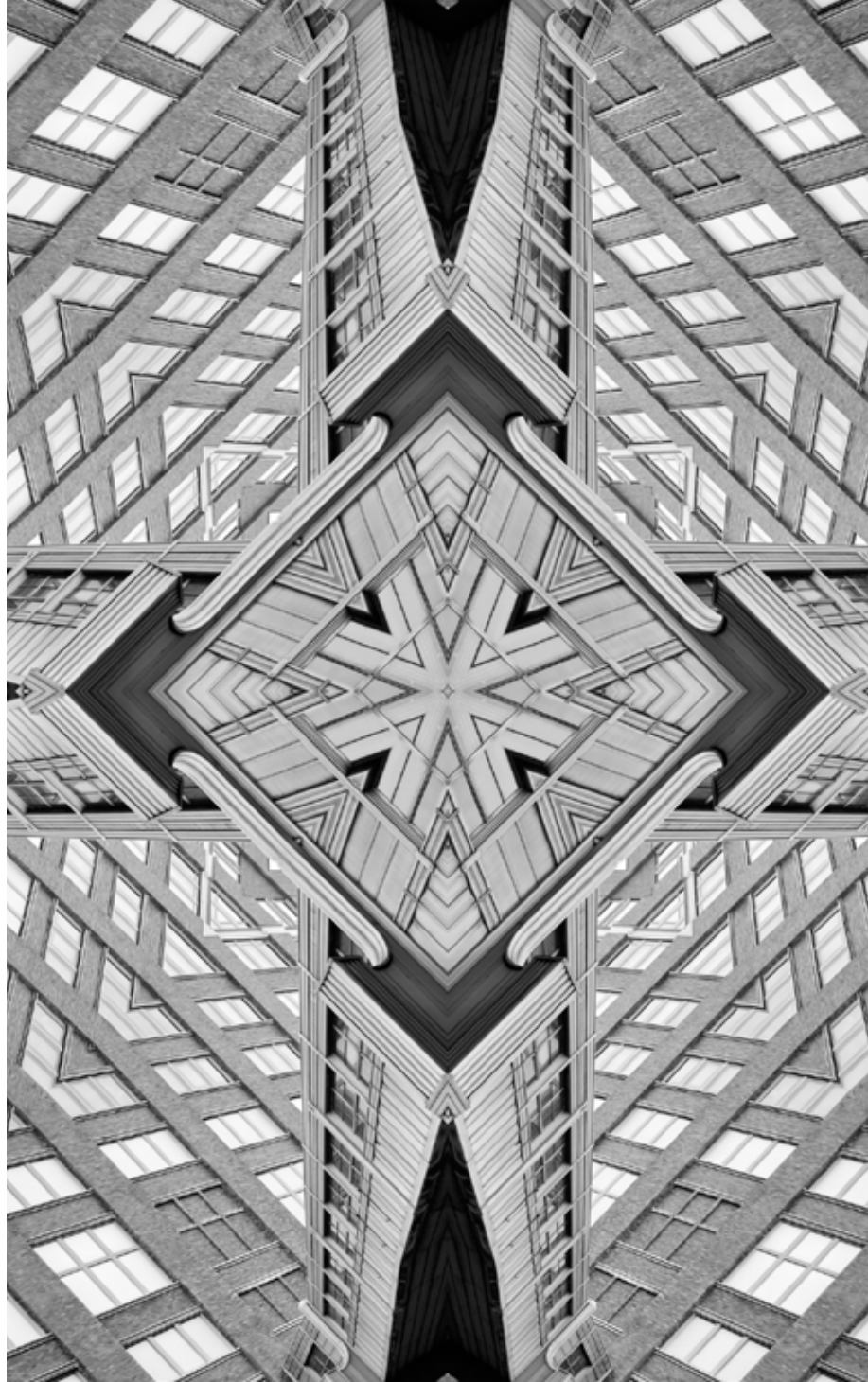


Issue

Brief

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A House Divided: The SCO's Afghanistan Conundrum

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Abstract

Separatism, extremism, and terrorism originating in Afghanistan compelled the neighbouring countries to form the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001. However, instead of presenting a united front, the SCO is rife with disagreements. Increased divergences and mistrust among the members have helped the Taliban regain power in Afghanistan and strengthen its influence in the heart of Eurasia. The Taliban have taken advantage of the trust deficit within the SCO to make false promises on constituting an inclusive government, women's rights, and its affiliations with terrorist groups. This brief discusses why the SCO must take a united stand on the Afghanistan situation to ensure regional peace, security, and stability.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit held on 17 September 2021 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, was an important event for Eurasian geopolitics. Iran, an SCO observer state since 2005, was admitted as a full member.¹ Tehran's accession to the SCO has increased expectations and demands from the Eurasian alliance, given the fragile situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban's appropriation of power in Afghanistan and the resultant regional and global ramifications became the summit's focal point. All SCO member countries will face serious security challenges if the Taliban regime does not adhere to international norms and the 2020 Doha peace agreement.² This can jeopardise Afghanistan's socioeconomic development, have disastrous consequences on regional peace, and weaken South-Central Asian economic connectivity, trade and transit. Peace and stability in Afghanistan are necessary for investments in regional initiatives such as the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission Project, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Power Interconnection Project.

The US's withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 has been termed a "strategic failure".³ Reneging on the promise to hold an intra-Afghan dialogue to form an inclusive government, the Taliban instead resorted to a brute military offensive to capture Kabul, creating severe and complex challenges for regional stability and security. The presence of over 10,000 foreign fighters in the ranks of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP),⁴ mainly from the neighbouring SCO member countries, will have a long-term impact on the region. The SCO's Dushanbe Declaration stressed the need for the Taliban to form a comprehensive government with representation from all ethnic, religious, and political groups in Afghanistan: "The most important factors in preserving and strengthening security and stability in the SCO region is the early settlement of the situation in Afghanistan."⁵

Addressing the SCO summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said continued instability and fundamentalism in Afghanistan would encourage terrorist and extremist ideologies worldwide.⁶ Given the lack of trust and the difference of opinion within the SCO, the conflict in Afghanistan will likely have spillover impacts in all neighbouring countries.⁷ Iran, the Central Asian Republics (CARs), Pakistan, and the Xinjiang province in China will bear the immediate impacts, while India and Russia will face security and terrorism challenges.

Origin of the SCO: Countering Terrorism

Afghanistan has long been a haven for terrorists and an exporter of cross-border terrorism, even before the formation of the first Taliban government in 1996. Since separating from the Soviet Union in 1991, three CARs—the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—have faced persistent threats from terror organisations with bases in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union, and Jamaat Ansarullah. Terrorists trained in Afghanistan played a key role in Tajikistan’s five-year civil war.⁸ Additionally, the IMU was behind many terror attacks in Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic.⁹ In February 1999, six blasts within minutes of each other at government offices in Uzbekistan killed 13 people and injured 120 others.¹⁰ In August 1999, IMU militants seized several Kyrgyz villages and took hostage four Japanese geologists, with the government forced to pay a US\$50,000 ransom for their release. The IMU later demanded free passage to Uzbekistan.¹¹

At the same time, Russia faced separatism in the North Caucasus, especially in Chechnya. China, too, saw a rise in separatist sentiment in Xinjiang and Tibet. In Xinjiang, the Chinese Communist Party’s socioeconomic exploitation of Muslim minorities increased separatist tendencies. Uyghur Muslims held anti-China agitations in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 1987. The situation changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union as the *mujahideen* gained power in Afghanistan. The tipping point for China was the Baren incident in April 1990, where Uyghurs started a mass protest to wage *jihad* against the Chinese and establish the East Turkestan state. The ensuing riots—where Uyghur separatists used bombs and pistols against the police and government officials—led to the death of six police officers.¹² In 2000, some Uyghurs founded the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, later known as the Turkistan Islamic Party, a Muslim separatist¹³ force with links to Afghan insurgents and other terror organisations, such as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the IMU in Central Asia.¹⁴

In 1996, Russia, China, the Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan formed the ‘Shanghai Five’ to solve long-standing border disputes through confidence-building measures and signed the Agreement on the Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces the following year. China sought Russia’s help to facilitate negotiations to resolve its protracted border issues with Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan. The disputes were settled in 1994 with

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Kazakhstan, 1996 with the Kyrgyz Republic, and 2002 with Tajikistan, with China getting 22 percent, 32 percent, and 3.5 percent of the claimed land from each country respectively.¹⁵

Terror activities and drug trafficking by Afghanistan-based groups and splinter organisations escalated after the Taliban came to power in September 1996, and regional states recognised that the threats were extremely complex to tackle bilaterally. The need for a joint approach to control the Afghanistan situation became the Shanghai Five's primary motive. In July 1998, the Shanghai Five prioritised the common fight against "separatism, extremism, and terrorism,"¹⁶ with the intent codified in Article 1 of the SCO charter.¹⁷ The Shanghai Five became the SCO in 2001 with the inclusion of Uzbekistan. At the opening ceremony of the multilateral organisation, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan called Afghanistan "the cradle of terrorism, separatism and extremism".¹⁸ With this vision, the SCO chose to adopt an approach of non-intervention, emphasising the State's role in fighting terrorism and insurgency (see Table 1 for the SCO's key declarations and agreements on countering terrorism). The principle of strengthening and rebuilding the anti-terrorism grid of the member countries based on the non-interventionist agenda remained the core principle of the SCO.

India, Iran, and Pakistan were given observer status in 2005. In June 2017, India and Pakistan, the two most influential and powerful countries in South Asia, joined the SCO with full membership status. India has a troubled history of insurgency backed by foreign terrorists in Kashmir,¹⁹ and Pakistan has faced similar problems from Islamic radical groups within the country and insurgency in Balochistan.²⁰ The SCO was expanded in September 2021, with Iran becoming a member. The inclusion of India, Pakistan, and Iran has strengthened the SCO's core agenda and its capacity to combat terrorism and radicalism in Eurasia.

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**Table 1:
SCO Counterterrorism Documents**

Year	Place	Declaration/ Joint Communiqué
June 2001	Shanghai	The Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism
June 2002	St. Peterburg	Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure between the Member States of the SCO
June 2004	Tashkent	Agreement over Counter-Terrorism Database
June 2006	Shanghai	cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism, extremism and drug trafficking
June 2007	Bishkek	Agreement over Joint counter terrorism military exercise
August 2008	Dushanbe	Agreement on Arranging and Conducting Joint Antiterrorist Exercises
March 2009	Tashkent	Cooperation Guideline of Counter-Terrorism, Counter-Extremism and Counter-Secessionism, 2010–2012; agreement with Afghanistan over Cracking Down Drugs Smuggling, Terrorism and Organised Crimes. Agreement over Counter-Terrorism Training
June 2011	Astana	Astana Declaration
June 2012	Beijing	Cooperation Guideline of Counter-Terrorism 2013-2015
June 2017	Astana	Joint Counteraction to International Terrorism
June 2019	Bishkek	Bishkek Declaration
November 2020	Moscow	Moscow declaration

Source: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,²¹ compiled by the author

The SCO’s anti-terrorism policy is institutionalised and consolidated within the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), one of the SCO’s two permanent bodies. The RATS works in accordance with the SCO charter and is tasked with tackling terrorism issues by maintaining a working relationship with member countries and international organisations to gather information. The RATS also assists the member countries “in [the] preparation

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and staging of counter-terrorism exercises at the request of concerned member states, [and in the] preparation and conduct of search operations and other activities in the field of fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism”.²²

Under the RATS, SCO members began joint exercises to train armed personnel in tactical operations to strengthen their counterterrorism and counterinsurgency grid, and improve coordination and cooperation among the grouping. Through the RATS, member countries expand their counterterrorism operations to include narcoterrorism in a bid to restrain the financial resources of terror outfits, given that drug smuggling was a major source of funding for anti-state activities, extremists, and terrorists in the region.²³

Due to the RATS, between 2011 and 2015, the SCO prevented 20 terror attacks; 650 terror-related crimes; destroyed 440 terror training camps; arrested 2,700 extremist group members and neutralised 1,700 others; and recovered 3,250 improvised explosive devices, 450,000 ammunition pieces and 52 tons of explosives.²⁴

“The inclusion of India, Pakistan and Iran as full members has strengthened the SCO’s core agenda and its capacity to combat terrorism and radicalism in Eurasia.”

Divergences and Mistrust Within the SCO

Although the SCO has been somewhat successful in equipping its members to deal with the issue, terrorism and the presence of terror groups in Afghanistan remain significant concerns. In 2005, the SCO created the Afghanistan Contact Group (ACG) to cooperate with the country on issues of mutual interest, including the illegal circulation of narcotics, organised crime, and counterterrorism. However, the ACG soon became defunct as violence escalated across West Asia.²⁵ Afghanistan was given SCO observer status in 2012 and signed a counterterrorism protocol with the RATS in 2015.²⁶ As NATO troops began to withdraw from Afghanistan, the SCO played an enhanced role in the process of reconciliation and peace through diplomatic channels with the Taliban and the civilian government in Kabul. The ACG was revived in 2017, against the backdrop of Moscow’s changed policy towards Taliban.

All SCO members were focused on encouraging peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan, but growing mistrust among the states and divergent views on terrorism complicated matters. The evolving situation in Afghanistan drove many SCO member countries to use the country and the Taliban to further their own geostrategic and geoeconomic interests against the West and each other. This worked in the Taliban’s favour. For instance, in 2019, Iran and Russia helped the Taliban on the pretext of defeating ISIS affiliates in Afghanistan, but this was actually a way to settle scores with the US.²⁷

India and Pakistan

The fault lines within the SCO broadened further with the inclusion of India and Pakistan as permanent members in 2017. Pakistan became involved in securing peace in Afghanistan for two reasons—the deteriorating security situation within the country due to Afghan-backed Pashtun separatism, and its perceived geostrategic interest in avoiding an encirclement by India.

India, on the other hand, has always supported “an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation” in the country.²⁸ It has provided about US\$650-750 million in humanitarian and economic aid,²⁹ invested US\$3 billion in the welfare of the Afghan people, and has undertaken “500 projects in critical areas of power, water supply, road

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connectivity, healthcare, education, agriculture and capacity building”.³⁰ This assistance has won India many friends within the Afghan government and among the citizenry.

Islamabad often accused New Delhi and the India-friendly government in Kabul of facilitating a proxy war within Pakistan.³¹ Taking advantage of this situation, the Taliban maintained close ties with Pakistan since 2002 and remained hostile to India due to religious differences and New Delhi’s support of the Northern Alliance.³² Since 1996, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan also maintained relations with and hosted Pakistan-backed terrorists, and trained them for operations in the erstwhile Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir. From 2002 onwards, the Pakistan security establishment helped the Taliban with recruitment and donations through different religious groups.³³ Indeed in July 2021, just before the Taliban’s return to power, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that Pakistan had not severed ties with terror groups and had sent over 10,000 fighters to help the Taliban.³⁴

In November 2020, India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Doval hosted a regional summit to discuss the Afghanistan situation with SCO members.³⁵ Pakistan and China did not attend the summit, instead holding a “Troika plus” group meeting in Islamabad with Russia and the US.³⁶ In December 2021, Pakistan hosted a conference of the Organisation of Islamic Countries on Afghanistan that included the interim Taliban foreign minister, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, and representatives from the United Nations, US, European Union, China and Russia.³⁷ India was not invited to the conference, leaving it to conduct the third India-Central Asia Dialogue on the same day to discuss the evolving situation in Afghanistan with the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.³⁸ At the meeting, the countries stressed that “Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts... formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking”.³⁹

“India has always supported “an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation” in Afghanistan.”

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China's narrow approach

China has fomented the fault lines within the SCO by using bilateral diplomacy to serve its parochial interests. Driven by security interests in Xinjiang, China adopted a “narrow approach” of “self-driven diplomacy” to hobnob with the Taliban, causing further tensions in the region.⁴⁰ In 2000, China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, met Taliban leader Mullah Omar to court it and other terror groups to contain any “spillover” of terrorism to Xinjiang. Omar promised that the Taliban would not allow Uyghurs to launch attacks on China in Xinjiang, but that they would continue to remain in the Taliban ranks.⁴¹ The Chinese hosted a Taliban delegation in 2019 when US President Donald Trump cancelled talks with the outfit amid increased violence in Afghanistan, further boosting the group's morale.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi attended the September 2021 SCO summit in Tajikistan, and visited Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to meet senior officials to discuss the Afghan situation.⁴² China, Pakistan and Russia also sent special envoys to Kabul to meet Taliban leaders to discuss the formation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan.⁴³

Heightened tensions between China and India after the crisis in the Galwan Valley and New Delhi's close ties with Washington have led to further rifts within the SCO. Following the India-US Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Chinese state-owned *Global Times* warned that “if India hastily joins the US alliance system, it may irritate China, Pakistan and even Russia. It may not make India safer, but will bring strategic troubles to itself and make itself a centre of geopolitical rivalries in Asia”.⁴⁴ The looming threat of an escalation of the sporadic India-China military clash at the Line of Actual Control and the QUAD's Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China's influence has increased the mistrust between the two Asian powerhouses.

Additionally, China has used the SCO to forward its hegemonic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁴⁵ India has distanced itself from the BRI as its flagship project, the controversial China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, spans across Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, in a violation of India's sovereignty. At the October 2021 Foreign Ministers' Conference on Interaction & Confidence Building Measures

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in Asia, Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar was highly critical of China and Pakistan. Jaishankar denounced the China for its “debt traps” and infringement of sovereignty through the BRI, and confronted Pakistan for its support of cross-border terrorism, which he termed as the “biggest enemy” of peace, prosperity and development in the region.⁴⁶

Russia and Central Asian Republics

Despite participating in the SCO’s joint military operations, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan hosted Taliban delegations in 2021 to strengthen ties with the group, with an eye on safeguarding South-Central Asian economic connectivity, trade and transit.⁴⁷ While the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan originally appeared to be in a wait-and-watch mode, both countries have now altered this approach: in September 2021, the Kyrgyz government sent a delegation led by the deputy chairman of the national security council to Kabul;⁴⁸ and in December, Kazakhstan sent a delegation to Afghanistan to discuss cooperation and trade with the Taliban.⁴⁹ Only Tajikistan has taken an antagonistic view towards the new Taliban regime in Kabul and has openly supported the Northern Alliance resistance.⁵⁰ Tajik President Emomali Rahmon took a tough line after the siege of the Panjshir province, which is populated by many expatriate Tajiks.⁵¹ Similarly, at the recent Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO; an intergovernmental military alliance consisting of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Russia and Tajikistan) summit on 10 January 2022, Rahmon claimed that 6,000 terrorists were present near the country’s southern border. Attacks in Kazakhstan allegedly carried out by Pakistani Tablighi Jamaat and Afghan-trained militants⁵² are also matters of concern for the CARs that have porous borders with Afghanistan.

The CARs have used the SCO as a tool to bolster their authoritarian regimes but have done little to resolve the regional fault lines. In April 2021, deadly clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border killed 30, injured hundreds and triggered the exodus of thousands of people. The violent clashes raised fears of a wider conflict. However, a timely intervention by neighbouring CARs and the agreement between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to transform these disputes into alliances has refocused the debate on regional integration. The trust deficit

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and divergence at the SCO also forced the five CARs to meet in Turkmenistan on 6 August 2021 to boost regional cooperation amid the crisis in Afghanistan.

Russia continues to view the CARs as its underbelly. Russia has projected itself to other regional powers, including China, as the only viable security guarantor in Central Asia.⁵³ Thousands of Afghan military personnel and civilians reportedly crossed over to Central Asia to escape the Taliban's brutalities when it began its offensive to take control of the country in 2021. The presence of resurgent Central Asian terror outfits and spongy borders forced the CARs to mobilise troops. In July 2021, Tajikistan mobilised 100,000 active officers and 130,000 reserve officers and soldiers, and sent 20,000 security forces to the Afghan border. Using the CSTO instead of the SCO to send military equipment to the Tajik-Afghan border has also undermined the SCO's role. As the Taliban gained control of much of northern Afghanistan in early August, Russia held military exercises with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan 20 kilometres away from the Afghan border under the CSTO banner. Russia perceives the SCO as China-dominated and so not a viable avenue for it to command influence over the region, thus preferring the CSTO for security issues.⁵⁴ China prefers the SCO to tackle regional security concerns, which greatly reflects Beijing's ambition to be part of a regional security bloc akin to the NATO.⁵⁵

Security implications

The trust deficits and divergences within the SCO has resulted in most member countries using bilateral channels to establish ties with the Taliban for geostrategic, geoeconomic and individual security guarantees. In January 2021, in a move that shocked the international community, Iran hosted a Taliban delegation to discuss the "relations between both countries, the situation of the Afghan migrants in Iran, and the current political and security situation of Afghanistan and the region."⁵⁶ Moscow hosted a Taliban delegation in July 2021 for security assurances,⁵⁷ while China has hosted the Taliban in 2019 and July 2021. In September 2021, Pakistan's powerful intelligence chief Lt Gen Faiz Hameed met the Taliban to finalise the government formation.⁵⁸ India has also met the Taliban to keep its geostrategic stakes alive in Afghanistan.⁵⁹

Through these bilateral meetings, the SCO countries sought assurances from the Taliban that terrorism will not spread beyond the Afghan borders. The Taliban have said that it will not allow other terror groups to use Afghanistan

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against neighbouring countries.⁶⁰ Such sureties were also part of the 2020 Doha agreement to prevent any “international terrorist groups or individuals,” including al-Qaeda and ISIS-K, from using Afghan soil to threaten the US, its allies and other countries. The Doha agreement also stressed the need for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire to start intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. However, the Taliban did not keep its promise of a ceasefire to start a dialogue, using the opportunity to seize power in Afghanistan through a military offensive.

The diverse priorities of the SCO member states and their bilateral approach have emboldened the Taliban to be belligerent and offensive in Eurasia, as was seen through the tussle with Tajikistan. During a speech to the UN in September 2021, Rahmon stressed the need for an inclusive government in Afghanistan and said that “various terrorist groups are actively using the unstable military-political situation in Afghanistan in order to strengthen their positions”. The Taliban responded by saying it “would not allow any neighbouring nation to interfere in the internal matters of Afghanistan.”⁶¹ This growing tension between the Taliban government and Tajikistan forced Russia⁶² and Pakistan⁶³ to intervene. Compared to the NATO and other SCO countries, Tajikistan has only 30,000 soldiers. The 6,000-strong Russian army base in Tajikistan may also not pose any credible challenge to the Taliban.⁶⁴

The divergent attitudes within the SCO have also resulted in the Taliban offering few concessions for global recognition. The unwillingness to grant rights to Afghan women and form an inclusive government—in which all Afghans are represented, as urged by Western powers and the SCO—indicate the return of a fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Taliban have said that demanding inclusivity was a ploy by the global fraternity to include spies into its government.⁶⁵

While the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan may have been a strategic failure, it will have few security repercussions on NATO countries but is almost certain to have widespread implications for Afghanistan's neighbours. The situation could become a regional security and strategic challenge given the behaviour of each SCO country. Over 10,000 foreign fighters from SCO countries are part of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the ISKP. The al-Qaeda and ISKP are regrouping and have renewed terror activities in Afghanistan through suicide bombings.⁶⁶ The rejuvenated Taliban will reignite violent sentiments, radicalisation, and deviant behaviour within the population of the neighbouring countries, impacting security in the region.⁶⁷

In the interest of regional peace and prosperity, the SCO countries must revisit their divergent policies and goals and come together through a joint mechanism to deal with the Taliban. Multilateral cooperation under the SCO is the only way to address the challenges emanating from the Afghan situation, particularly a resurgence in terrorist and extremist activities. The SCO should hold more anti-terrorism drills and also cooperate with the Financial Action Task Force to choke the finances of terror outfits.

Despite being projected as a space for regional integration, the SCO has become a forum of regional heavyweights, which has only reduced its cohesion. One way to start afresh is for the member countries to use the SCO as an avenue for aid to Afghanistan, which can also pressurise the Taliban to meet global demands. Indeed, peace will be hard to achieve in Afghanistan and the neighbourhood if the SCO does not agree on the Taliban issue and countering terrorism. [ORF](#)

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