

What's the SCO's Game Plan for Afghanistan?

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Global Research, July 09, 2021

Region: [Asia](#)

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would do well to coordinate its members' efforts to contain Afghan-emanating regional terrorist threats such as ISIS-K, encourage a political compromise between Kabul and the Taliban, and devise a plan for developing the war-torn country's connectivity potential so as to ensure its long-term stability.

The future of Afghanistan is more uncertain than ever before against the backdrop of the Taliban's [rapid advance](#) throughout the country in the wake of America's [impending military withdrawal](#) by [31 August](#). Most observers predict an intensified period of civil war if the group, which is still regarded as terrorists by most countries such as Russia despite Moscow pragmatically hosting them on several occasions over the years for peace talks, isn't able to take Afghanistan's main cities that still remain under government control. The resultant chaos might create a dangerous opportunity for ISIS-K to expand its presence in the country and even become a major security threat to Central and South Asia. With the US practically abandoning its anti-terrorist commitments, perhaps for what some suspect might be [Machiavellian reasons](#) related to provoking this very scenario, it therefore falls on the SCO to ensure regional security instead.

This group comprises most of the Central Asian Republics (CARs, with the exception of Turkmenistan), China, India, Pakistan, and Russia.

Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia are observers while Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey are dialogue partners.

One of the SCO's mandates is to jointly confront the threats of terrorism, separatism, and extremism as well as enhance economic cooperation between its members. Considering the fast-moving events described in the first paragraph of this analysis, it therefore follows that they have a natural interest in working together when it comes to Afghanistan. This can take security, political, and economic forms. The first concerns supporting the two member states bordering Afghanistan, especially highly fragile and formerly civil war-torn Tajikistan, while the second involves facilitating dialogue between the warring parties. The third, meanwhile, concerns Afghanistan's connectivity potential.

To elaborate a bit more, nearly 1,600 Afghan troops [reportedly](#) fled to Tajikistan in recent weeks in order to escape the Taliban's rapid advance in Northern Afghanistan. [Sputnik](#) reported that the group has allowed a major border crossing to continue operating unimpeded, and it's widely known that the Taliban doesn't harbor any regional expansionist plans. It's therefore highly unlikely that they'd pose a threat to Tajikistan or any other CAR. Even so, the prevailing uncertainty over Afghanistan's future might result in large-scale refugee influxes, especially if ISIS-K exploits the situation. For this reason, President Putin recently [promised](#) his Tajikistani counterpart full support for ensuring its border security. There should be no doubt that the Russian military base in that country is more than capable of fulfilling this mission if requested to do so, but it nevertheless provides an excellent opportunity for the SCO's members to cooperate more closely on the security front.

Thus far, its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) hasn't seen any real action. The SCO is comprised of very diverse members who lack meaningful security coordination apart from largely symbolic drills that are held every now and then. It would immensely boost the organization's effectiveness if Tajikistan requested its assistance, even if only for the purpose of functioning as a so-called "live action exercise" in support of the Russian-led mission. That doesn't imply the prolonged dispatch of their servicemen under the SCO banner either since this could also be accomplished by more intelligence sharing through this structure as well as the provisioning of relevant material support. Although India is in a rivalry with China and Pakistan, they all might put their differences aside in the interests of pragmatism so as to obtain the multilateral security experience that could be put to use during future regional crises, whether concerning Afghanistan or elsewhere.

The second dimension of the SCO's game plan for Afghanistan should involve all members doing their utmost to encourage a political compromise between Kabul and the Taliban. [Reuters](#) reported earlier this week that the latter intends to present a peace plan during talks sometime next month, which might in effect function as an ultimatum for preventing their speculatively planned move on the capital. The Taliban [denies](#) that it's seriously considering any such attack, but observers fear that it might become an inevitability if Kabul refuses to submit to their demands. In order to avoid the pronounced instability that would likely follow that battle, it's in the SCO's interests to see to it that the Taliban and Kabul reach a deal during the next round of talks. The Afghan government is already largely demoralized by the US' withdrawal and its official American ally will soon be less capable of defending it than ever before following its September withdrawal, so this scenario is indeed possible.

Therein lies the third part of what the SCO should do to help Afghanistan and that's present the basics of a comprehensive regional economic integration proposal for showing all domestic stakeholders that peace would veritably be in everyone's best interests. February's agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan to construct a trilateral railway (casually referred to as PAKAFUZ after the first letters of each participating country's name) could unlock the war-torn country's [supercontinental integration potential](#) by finally bringing together Central and South Asia. That could in turn lead to the establishment of a new economic axis stretching from Russia in Eastern Europe all the way down to India in South Asia that could tentatively be referred to as the SCO Corridor. This ambitious proposal should ideally be presented to Kabul and the Taliban by the SCO as a whole with the assistance of all its members during the next round of peace talks in August.

There isn't enough time to flesh out the exact details, but each country could still generally commit something or another to this plan, even if only broad promises of financial assistance (whether grants and/or loans) as well as technical expertise. What's most important is that both warring parties (but especially obstinate Kabul) realize that coming to a pragmatic compromise would suit all of Eurasia's interests, not just their own, and that the supercontinent's most promising multipolar body has a direct stake in that outcome. The SCO must walk the walk instead of just talk the talk, so to speak, hence the need to put aside some of its rival members' differences in order to jointly present a credible plan to this end (whatever its lack of detail for the moment considering the short time frame). The much-needed goodwill and trust that could facilitate this could be greatly advanced through the earlier proposal of providing multilateral security assistance to Tajikistan.

To bring everything together, the SCO has the responsibility to take the lead in ensuring that the situation in Afghanistan doesn't soon spiral out of control and create fertile ground for ISIS-K's regional expansion. The bloc can only accomplish this by jointly containing such terrorist threats to the neighboring CARs like Tajikistan, encouraging Kabul and the Taliban to pragmatically reach a political compromise during the next round of peace talks in August so as to prevent the feared intensification of the Afghan Civil War, and greatly assisting the aforementioned by devising a credible plan for transforming Afghanistan into the centerpiece of the proposed SCO Corridor from Eastern Europe to South Asia. This is admittedly a lot to ask for an organization that hasn't yet ever been confronted with a real crisis, let alone one that's as urgent as the Afghan Civil War, but it's still possible to accomplish even some of what's been suggested so long as the political will is present.

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This article was originally published on [OneWorld](#).

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