
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Afghanistan's Prospective Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Asadullah Aria¹, Saifullah Ziaee², and Zabihullah Quraishi³

¹Associate Professor, Faculty of Communication and Journalism, Al-Beroni University, Kapisa, Afghanistan

²Professor, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Al-Beroni University, Kapisa, Afghanistan

³Professor, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Al-Beroni University, Kapisa, Afghanistan

Corresponding Author: Asadullah Aria, **E-Mail:** danishpezhohan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the prospects of Afghanistan's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Given the increasing importance of this organization in regional and global dynamics, Afghanistan's effective involvement could play a key role in shaping regional economic, security, and political interactions. This research employs qualitative methods and the Delphi strategy to gather and analyze the views of experts and specialists in international politics, regional security, and economics. Data analysis was conducted using the grounded theory method in NVivo software, and the results, based on the Kendall formula, indicate a consensus among experts regarding the significance and challenges of Afghanistan's participation. The research findings suggest that Afghanistan, due to its geostrategic position, rich natural resources, and potential capacities, can serve as a bridge between Central, South, and West Asian countries, thereby strengthening economic and security cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, challenges such as internal instability, economic dependency, and geopolitical pressures from foreign powers pose serious obstacles to Afghanistan's active participation in the organization. According to content analysis, there is a consensus among experts that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, if it enhances its support mechanisms, can provide a suitable platform for bolstering stability and development in Afghanistan. This endeavor requires multilateral cooperation and sustained support from the key members of the organization. The findings of this research can significantly assist policymakers and decision-makers in formulating effective strategies to enhance Afghanistan's role in this organization.

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan, China, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Opportunities, and Challenges.

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1. Introduction

Afghanistan and China are two friendly and ancient countries; friendship and understanding between the peoples of the two countries, such as their history, are deeply rooted; the transport of caravans to China via the Silk Road in Afghanistan has played a great role in these relationships. In recent years, Sino-Afghan relations have seen unprecedented growth, with China actively involving itself in Afghanistan's political transformation due to its longstanding friendly ties with the country (Aria, Tayeb, & Khpalwak Zazai, 2023).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001 to improve security, economic, and cultural cooperation among member countries. Several studies have indicated that this organization is vital in promoting regional stability and security (Etmad Jawad, 2015).

Investigations on the organization's influence on its member countries reveal that security and economic cooperation have resulted in fewer security threats and more economic collaboration in the region. As one of the most significant regional institutions, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) offers an appropriate forum for member nations to expand their economic and security cooperation with one another (Jinghan, Zeng; Breslin, Yuefan Xiao and Shaun, 2015).

This research paper examines the prospects of Afghanistan's presence in this organization and its impact on regional security and development. Afghanistan has been accepted as an observer country in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization since 2012. Observer status allows Afghanistan to participate in the organization's meetings and activities and benefit from the experiences and achievements of the member countries. However, Afghanistan has not yet been accepted as a full member of this organization (Huasheng, 2016).

Afghanistan, as a country with a unique geostrategic position and a complex history of regional and global interactions, has long been present as a dialogue partner in this organization. However, with the extensive changes in Afghanistan's internal affairs and the regional geopolitical equations, the discussion about the future of this country's effective and sustainable presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has become increasingly important (Zhang, 2022).

On one hand, Afghanistan, as a bridge between Central, South, and West Asia, can play a key role in achieving the strategic goals of the Shanghai Cooperation organization, and on the other hand, the presence of rich natural resources, its transit position, and potential capabilities for regional connectivity are among the factors that can make Afghanistan one of the important players within this framework (Vosoughi, 2014).

On the other hand, challenges such as internal instability, the presence of extremist groups, economic dependency, and geopolitical pressures pose serious obstacles to utilizing these capacities. This contradiction between opportunities and challenges makes it even more necessary to examine the future of Afghanistan's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Aria, Asadullah. Bayan, Naqibullah & Hazeem, Shafiqullah, 2024).

The most prominent research objectives in this scientific study are as follows:

- Identifying the role of SCO in the development of security and stability in Afghanistan;
- Analyzing the economic consequences of Afghanistan's affiliation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization;
- Analysis of the effect of membership on the growth of international investment in Afghanistan;
- Identifying the challenges and obstacles to Afghanistan's permanent membership in the SCO;
- Examining the existing opportunities to utilize the organization's capacities for the development of Afghanistan.

The most important issue that has led to this research is, in fact, the delay in Afghanistan's permanent membership in this organization. This research, by analyzing the prospects of Afghanistan's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, aims to identify and examine the opportunities and challenges related to this issue.

Researchers in this study are seeking advantageous results by posing the following questions:

1. What steps should Afghanistan take to achieve permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)?
2. What challenges does Afghanistan face in securing permanent membership in the SCO, and how can they be addressed?
3. How can Afghanistan leverage its geopolitical position and partnerships to strengthen its case for permanent Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) membership?

In this research, an effort has been made to gather the opinions of experts in the fields of international politics, economics, and regional security regarding Afghanistan's prospects in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) using qualitative research methods and the Delphi strategy. This study seeks to suggest beneficial solutions to improve Afghanistan's role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and to assist decision-makers and policymakers in this regard.

2. Literature Review

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in 2001, is one of the important regional institutions with security, economic, and cultural objectives that has extensive influence on regional and global interactions (Bahar, 2022).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as one of the most important regional multilateral institutions in the past two decades, has played a significant role in managing security challenges, strengthening economic cooperation, and expanding cultural interactions among member countries (Bashardost, 2019). Numerous studies in recent years have examined the role and performance of this organization in addressing regional challenges, including combating terrorism, strengthening economic

cooperation, and managing political crises. However, examining Afghanistan's position and role in this organization, especially after recent developments in the political and security structure of the country, requires more attention (Zhenmin, 2013).

In the existing literature, Afghanistan is recognized as a country with a unique geostrategic position that can play a fundamental role in connecting Central, South, and West Asia (Kuhn, 2009).

Aria et al. (2023), in a research paper have described the role and importance of Afghanistan in China's foreign policy as very vital, with Afghanistan's presence in the SCO serving as evidence for this claim (Aria, Tayeb, & Khpalwak Zazai, 2023). Kunz and Reynolds (2020), in a study highlighted the importance of Afghanistan's geographical location in regional projects such as China's "Belt and Road Initiative" and its role in creating transit routes. Additionally, studies by Weiss (2019), and Sharif (2021) have shown that Afghanistan's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can help strengthen regional stability through collective security mechanisms.

In the context of Afghanistan's challenges, numerous studies have pointed to factors such as political instability, the activities of terrorist groups, and the geopolitical pressures from foreign powers. For example, Johnson et al. (2018), examined the negative impact of internal instability in Afghanistan on the process of regional cooperation. On the other hand, Alizadeh and Ahmadi (2022), believe that the SCO can provide a platform for Afghanistan's economic reconstruction and the strengthening of regional diplomacy, but this requires the firm support of the organization's key members (Zhang, 2022).

This research seeks to address existing gaps in the literature by exploring the potential of Afghanistan's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization through the insights of experts, utilizing innovative qualitative methods based on the Delphi strategy. It aims to identify key opportunities, challenges, and strategies to enhance this participation. By employing qualitative data analysis in grounded theory, the study aspires to offer a thorough and actionable framework for policymakers and decision-makers.

In this study the literature in this field is generally divided into two main areas: one examines the role and functions of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a regional multilateral institution, while the other analyzes Afghanistan's position within regional frameworks, particularly its relationship with the SCO.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is one of the largest regional multilateral institutions, established on 2001 with the primary aim of enhancing security, combating common threats (such as terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking), and expanding economic and cultural cooperation (Liaqat, S., & Abbasi, A. H, 2023). Studies in this area indicate that this organization has gradually transformed from a security-oriented entity into a multifaceted structure with a focus on economic and diplomatic cooperation. Studies have shown that one of the main priorities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism.

Fischer and Jones (2019) have addressed the role of this organization in coordinating members' efforts to combat terrorism and believe that mechanisms such as the "Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure" (RATS) have helped reduce security threats. Over time, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has become one of the important platforms for economic cooperation in the region. Studies by Li and Zhang (2021), indicate that major economic projects, such as China's "Belt and Road Initiative," have been strengthened within the framework of this organization and have played a crucial role in facilitating trade and developing infrastructure.

Some studies, such as Carter's research (2020), point to the structural limitations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The lack of cohesion in the interests of the members, the differences in the strategic priorities of countries such as China, Russia, and India, and external pressures are among the factors that have limited the effectiveness of this organization. The significance of the Afghanistan situation to China is well illustrated by the fact that the former has been an important agenda item in all the bilateral and multilateral dialogues that China has engaged in within the SCO (Cheng, 2015).

2.1 Afghanistan's position in regional interactions and SCO

Afghanistan, with its geostrategic position at the crossroads of Central, South, and West Asia, has long been recognized as a key player in regional equations (Nozar Shafiee and Ruhollah Salehi Dolat Abadi, 2017). In this section, the literature is divided into three main axes.

Afghanistan, as a transit bridge between Central and South Asian countries, plays an important role in regional economic connectivity. Research by Kamali and Rahimi (2018), has shown that the geographical location of this country can be effective in strengthening projects such as the "Lapis Lazuli Corridor," the "Trans-Afghan Corridor," and the "China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor". Additionally, Afghanistan's rich natural resources, especially in the mining sector, can be a factor attracting regional investments to the country (Sajid).

2.2 Challenges of internal instability and security: The effect of Afghanistan's domestic instability on regional ties has been the subject of several studies, such as the one conducted by Johnson and Smith (2019). Afghanistan's capacity to effectively participate in regional organizations has been hampered by a number of circumstances, including the existence of terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the frailty of governmental institutions, and foreign interference.

2.3 Afghanistan's relationship with SCO: Afghanistan has been present as a "dialogue partner" in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization since 2012 (Munadi, Main finding in Afghan-china relations, 2016). Studies by Rezaei and Ahmadi (2020) have shown that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can play a fundamental role in the economic reconstruction and strengthening of political stability in Afghanistan. However, the lack of full membership of Afghanistan and the country's dependence on foreign aid are among the main challenges in this regard.

2.4 The role of SCO in the stability of Afghanistan

The study examines how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can aid Afghanistan's stability by enhancing regional security, economic cooperation, and infrastructure development. It also explores member states' collaboration to tackle terrorism, drug trafficking, and economic instability for lasting peace and progress (Lin, 2011).

López's studies (2021), have shown that security cooperation among the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can be effective in reducing security threats in Afghanistan. Especially, the role of Russia and China in strengthening the security capacities of this country is significant. Afghanistan can utilize the economic platforms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to attract investment in infrastructure and mines. Zhang and Wang (2019), emphasized that joint economic initiatives within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can help reduce Afghanistan's economic dependence on Western countries.

The existing literature indicates that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has the potential capacity to strengthen stability and development in Afghanistan, but this depends on how opportunities are utilized and challenges are managed. Specifically, past research emphasizes Afghanistan's need to strengthen domestic institutions, increase multilateral cooperation, and leverage its geopolitical position (Muhammad khan, 2015).

This research, using qualitative methods and expert data analysis, aims to fill the existing gaps in the literature and provide a more comprehensive picture of Afghanistan's future presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

3. Methodology

The investigation utilized the Delphi strategy alongside a qualitative approach. The Delphi technique was chosen for its effectiveness in fostering consensus and providing an in-depth analysis of complex issues. To implement this technique, a diverse panel of experts was assembled, including government officials, university academics, economic and security analysts, and politicians. The Kendall formula was employed to ensure alignment and consensus among the experts' perspectives. The formula is as follows:

$$W = \frac{12 \cdot S \cdot m^2 \cdot (n^3 - n)}{m^2 \cdot (n^3 - n) \cdot 12 \cdot S}$$

If W is high (for example, more than 0.7), it indicates a strong consensus among the experts, and the results will be reliable. If W is low (for example, less than 0.3), it indicates that the experts have diverse opinions and there is a need to revise the design of the items or the selection of experts.

The number of experts for statistical calculations should be at least 5. But for greater accuracy, it is recommended to use 10 to 20 experts. In this study, more than five experts, including university professors, diplomats, and economic and political experts related to Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, participated in the panel.

Calculation of the Kendall's W coefficient: (W)

$$W = \frac{12 \times 6194.5}{10^2 \times (10^3 - 10)}$$

$$W = \frac{74334}{100 \times 990} = \frac{74334}{99000} = 0.751$$

This value of the Kendall's coefficient of concordance (W) obtained is 0.751, which falls within the range of 0.7 to 0.8.

After the analysis, the value of $W = 0.751$ was obtained, indicating a high level of agreement among the experts. This result indicates that the experts' views on the future presence of Afghanistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are generally aligned and close to each other.

In the next stage, using the qualitative research method of content analysis based on grounded theory, the viewpoints have been categorized into open, axial, and selective codes in specified tables.

4. Results

The research findings, derived from the content analysis of expert interviews, indicate agreement and consensus on the research propositions. Experts, by examining various factors, agreed that Afghanistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization could contribute to the country's economic development.

Economic cooperation with the organization's member countries can attract foreign investments, develop infrastructure, and improve Afghanistan's economic situation. Afghanistan can benefit from the successful experiences of its neighboring countries in the fields of economy, security, diplomacy, and human development.

Experts have categorized the challenges that have hindered Afghanistan's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which include security issues, political instability, and infrastructural problems. Addressing these challenges requires proper planning and comprehensive cooperation.

Finally, in the tables below, you will see the content analysis of semi-structured interviews with experts.

4.1 Analysis of Afghanistan's Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

This section provides a coding framework based on semi-structured interviews with experts about Afghanistan's potential role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The analysis categorizes findings into In Vivo, Descriptive, Process, and Conceptual Codes to highlight key insights.

Table 1: In Vivo Codes (Direct Quotes or Key Phrases from Experts)

Key Quotes or Phrases
Weak internal security, human rights violations, and internal political disputes.
Investing in infrastructure and accessing new markets.
Geographical location, terrorist threats, regional security cooperation.
Dependence on foreign investment and access to international markets.
Diplomatic interactions and the impact of global crises on regional politics.
Afghanistan can play a key role in regional security.
The SCO member states are of particular importance for economic recovery.
The role of neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan is important in facilitating cooperation.

Table 2: Descriptive Codes (Summarizing Key Themes)

Theme	Description
Security Challenges	Internal instability, terrorism, and weak security systems.
Economic Opportunities	Infrastructure development, foreign investment, and access to regional markets.
Political Dynamics	Diplomatic relations with SCO members, geopolitical rivalries, and regional cooperation.
Regional Connectivity	Afghanistan's role as a bridge between Central, South, and West Asia.
SCO Membership Benefits	Enhanced security cooperation, economic development, and diplomatic influence.
Challenges to SCO Membership	Political instability, economic dependency, and cultural differences with member states.

Table 3: Process Codes (Actions, Strategies, and Processes)

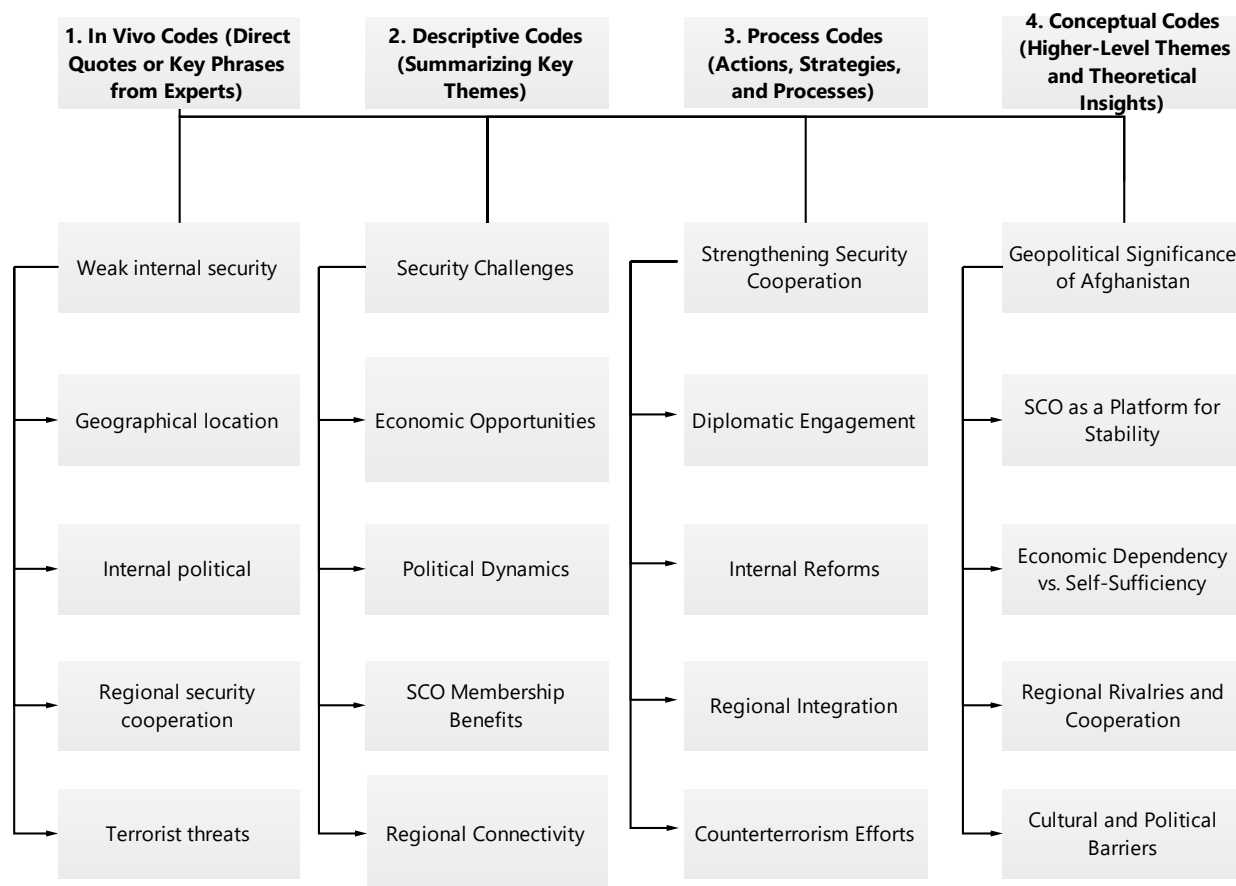
Action/Strategy	Description
Strengthening Security Cooperation	Sharing intelligence with SCO members, combating terrorism, and enhancing regional security mechanisms.
Economic Development Initiatives	Leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for infrastructure projects and attracting foreign investment.
Diplomatic Engagement	Building stronger ties with key SCO members (China, Russia, and India) and neighboring countries (Iran, Pakistan).
Internal Reforms	Establishing an inclusive government, improving governance, and addressing human rights concerns.
Regional Integration	Participating in regional economic projects like the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and Trans-Afghan Corridor.
Counterterrorism Efforts	Forming partnerships with SCO members to combat extremism and drug trafficking.

Table 4: Conceptual Codes (Higher-Level Themes and Theoretical Insights)

Concept/Theme	Description
Geopolitical Significance of Afghanistan	Afghanistan's strategic location as a bridge between Central, South, and West Asia, and its potential to enhance regional connectivity.
SCO as a Platform for Stability	The role of the SCO in promoting regional security, economic cooperation, and political stability in Afghanistan.
Economic Dependency vs. Self-Sufficiency	The tension between Afghanistan's reliance on foreign aid and its potential for economic self-sufficiency through SCO initiatives.
Regional Rivalries and Cooperation	The impact of geopolitical rivalries among SCO members (e.g., China, Russia, India) on Afghanistan's ability to benefit from the organization.
Security vs. Development Nexus	The interdependence of security and economic development in Afghanistan, and how SCO membership can address both.
Cultural and Political Barriers	The challenges posed by cultural differences and political instability in Afghanistan's integration into the SCO.

The revised codes provide a structured framework for analyzing the insights gained from the semi-structured interviews with experts. By categorizing the findings into In Vivo, Descriptive, Process, and Conceptual Codes, we can better understand the opportunities and challenges associated with Afghanistan's prospective role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This framework can guide policymakers and researchers in developing strategies to enhance Afghanistan's participation in the SCO and leverage its potential for regional stability and development. The findings indicate that Afghanistan's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization provides opportunities to strengthen regional security and economic development. However, challenges such as Afghanistan's internal instability and the political disagreements among the organization's members can hinder the achievement of these goals.

Figure 1: Showing the Paradigm Model



5. Discussion

The discussion in analyzing the future of Afghanistan's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a topic that creates profound opportunities and challenges from various perspectives. In this context, the main contention in analyzing the future of this presence revolves around the conflict between significant potentials and its structural and geopolitical limitations. This conflict can be examined in three main areas: security, economy, and regional politics.

Afghanistan's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a topic that creates profound opportunities and challenges from various perspectives. In this context, the main contention in analyzing the future of this presence lies in the conflict between its significant potential and its structural and geopolitical limitations. This contradiction can be examined in three main areas: security, economy, and regional politics (Zhang, 2022).

Afghanistan, due to its geopolitical position as a bridge between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, plays a key role in regional security. Membership in the SCO provides the opportunity for Afghanistan to become part of regional cooperation in combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and extremism. However, internal instability, weaknesses in security capabilities, and the inability to exchange information effectively with member countries pose serious challenges in seizing this opportunity.

Afghanistan has the potential to enhance its infrastructure and gain access to larger markets through participation in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and economic cooperation with China and Russia. However, the geopolitical rivalries among major powers, including China, Russia, and India within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), create complex conditions for Afghanistan. These rivalries risk transforming Afghanistan into an arena of regional tensions rather than promoting economic development (Aria, Asadullah and Li Xin Li, 2019).

Critics argue that Afghanistan's security frameworks lack the necessary capabilities to effectively engage within the SCO security framework, which diminishes the trust of other member states in the nation. Conversely, proponents contend that joining the SCO could serve as an effective means to enhance Afghanistan's internal security. Some analysts assert that Afghanistan, given its fragile economic and political systems, is unable to fully capitalize on the economic opportunities offered by the SCO, suggesting that its involvement primarily benefits the major member powers. Meanwhile, another perspective maintains that Afghanistan's active engagement in this organization could foster sustainable economic prospects.

From a political standpoint, Afghanistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) presents an opportunity to enhance its diplomatic standing in the region. However, the country faces significant challenges, including issues related to government administration, human rights concerns, and cultural differences with some member states. Additionally, the roles of neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan have become influential yet complex factors in Afghanistan's relations with the SCO. Critics view the positions of Pakistan and Iran regarding Afghanistan's membership as ambiguous and contradictory, as both countries pursue their national interests. Conversely, some believe that strengthening diplomatic cooperation with these two nations could help Afghanistan gain more support from SCO members.

The future of Afghanistan within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) presents a critical opportunity for the nation, contingent on its ability to navigate existing challenges. While Afghanistan currently faces significant hurdles, including internal instability, weak diplomatic relations, and economic dependency, its strategic location and untapped economic potential position it as a vital player in enhancing regional security and economic prosperity. To turn these challenges into opportunities, Afghanistan must prioritize the development of policies that foster political unity, enhance diplomatic engagement with member states, and establish itself as a reliable partner within the SCO framework. By doing so, Afghanistan can transform its challenges into a pathway for robust participation and collaboration in the region.

6. Conclusion

The prospects for Afghanistan's role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) reveal a nation poised to harness significant geopolitical, security, and economic prospects while navigating substantial challenges. Positioned strategically as a conduit between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan has the potential to enhance regional security, drive infrastructure development, and gain access to global markets. Nevertheless, internal factors such as political volatility, security vulnerabilities, and the absence of an inclusive governance structure hinder Afghanistan's ability to fully leverage these prospects. Externally, geopolitical rivalries among influential SCO members, including China, Russia, and India, could transform Afghanistan into a focal point of regional friction. Furthermore, the inherent structural and cultural disparities between Afghanistan and other SCO nations may obstruct collaborative efforts. By proactively addressing these challenges, Afghanistan can unlock the following strategic opportunities for its future within the SCO.

Regional Security: Joining the SCO can enhance Afghanistan's security cooperation and help tackle threats like terrorism and drug trafficking.

Economic Development: Engaging in initiatives like the "Belt and Road Initiative" can improve Afghanistan's infrastructure and decrease its reliance on foreign aid.

Strengthening Diplomacy: Membership in the SCO enables Afghanistan to bolster its diplomatic influence and play a crucial role in regional policies.

Afghanistan's involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization offers significant opportunities. However, success requires careful planning, internal reforms, and active diplomacy. By effectively addressing challenges, Afghanistan can leverage its SCO membership to strengthen its regional stance, benefiting both itself and the wider region's security and sustainable development.

7. Suggestions

1. Afghanistan should focus on creating a fair and inclusive government. This is essential for gaining the trust of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states and supporting regional stability.
2. Afghanistan needs to enhance its security systems and share intelligence with SCO member countries. This will help strengthen collective efforts for regional security.
3. The Afghan government should take advantage of investment opportunities from SCO member countries, especially in infrastructure and economic development, like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
4. Afghanistan should approach major SCO countries, such as China, Russia, and India, carefully to manage its geopolitical landscape effectively.
5. Afghanistan can benefit from its relationships with Iran and Pakistan to work better with other SCO members. These connections can help promote shared interests and cooperation.
6. Afghanistan must create strong partnerships for counterterrorism to ensure regional security and pave the way for peace in Afghanistan and beyond.
7. Improving the role of regional organizations is important for addressing Afghanistan's challenges and supporting long-term development. These institutions can help foster better governance, security, and economic stability.

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Associate Prof. Asadullah Aria ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/my-orcid?0009-0006-5801>

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