

Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Prospects for Membership

Betty Lalrinfel and Dr. Anurag Tripathi*¹

^{1*} Betty Lalrinfel is Research Scholar and Dr. Anurag Tripathi is Assistant Professor in Christ (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, Karnataka

Abstract

This paper looks into the extension of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a regional Organisation. It analyses the prospects of Afghanistan becoming a full member of the organisation. The paper talks about the strategic importance of Afghanistan in the contemporary international system and how this influences Afghanistan's relationship with the SCO. The paper also analyses the positives and negatives that accession of Afghanistan as an SCO member would bring along.

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; regional organisation; Afghanistan; membership

Introduction:

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation expanded for the first time since its inception in the Astana Summit of 2017 when it admitted the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan as its permanent members. This expansion can significantly contribute to raising the stature and the profile of the organisation. With the inclusion of India and Pakistan, the SCO now accounts for about 80 percent of Eurasia's territory, 44 percent of the world's population and 24 percent of the global GDP. This expansion of the SCO will likely not be the last. The SCO is gaining more attention and being seen as a counterbalance to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). With several countries expressing their desire to join the SCO, Afghanistan emerges as a viable candidate to be elevated as a full member from an observer status considering the special geopolitical status that Afghanistan possess.

What is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation?

The SCO is a permanent intergovernmental organisation with the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan as its original members. Its formation was announced on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai, its Charter signed in 2002 and it came into force in 2003. The SCO was preceded by the Shanghai 5 mechanism with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as its members. The Shanghai 5 was started to strengthen confidence building and disarmament in the border regions of the member countries. The meeting of the heads of states of the members was held annually and there was a gradual expansion of the topics discussed in these meetings from border security to building up mutually beneficial cooperation in the political, economic, security and other areas among the members.

The Shanghai 5 evolved into the SCO with the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001. With the grant of membership to India and Pakistan, the SCO now consists of 8 members. It has four observer states- Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia. The dialogue partners of the organization are: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka.

According to the SCO Charter, the organisation aims to strengthen mutual trust and neighborliness among the member states, promote effective cooperation in trade, politics, the economy, research, technology and culture, energy, transport, tourism and the environment. It also aims to make joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security, and stability in the region and move towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order. The SCO is based on the spirit of the Shanghai 5 and conducts its internal policy based on the principle of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a desire for common development. The external policy of the Organization is based on the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting any third country, and openness.

Procedure for Admission of New Members to the SCO

Membership of the SCO is mentioned under Article 13 of the SCO Charter. The Charter states that membership of the organisation would be open to interested countries belonging to the Euro-Asian region. They should agree to abide by the purposes and principles of the SCO Charter and by international treaties and instruments adopted by the Organisation. It is important for interested countries to have diplomatic relations with all SCO members and to have a status of an observer or dialogue partner of the SCO. The charter describes that an interested country should maintain active trade, economic and humanitarian relations with SCO members and its international security commitments should be in line with relevant international treaties and instruments adopted by the SCO. It is imperative that a country seeking SCO membership should not have an armed conflict with any other state, should not have any sanctions imposed on it by the United Nations Security Council, and should fulfil its obligations under the UN Charter and comply with generally recognised norms and principles of international law.

Afghanistan's Quest for Membership

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was granted an observer status at the Meeting of the Council of Heads of States of the SCO in 2012 at Beijing. Soon after getting observer status, Afghanistan filed a formal application for permanent membership of the SCO in 2015 at the SCO Summit in Ufa. Afghanistan occupies an important geographical position and it is vital for regional stability. The country remains bogged down in conflicts and is using different regional forums like the Heart of Asia- Istanbul process, SCO and RECCA and with the help of regional countries and international friends is trying to turn Afghanistan into a regional hub and economic roundabout through 'trade, transit, and investment' in the

Heart of Asia. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chief Executive of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, reiterated his country's desire to be an active part of the SCO when he met with the General Secretary of the SCO, Mr. Rashid Alimov on the sidelines of the SCO Summit in Sochi, Russia. The Chief Executive stated that 'regional cooperation and economic convergence' is the main focus of Afghanistan's foreign and economic policy and active participation of Afghanistan in the SCO would be a way of working towards achieving this goal.

Prospects of Attaining Membership by Afghanistan

Afghanistan's strategic location has made it a point of interest for great powers to stake their claim and assert their influence in the region. It is regarded as the heart of Asia and the attainment of regional stability and peace in the region relies heavily on having a stable and peaceful Afghanistan that is not besieged by war. Afghanistan has been beleaguered with war and violence through the presence of the Taliban and American led NATO forces. Even with the heavy presence of the US in Afghanistan, stability has eluded Afghanistan for quite a long time now. Efforts at trying to bring peace to the country in order to ensure stability in the region have been devised. Among these, the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process has been launched in 2011 as a framework for enhancing dialogue and consensus to bring about regional cooperation for the future stability of Afghanistan and the region as a whole.

Soon after Afghanistan submitted its application for membership, China announced its support for the accession of Afghanistan at a meet between the National Security Advisor of Afghanistan, Mohammed Hanif Atmar, and China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, at Beijing in 2016. China's support for Afghanistan's peace and reconciliation process was also mentioned by President Xi Jinping in his speech at the Astana Summit in 2017.

Secretary General of the SCO, Rashid Alimov expressed full support to Afghanistan's permanent membership and states the importance of the country by calling it the 'heart of Asia and the SCO' when he met with the Chief Executive of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah at the Sochi Summit in December 2017. Mr. Alimov stated that in order to speed up the process of accession, Afghanistan has to take advantage of the opportunity to join the SCO's contracts and documents and organise cultural events and economic exhibitions in cooperation with the SCO members.

Afghanistan has also received full support from Kazakhstan as was stated by the Kazakh Ambassador to Kabul on February 2017. Kazakh support for Afghan membership would strengthen ties between the two countries and Astana believes that the inclusion of Afghanistan in the SCO would improve security in the country and in the Central Asian region as a whole and would boost commercial and transit relation in the region.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has also expressed the view that efforts to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan should be through organisations such as the SCO as all the countries in the region are a part of the Organisation. Therefore, it welcomes the application of Afghanistan for permanent membership as it believes it would further the ease of cooperation and dialogue process with regards to establishing peace in Afghanistan.

SCO-Afghanistan Relationship:

One cannot ignore the strategic importance of Afghanistan for the members of the SCO. Peace and stability in Afghanistan is conducive to peace and stability in the region as a whole. The spillover of the conflict in Afghanistan could be dire for its neighbouring countries since most of the countries it shares borders with are members of the SCO, with the exception of Turkmenistan, and with Iran also currently applying for membership. The importance of a stable Afghanistan was recognised by the SCO since its early days. The Protocol on the establishment of the SCO- Afghanistan Contact Group between the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was signed in Beijing in 2005. This contact group was established in order to develop recommendations and proposals on counteracting terrorism and drug trafficking. It would also work in assisting Kabul with economic reconstruction of its war torn economy and reconciliation within the country. After a seven year pause, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was resumed with the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs playing hosts in October 2017. The Afghan delegation was led by Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai. Mr. Karzai renewed his country's interest in gaining permanent membership of the SCO and it was unanimously supported by all members that the request would be taken into consideration.

Afghanistan occupies a special importance for the SCO members. The country is still reeling from the aftermaths of war and has turned it into a hub of terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. Its neighbours are keen to ensure that terror does not spill through the borders into their territory. Establishing a good relation with Afghanistan is necessary to gain a toehold in order to realise their counter terrorism efforts and the granting of permanent membership to Afghanistan would go a long way in achieving this. The SCO consists of members who have special interests in Afghanistan like China, Pakistan and India and are investing heavily in order to build up the country from the aftermath of war. However, for the investments to reap its benefit, it also requires success in the security sphere.

With the recent expansion of membership, the SCO has become an organisation which consists of the rapidly growing large economies like China and India. The SCO is going to become the next economic hub in the future, and it is imperative that Afghanistan becomes a part of this grouping in order to reap the economic benefits for the rebuilding of its war torn economy.

The 'new Afghanistan strategy' of President Donald Trump has been to increase military deployment and to put pressure on Pakistan. Military intervention is not a possibility for the SCO as it would put the SCO against the US, which has troops deployed there in accordance with a bilateral security agreement. Afghanistan's dependency on the US hinders its participation with the SCO. Despite this, SCO still has a

role to play and the Chief Executive of Afghanistan, Abdullah has called on the SCO members to use their leverage and contacts with armed Afghan militants to urge their entry into intra-Afghan talks. Afghanistan's desire for accession to the SCO in the hopes that it would help the country in combating terrorism shows the country's discontentment with the work of the US. With the SCO countries not really contributing militarily by sending in troops to Afghanistan, this just leaves the space open for justification of American presence in Afghanistan to deal with the crisis in the country. This again is a detriment to the objective of China and Russia whose objective is to rid the influence and presence of the US in what they consider to be their region of influence.

Afghanistan is a country fraught with tensions. Admitting a country of such nature could also be a detriment to the organisation as a whole, even though the benefits of admission are manifold. In order to make its accession to the SCO easier, Afghanistan has to have a firm hand on its major problems and difficulties. President Putin's special envoy to the SCO has stated in an interview to Russia's Kommersant Daily that Afghanistan's membership would not be easy due to the domestic situation in the country. It is also on this ground that the Secretary General of the SCO, Mr. Rashid Alimov, has urged Afghanistan to take part in various SCO events to deepen cooperation to speed up the accession process.

Conclusion:

The desire for Afghanistan to become a full member of the organisation would predominantly be the expectation that membership would bring an end to conflict in the country through the concentrated help and input of the other members of the SCO. The SCO would also benefit from being able to solve the Afghan problem through the granting of membership to SCO and the increased cooperation that this would carry with since the stability of Afghanistan is paramount to the stability of the region encompassed by SCO. There is an expectation from the international community about the SCO's role in Afghanistan and its willingness to seriously handle the Afghan problem. However, this expectation has not been met. There are glaring divergences in the manner that individual SCO member countries perceive the insurgency crisis in Afghanistan thus making it impossible for the SCO as an organisation to come up with a concrete policy towards the country. Even though the SCO has repeatedly reiterated its position to support local and international efforts aimed at initiating a political dialogue between Afghanistan authorities and the insurgent groups, the fact that the different members of the SCO has taken different approaches to the different warring factions in Afghanistan restricts the outcome of a successful dialogue. Therefore, SCO needs to revisit its policy, based on the interests of the region and support international community in their fight against the insurgents.

Expansion of the SCO should not just look at horizontal expansion to make a presence but it focuses on the value addition of a member towards the organisation. The accession of India and Pakistan has also increased the hopes of future expansion and the addition of Afghanistan should certainly bring a benefit for all parties involved. It would make the SCO a truly regional organisation and enhance its legitimacy. It would feed right into Russia and China's efforts at countering American unipolarity and building a multipolar international system. It would increase the political weight of the organisation due to the strategic positioning of Afghanistan. However, expansion of the SCO would bode well only if the

organisation continues to maintain its relevancy and it is not besieged by internal power politics. If the current effects of expansion to include India and Pakistan go well, prospects for future expansion will certainly increase.

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