

**Withdrawal of NATO and US Forces and the Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Afghanistan**

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Regional and international organizations have got significant importance in world politics and these organizations are playing vital role in economic development and stability. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is one of the regional international organization which played a constructive role in the stability of the region (Central Asia & China) since its inception. According to many analyst and security expert on the region fear that the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan will create a security vacuum which will endanger the regional security. SCO in this regard can play a crucial role for stability and economic development due to various reasons such as, the organization has long experience in tackling terrorism in the region, it has non-intervention policy in the internal affair of other states and more importantly it has good relation with Afghanistan. The SCO afghan contact group, the status of observer state and all other interactions shows that the organization has keen interest in the stability and economic development of the country. In order avoid the 1990s situation in the country, it is necessary to strengthen the Afghan government and need to avoid the intervention policy of regional states into the internal affairs. There is need of collective approach in order to secure regional stability and enhance economic development and SCO provide such platform. Through this platform, the regional states can solve their problems because regional problems need regional solutions. Descriptive analytical and qualitative research method is used in the research.

*Key words:* SCO, Afghanistan, post withdrawal, regional stability, NATO/ US, Terrorism

After almost thirteen years of US and NATO presence in Afghanistan, the security situation is still fragile and there is a lot to do in security and economic front in order to make Afghanistan a peaceful and economically prosperous country. The announcement of the US and NATO withdrawal in December 2014 further brought some question and observation in the mind of the analyst like how the stability should be maintain, how the Taliban resistance should be deal and most important how the country should be avoided form the situation like in 1990s mean there are threats for the civil war again in the post withdrawal period. On the other hand there are some positive views regarding the future development such as Afghan government build national army and police forces which cansomewhat maintain the peace and security secondly the current election was also a positive development. So we can say that the current situation is up to a greater extant different from the 1990s situation because there are some local and regional realities which can be seen as positive in the sense of stability and regional cooperation.

In the post withdrawal period, the regional and neighbors countries have to play their role and their role will be vital for the stability of Afghanistan. In this globalized world no state can solve its issues without the support of the other state particularly those issues which are related to the security and economic developments. The series of negotiation has been made with Afghanistan where the regional countries such as Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran are encouraged to play their role in the stability of Afghanistan (Simbal, 2009: 9). All these regional key states are members or observers of SCO so its mean SCO has to play a crucial role. When we look into the history of Afghanistan, we see there is intervention of neighboring countries in internal affairs of the country which created some problems so there is need of cooperation rather than intervention in internal affairs. Currently Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is playing very significant role in the regional stability and economic development. Apart from the conferences and discussion, SCO wants to play a bigger role in the stability of Afghanistan. The role of SCO will be of vital interest for Afghanistan and regional stability because the non-intervention policy in the internal affair of the other state will provide an opportunity for SCO to play a positive and

constructive role in the post withdrawal period secondly the main focus of the organization is to fight against extremism which is also a critical issue for Afghanistan and thirdly regional stability and peace will not be achieved with a stable Afghanistan so this also make the cooperation between Afghanistan and SCO of mutual interest. All these common points make the situation suitable for the future cooperation especially in the field of security and economic development.

The role of SCO is vital for many reasons such as it is in the interest of SCO to have a stable and peaceful Afghanistan because violence, instability and separatism tendencies in the SCO member states are in one way or in the other way linked with Afghanistan such is the presence of IMU members and some Uighur in the country make security problem for the SCO states, so in order to counter these forces, it is better to have good relations with Afghanistan government in order to come over on the issue of security and extremism.

### **Background of SCO**

The history of SCO goes back to early 1990s, when the Central Asian states got independence. In order to solve the boundaries problems and build cordial relations, China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan decide to establish Shanghai Five (Gleason, 2001). With the passage of time and the changing regional security situations compel the leaders of Shanghai Five to further enhance the organization in order to deal effectively with rising security challenges in the region. With the inclusion of Uzbekistan, the Shanghai Five was transformed into Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 (Hanova, 2009). The main idea behind this transformation was to make the organization more effective in order to deal with trans-border issues such as terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. The organization within a short period of time became an influential regional international organization. The main reason for the popularity of the organization is the significant role for the regional stability and economic developments (Oresman & Charynov, 2005).

### **SCO and Afghanistan Issue**

Since its inception in 2001, the organization got significant role in the dynamics of the regional issues such as fighting extremism and drug trafficking. In the short span of time the organization was able to expand military cooperation, intelligence sharing and counter terrorism mechanism among its members. Afghanistan which is situated in strategically important area and host to a number of militant organizations, always remained vital for the regional stability, that's why the organization is specially focusing on friendly relation with the country.

The formal mutual relations between Afghanistan and SCO started in 2005 when the SCO and Afghanistan Contact Group protocol was signed. The basic purpose of the group was to enhance cooperation and to discuss peace related issues. In this group, diplomats and expert from both sides were included and it was also decided to make interaction with institutions of Afghanistan. The establishment of this group was vital for both side because it provides the opportunity to interact and cooperate with each other (The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group between the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2005).

In 2009, SCO organized an international conference on Afghanistan which got recognition from the international organizations such as UN, NATO and OIC. All the participants recognized and appreciated the role of SCO for the stable, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan. In the conference the participant were agreed to enhance their cooperation with the country in order to deal with trans-border and regional issues such as terrorism and drug trafficking (Declaration of the special Conference on Afghanistan convened under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2009). The significant role of the organization was discussed and the participant argued that for the stability in Afghanistan this forum can play an effective role and can cooperate with international community already working for the stability and prosperity of the country. In joint statement the members of SCO and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan agreed to support and assist the Afghan government in socio-economic developments, building institution, working for the stability of the country mean enhancing the capability of Afghanistan security forces through training and assistance and to make effective mechanism for the countering terrorism and drug trafficking which is a challenge to the entire region.

These efforts of the organization shows that it has keen interest in the stability and overall developments of the country because the regional security and stability will be achieved through the cooperation among the

regional states and SCO is such forum through which all the regional states can enhance cooperation in order to deal with regional issues and challenges. As the foreign minister of Russia expressed his observation that in case United State and the international forces failed to bring stability in Afghanistan, the terrorism may increase which is a severe issue for the regional stability (Safranchuk I. , 2009: 144-145).

In 2011, Afghanistan formally forwarded an application to join the organization. In June 2012, the organization granted observer status and thus after Mongolia, Pakistan, Iran and India, Afghanistan become the 5<sup>th</sup> observer state of SCO. The inclusion of the country into SCO was important because of various reasons such as it will help both parties to fight effectively against cross border terrorism, drug trafficking and weapon smuggling, on the other hand with the support of Afghanistan, the SCO members will be able to counter the extremist groups which are using Afghanistan as a base for the their activities in the region like IMU(Luan, 2012 ). The entry of Afghanistan into the organization was occurred in a chaotic situation. All the member states of the organization welcomed the entry of Afghanistan. Russia especially encouraged it and the Foreign Minister was of the view that such interactions will be fruitful for the eradication of terrorism and for regional stability (Kundu, 2012).

#### **Post-withdrawal period and Role of SCO**

After the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the US, NATO and ISAF forces were not able to restore complete peace and stability in the country and on the other hand they failed to reach to an agreement with Taliban. The government of Afghanistan taken certain steps to include Taliban in main stream politics but not able to bring them on the table. Since January, the ISAF forces withdrew from combatant operation and giving training to Afghan security forces in order to make them able to take the responsibility of the country security. On the other hand there are many attacks made by Taliban infiltrator, in which may ISAF forces has been died. Its mean that the Afghan security forces are not reliable and there are some Taliban within security forces which are targeting the international forces and this may lead to further uncertainty to the stability of Afghanistan. These situations shows that the post-withdrawal period is very uncertain because the US and NATO forces announced their withdrawal without stabilizing the country.After the withdrawal period the US announce that it will keep some forces its mean that after the withdrawal it need the support of other regional state. In this regard the US and SCO can cooperate with each other (Guang, 2011).

Some analyst fear that history may repeat itself in the country its mean that if peace and stability not brought in the country than it may lead toward the 1990s situation where different groups were fighting with each other and the country witnessed a civil war(Reis & Simionato, 2009: 135). There are other views as well, like some analyst argue that the situation in the country is for much different from the situation of 90s and now there is some ground and regional realities which cannot be ignored such as the beginning of a democratic system and the growing awareness among the people to support democratic forces and reject the extremist tendencies in the country. So its mean that there are differences of opinion but one thing is clear that the country will be facing great challenges in the post-withdrawal period such as law and order situation and economic developments.

In order to bring stability and peace in Afghanistan, it is the responsibility of the regional states to support thecountry without any intervention in the internal affairs. The regional players have dynamic interest in the country(Mazhar, Khan, & Goraya, 2013: 73 & 78). SCO in this regard can play very significant role because of many reasons such as the non-intervention policy of the organization make it easy for Afghanistan to have close cooperation with the organization for the country stability secondly, the organization main objective is to fight against terrorism and extremism which are the key issues for the country thirdly, the role of the organization since its inception remain very positive for the countering terrorism, regional stability and economic developments and lastly the organization has an observer status in UN which further provide the opportunity to play a constructive role in the country mean this international recognition of the organization will help to play a positive role for peaceful, stable and economically prosperous Afghanistan.

#### **Post-withdrawal, SCO and the role of regional states in Afghanistan Stability**

You can change your friend and enemy but you cannot change your neighbors. In order to analyze the stability and economic development in Afghanistan, it is necessary to describe the role of regional key player like

Pakistan, India and Iran. In the complex security situation and global issues such as terrorism, drug trafficking, there is need of mutual cooperation. In the post-cold war era, the weak states are became a threat for international peace and stability. According to Francis Fukuyama, nations that are not able to exercise the responsible sovereignty, are causing spillover effect(Fukuyama, 2004). Its mean that, it is in the vital interest of the regional states to have a stable Afghanistan because the spillover effect will disturb the whole region security order. The regional states must work with the country in order to strengthen its capacities to control the territory and the internal threat of insurgency, terrorism and other crimes such as drug trafficking.

After the 9/11 attack, the US and international forces invaded Afghanistan in order to bring stability and curb terrorism. This invasion has changed the dynamics of regional politics and security(Gul, Post-9/11 Afghanistan and the Regional Security Scenario, 2006:5). India is emerged is one of the influential state in the region and further increase its influence in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan significance and its geo-strategic importance cannot be ignored, that's why we see series of bilateral and trilateral meeting attended by Pakistan officials. Similarly Iran is also a key regional state having influence in the country. Speaking historically, these individual interests somehow effected the internal situation in Afghanistan particularly Pakistan and India has been blamed for proxy war. What are the solutions to these problems? There is need of institutions and regional forums which can handle these complex issues. Although, Afghanistan and other regional key states mentioned above are not permanent members of SCO, still they have the opportunity to use this platform for the regional stability. SCO members are also have keen interest to work with all these countries for regional stability and economic prosperity in the region as Ivan Safranchukhas discussed in his paper on Afghanistan and regional stability that *The SCO has shown it is going to play an increasingly active role in Afghanistan issues and promote an agenda of its own, while cooperating with other interested countries*(Safranchuk, 2009: 143-144).

#### **Tackling terrorism, drug trafficking, the SCO Experience**

Within a short period of time SCO got a significance position in the world politics particularly in dealing issues like terrorism, separatism drug trafficking and borders issues. The SCO members such as Uzbekistan and other Central Asian state were facing similar security problems facing by Afghanistan today. The organization first developed cordial relation among all members and then adopted certain measure to solve the regional issues.

The SCO experience regarding regional stability and greater economic cooperation can benefit other regional and neighbor states such as Afghanistan. In order to bring stability in member state and in the region, SCO established Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS)(The Executive Committee of the Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure, 2013). The SCO member states view combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism within the framework of the SCO as a foreign policy objective of the greatest importance and consider that the development of additional mechanisms of international cooperation in this area must become an appropriate step in increasing and modernizing the capacity for swift anti-crisis reaction and must facilitate the effective joint use of opening possibilities and the countering of new challenges and threats.

The Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure is responsible for carrying out all the activities such as coordination, legal procedure and all other related issues. So within a decade the organization was able to contain the activities of all the extremist group by effectively implemented its agenda on counter terrorism through effective use of intelligence information and close cooperation. How can this SCO experience work for Afghanistan?The geographical location of Afghanistan is very significant for the regional security and stability. The SCO member able to contain the extremist group and up to a greater level able to restore peace and security but they were not able to completely vanish the extremist group. One of the main reasons was their easy access to Afghanistan that's why the SCO member closely cooperating in order to contain these group. This cooperation will enhance the possibilities of regional stability and economic cooperation.

#### **SCO A Model of Regionalism**

In the post-Cold War era the regional integration process has increased and this can be seen through the establishment of regional organizations and also the increasing role of the existed organizations(Mistry, 2000: 48-49 & 55). European Union and ASEAN are the model of regional integration which played a crucial role for regional

security and economic development. In Asia two regional organization (SCO and ASEAN) played a vital role in economic integration and regional stability. Both organization have some similarities and distinctions. Outside the Europe, these two organization are model of regional cooperation(Aris, A new model of Asian regionalism: does the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation have more potential than ASEAN?, 2009:43).

The SCO provides a platform for the regional states to cooperate and work together for curbing the common threats such as China and Russia helped out the CARs to fight against the militant groups and restore law and order situation in their countries. According to Joshua S. Goldstein the concept of collective security is broadened in twenty first century like the weak states have very little control over their territories so these territories becomes safe havens for drug trafficking and terrorism. It is the responsibility of international community to provide a sound supports to the weak states in restoring law and order situation (Goldstein, 2008: 85-87).

As a model of regional integration, SCO focuses on all social, political, economic and security issues. In order to enhance regional security, the organization has conducted military exercises and training, to train the security forces particularly the Central Asian States force that face serious threats from the militant groups operating in the mountainous regions (Gordon, 2010). The organization has also played a constructive in the economic development of the region and took some positive measure to enhance economic development in the region such as the agreement on SCO Business Council and Interbank Association. The heads of all SCO member states welcomed that agreement and express the hope that both Council will work together for the prosperity of the region(Joint Communiqué of Meeting of the Council of Heads of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2007). Part from this, the organization has also established energy club.

All these developments will help the regional states to become economically more integrated. All the observer states of SCO are the potential to become the permanent member of the organization in the near future. The informal interactions among the regional state may institutionalized by using SCO as a model for regionalism. According to Stephen Aris, the author of Eurasian Regionalism and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, *outside the West SCO is significant case study in international Relation particularly on regionalism* (StephenAris, 2011).

#### **Post-withdrawal and Regional Security**

Located between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan is remain a key state for the regional stability. This peculiar position of the country remain a sours of interest for the big power(Gul, The Post- 9/1 1 Afghanistan and the Regional Security, 2006: 51-52). In the last many decades, Afghanistan is remained a sours of conflict in the region which start from Central Asia and further expand to Chechnya and other surrounding areas. On one hand the security situation in Afghanistan is affected the security situations in these area and on the other hand it remain a hub for the drug trafficking. In order to understand and solve the issues especially the security challenges in the country it will be better to understand the regional dynamics and its impact on the regional and Afghanistan security situation (Rubin & Armstrong, 2003: 35).

The withdrawal of NATO and ISAF forces after December, 2014 has great impact on the security of Afghanistan as well as on the entire region. As discussed above that certain measure should be taken in order to make a stable Afghanistan because unstable Afghanistan has direct and indirect impact on the regional security. Speaking historically Afghanistan has remained a safe haven for the different extremist groups of the region like the growing presence of IMU members in Northern Afghanistan which are operating in Central Asian and posed a serious threat to CARs security especially Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand the Chinese government is much cautious about the activities of the Uighur separatist groups such as East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The Chinese government accuses such groups of getting training in Afghanistan and are involved in different terrorist activities(Pereire, 2006). These militant groups are connected with each other, therefore the Chinese government not only working with Afghanistan but also with the central Asian States to counter these groups by collecting data, share information and also extradition of culprits in order to enhance the regional security(Clarke, 2007). The SCO has developed such mechanism through which it able to share intelligence information in order to contain these militant groups.

Similarly Russia wants to have stable Central Asia because instability and extremism has some consequences for Russia such as in Chechnya. The Central Asian states security has been on the risk due to growing presence of IMU member. IMU is not only operating in CARs but also have deep roots in Afghanistan. There are a number of IMU members which are operating in different provinces of Afghanistan (Feitt, 2010). Although US and international forces weaken these groups but not able to completely vanish them. In these situations the problem of insecurity and militancy can be seen through regional approach because almost all the regional states are affected and affecting by fragile security situation. SCO in this regard can play a vital role because securing the member states and region from militancy and extremism is the prime objective of this organization.

In the post 2014 period, there will be serious and great challenges to the regional security because the militant groups are still active and they are partially defeated by the NATO and ISAF forces. According to Roger N. McDermott, the writer of report on the security of Central Asian state in post-2014 says, *the militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkistan Islamic Movement and Islamic Jihad Union and other militant groups can pose a serious threat to the regional security after the withdrawal of US and NATO forces* (McDermott, 2013: 13). All these concern and threat shows that there is need of some mechanism and bodies which can deal the situation in the post 2014 period.

The SCO can play a bigger role for regional stability and the main reasons are, the organization has long experience in tackling extremism, the fragile security situation will directly affect the internal security dynamics of the member states and the growing cooperation between Afghanistan and SCO can help both sides to curb out the extremism from the region. SCO during a short time of period develop a security community for the regional security. The organization promotes confidence building measure, military cooperation, economic and political support and also strategic cooperation which is necessary for the regional stability (Lanteigne, 2006/07).

The world is going toward multipolar approach in international politics where different regional powers such as regional international organizations can solve their regional issues and SCO has the potential to play a vital role for the regional stability and economic development (Aris, Eurasian Regionalism The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2011: 100-102). Apart from the regional approach, the SCO also has international recognition which can help to play more constructive role in Afghanistan in the post-withdrawal period.

The organization has UN observer status and also has arranged an international conference on Afghanistan which shows its interest in the economic development and enhancing the fragile security situation in the country. With international recognition and having a positive role in regional stability it will be easy for the organization to interact and cooperate with Afghanistan for its stability and economic development.

### **Conclusion**

The withdrawal of NATO and ISAF forces in 2014 have great implications for local, regional and international security. After the invasion and the presence of international forces, entire peace and security has not been restored in the country which worried the countries especially the neighbor and regional states. Although there is some improvement in the security and economic development in the country such as, the strengthening of Afghan National Army (ANA) and police forces but still the overall security situation is volatile. Keeping in view the entire situation, it is the prime responsibility of international community particularly the regional states to play their role in the improvement of security and economic development of the country.

In the past Afghanistan is remained a center of interest for different countries particularly the regional countries which created a bad impression of the involvement of neighbors in the internal affairs of the country. In such kind of uncertain situation there is need of such regional forum which can play a positive role instead of intervention in the internal affairs of the country. SCO can and will play a bigger role in the stability of the country because SCO has non-interventionist policy, it has played a significant role in the regional stability and countering terrorism, it is now playing a significant role in world politics and most importantly it has cordial relation with Afghanistan. All these conditions are suitable for the greater role of SCO particularly in the security and economic sector. SCO has a long experience of building confidence measure, good neighborhood and tackling extremism

and terrorism in the member states, this experience can help Afghanistan because the country has facing the same problems. Apart from the security improvement the organization has also made significant development in the economic sector so similarly it can play the same role in Afghanistan and as an observer it is important for the country to learn from the experience of the organization.

SCO members are also worried about the spill over effect from Afghanistan because instability in Afghanistan can affect the overall security of the region. Afghanistan has remain a center for the extremist groups such Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and several other groups operating in the region. All these circumstances compel the regional states to cooperate with each other. In international Relations states act through formal organizations because these organizations are providing legitimacy for their actions. In order to curb extremism, SCO in this regard can play a vital role in the stability and developments of Afghanistan and stable Afghanistan will further contribute to the regional stability which is the prime objective of the Organization. The country has cordial relations with the Organization, the relations further improved when the country got the observer status. The organization has keen interest in the stability and development of the county because it taken some steps such as the establishment of SCO- Afghan contact group and the arrangement of an international conference on Afghanistan which got international support and recognition. This shows that in the post-withdrawal period the role of organization will be crucial.

Regionalism is of the important subject in international Relations theory and SCO can be view as model of regionalism. Regional organizations such as EU and ASEAN have played an important for regional integration and economic development. Similarly, SCO can play a vital role in integrating South, Central and Eastern parts of Asia. Regional problems need regional solutions. SCO within a short period of time was able to enhance the greater cooperation among its member and the same role can be extend to other regional and neighbors country. The international Relations scholars are of the views that, in this globalized world individual and particularly the weak states are not able to depend their territory. So there is need of collective actions and mutual cooperation which can be achieved through regional and international organization. Keeping in view all these argument we can conclude that for regional stability and economic prosperity, the SCO will play an important role in Afghanistan in the post 2014 era.

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