



The Case for Afghanistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Since 2014, Afghanistan has been striving for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with no avail yet. It is still an observer state in the SCO, although the two highly populous South Asian countries, Pakistan and India, got full membership in July 2017. In this article, we will note multi-dimensional arguments that justifiably build the case for Afghanistan's full membership of the SCO.

Geographical location: Geographically, Afghanistan is a part of the SCO region. It is a direct neighbor of four SCO member states namely Pakistan, China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and has very close historical and economic relations with the other four, such as, Russia (the former Afghan neighbor in the pre-1991), India (Afghan neighbor before 1947), Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Despite having no direct borders with the latter's, they are still considered as "close neighbors" in Afghan foreign policy.

Ethnic and cultural compatibilities: Out of 150 ethnic groups in the SCO region, roundabout 30 are living in Afghanistan, which has deep ethnic links with all of its neighbors because these ethnic groups are mostly

scattered in the region and are not living in one particular country. No other country is linked more ethnically, culturally, and historically in the SCO region except Afghanistan. Currently, Afghanistan is at the cross-juncture of all the SCO ethnicities. Therefore, connecting Afghanistan to the other SCO ethnicities will have a multiplier effect in the whole SCO region, resulting in a more culturally and ethnically connected region.

Diplomatic relations: Afghanistan has diplomatic relations with all the members of the SCO. In addition, it has also very close relations with the SCO observer states, except Mongolia and Belarus where Afghan diplomatic missions are not present but they are directed from Afghan embassies in China and Russia respectively. Still, with Mongolia and Belarus, Afghanistan has been engaged in education and economic sectors. In addition, and historically, it has recorded bilateral ties with the founding members of the SCO for centuries, including the newly graduated SCO members—Pakistan and India.

Economic ties: Afghanistan has very closed economic and trade ties with most of the SCO member states. This



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is backed up by statistics. In 2017-2018, more than 87 percent of the total Afghan imports were from the SCO countries; and more than 57 percent of Afghanistan's total exports were destined to the SCO member States; and in total, more than 60 percent of the Afghan total trade was with the SCO countries.

Afghanistan factor behind SCO formation: Afghanistan along with the post-Cold War Order is considered as one of the main driving factors behind the formation of the SCO, in the first place. In the post-Cold War era, the world became unipolar, and Afghanistan's situation was exploited by the regional powers, causing more chaos and instability and hence effecting Afghanistan to become a safe haven for regional extremist, terrorist and separatist movements, and become a fertile ground of opium production. This has been rightly pointed out by a former experienced Russian ambassador as that "One should not forget that the SCO emerged as a response to immediate threats of terrorism and drug trafficking, which came from Afghanistan in the late 1990s. The SCO idea was born from a collective demand for a regional coalition to combat them."

Similar policies: The Afghan government's fight against terrorism, extremism and opium cultivation remains in line with the SCO's fight against three evils, which is then considered the primary motives behind its formation in 2001. Hence, providing Afghanistan a full membership in the SCO will help the regional body achieve its objectives better and will further boost the regional integration and connectivity among the SCO region.

Perfect timing: Currently, the prospects for Afghan membership are better than anytime else as the US troops are planning to withdraw from Afghan, based on a peace deal signed between the Afghan Taliban and the USA in February 2020. However, prior to it, more than 65 percent of the US troops have left Afghanistan. This should remove concerns of some of the SCO members that are opposing Afghanistan's entry into the organization due to the presence of American troops in Afghanistan or Kabul's close alliance with Washington. Moreover, Afghanistan's membership in the SCO just before the success of the peace deal between Afghan government and Taliban will not only reduce the threats emanating from Afghanistan to the SCO region, but will also impact the reduction of the "power vacuum" after the US withdrawal. If the SCO wants that the region should not once again be plunged into the 1990s era, where a civil war broke out in Afghanistan, impacting a civil war in Tajikistan, stirring an Intifada in Kashmir, and rise of extremists and separatist feelings in Xinjiang, China, fueling radicalization of the whole region and spread of narcotics along with extremist ideas to Central Asia and Russia, it must act, and act actively in Afghanistan. Giving a full membership to Afghanistan could be the first step in this regard. In case of a failure, adverse regional power politics might emerge in the post-US withdrawal period, paving the way for proxy wars and consequent instability.

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