



AIR Discussions (July 3rd Week)

AIR SPOTLIGHT - SCO MEETING AND AFGHANISTAN

CONTEXT: India's External Affairs Minister participated in the 8 members' Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. The meeting was held in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SCO MEETING:

- The SCO meeting was significant in the backdrop of what is happening in Afghanistan- pulling out of NATO and US troops, resurgent Taliban is trying to establish its rules over Afghanistan.
- Each and every member country of the SCO is going to be affected by it either directly or indirectly.
- Uzbekistan's newly proposed Plan of Practical Measures to Promote the Socioeconomic Restoration of Afghanistan was also discussed.
- Recently, the Afghan deputy foreign minister met with his Tajik counterpart and both agreed that the SCO, which aims to fight against terrorism and extremism in the region, is a "good mechanism" to address the current security situation in Afghanistan.
- Foreign Minister stated that it is very important that the linkage of combating terrorism and extremism with what is happening in Afghanistan is clearly spelt out.
- He asked other members of the SCO to act against terrorism and terror financing.
- The Taliban is not ready to listen to anyone. In such circumstances, the role of SCO becomes crucial to force the Taliban to behave in a manner that is conducive to the peace and security of the region.
- There are three major issues:
 1. to preserve the governance in Afghanistan.
 2. to ensure that the existing government in Afghanistan is not overthrown.
 3. not to threaten the neighbouring countries with terrorism and extremism.
- Foreign Minister also emphasized that the future of Afghanistan cannot be its past.
- In this context, the contact group issued a statement condemning the violence perpetrated by the Taliban and the group is against the seizure of power by violence and force and that illegitimate actions should not be recognised.

AFGHANISTAN AND THE SCO- BACKGROUND:

- Afghanistan has been engaged with the SCO for over 15 years.
- It signed a protocol establishing the SCO-Afghanistan contact group in 2005; however, its "activity was suspended in 2009."
- In 2012, Afghanistan became an observer in the SCO.
- In 2015, Afghanistan signed a protocol on counterterrorism with the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the SCO; the same year Kabul applied for full membership in the group.
- Since then Afghanistan has requested full membership in the SCO.
- In 2017, Chinese President proposed the resumption of the SCO-Afghanistan contact group.



- In 2018, Afghanistan signed a **protocol on conducting consultations on “political issues and the fight against terrorism, extremism and illicit drug trafficking, as well as involving Afghanistan in the regional economic cooperation processes.”**

REASONS FOR JOINING:

- There is a **consensus in Kabul that to end the ongoing conflict, regional cooperation is needed.**
- **SCO’s goals are mostly in line with what those of the Afghan government,** whether fighting terrorism, extremism, and illegal drugs or pursuing the economic cooperation and regional connectivity envisioned in the SCO Charter and Afghan developmental plans and National Priority Programs.
- Seeking membership in the SCO, which counts China and Russia as members, **is also in line with the Afghan government’s newly coined foreign policy of “multi-alignment neutrality.”**

WHY THE SCO NEEDS AFGHANISTAN?

- **Afghan Civil War was the main reason behind the formation of the SCO in the first place.**
- **The Afghan state is a natural ally for the SCO’s efforts.** The Afghan government’s fight against terrorism, extremism, and opium cultivation is in line with the SCO’s fight against the “three evils,” which formed the primary motivation for its formation in 2001.
- **The SCO does not want the region to relive the turbulent 1990s, where a civil war in Afghanistan played a role in conflicts and insurgencies throughout the region:** the civil war in Tajikistan, a stirring “Intifada” in Kashmir, insurgency in Chechnya, and the rise of extremists and separatists in Xinjiang.

FACTS ABOUT SCO

Headquarter	Beijing, China
Creation	It was announced on 15th June 2001; while it came on force on 19th September 2003
Official Language	Chinese and Russian
India Joined SCO on	2017-SCO Astana Summit
Supreme Decision Making Body	The Heads of State Council
Permanent Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCO Secretariat – Beijing • Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) – Tashkent

PAKISTAN: GAINS, CONCERNS

- This is a moment of both vindication and concern in Islamabad.
- The **Taliban are a creation of the Pakistani security establishment.**
- But a **US withdrawal also means Pakistan will need to shoulder the entire burden of the chaos that experts predict.**
- The **foreign minister of Afghanistan described the presence of foreign fighters along with the Taliban as a major concern in ensuring peace and stability.**



- In the contact group meeting, there was an **emphasis on regional cooperation particularly with Pakistan because Pakistan is controlling the narrative as long as the Taliban is concerned, in closing the shelters and seizing the funding of the Taliban.**
- There are many factions in the Taliban. There is one group of the Taliban who was willing to talk in Doha. There is another set of commanders on the ground who are on the rampage and going ahead and taking whatever they can.
- In such circumstances, Pakistan will be unable to control all the levers of the Taliban and definitely, there will be some kind of major backlash on Pakistan itself. Hence, for Pakistan, it is not a very rosy scenario, whatever its original intentions might be.

TALIBAN:

- **Possibility of the Taliban being able to strike a peace deal with the Afghan government is low.**
- **It may lead to a repeat of the 1975 Fall of Saigon**– when the capital of the US-backed South Vietnam fell to Communist-ruled North Vietnam two years after the withdrawal of American military presence of 19 years.
- **Concerns regarding Violence continuing unabated and threat to human rights.**
- **The Taliban wants to reimpose its version of Islamic law as the country's system of governance.**
- SCO members have also noted that the **Taliban has not cut off its ties with Al-Qaeda** even after pledging to do so to the USA.
- **The Taliban also has ties with central Asia and Chinese terrorists and extremist groups.**
- **There are many factions of the Taliban who are negotiating in Qatar, Moscow, and Iran. However, these factions have been cut off from what is happening on the ground. How it evolves in the future remains to be seen.**

INDIA: TIME TO BE WARY

- **India was on the outer edges of the Trump drive to exit Afghanistan that culminated in the Doha Accord, and was a reluctant supporter of the “intra-Afghan talks” between the Taliban and Afghan government.**
- **The Blinken proposal under Biden administration gave India a role, by recognising it as a regional stakeholder, but this proposal seems to have no future.**
- **The Haqqani group, fostered by the ISI, would have a large role in any Taliban regime.**
- **Another concern would be India-focused militants such as Lashkar- e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohamed, which the Indian security establishment already believes to have relocated in large numbers to Afghanistan.**
- **In the 1990s and 2000s, India was steadfastly opposed to any dealings with the Taliban.**
- **In 2018, when Russia hosted Afghan and Taliban talks, India had sent a diplomatic delegation to Moscow.**
- **In 2020, at the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, Mr. Jaishankar was present at the inaugural session via a video link, reaffirming the long-held Indian position.**
- **Since the fall of the Taliban, India has cultivated deep ties with the Afghan people and the government, with investments in multiple projects.**
- **Thus, its economic, strategic and security ties could be disrupted if the Taliban were to take over.**



IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA, CHINA & IRAN:

- **China:**
 - China would have much to lose from instability in Afghanistan as this could have an impact on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.
 - A Taliban regime in Afghanistan might end up stirring unrest in the Xinjiang Autonomous region, home to the Uighur minority.
 - Conversely, as an ally of Pakistan, it could see a bigger role for itself in Afghanistan.
- **Russia:**
 - The US exit is for Russia a full circle after its own defeat at the hands of US-backed Mujahideen and exit from Afghanistan three decades ago.
 - In recent years, Russia has taken on the role of peacemaker in Afghanistan.
 - But both the Taliban and the Afghan government have been wary of its efforts.
 - Russia's growing links with Pakistan could translate into a post-US role for Moscow in Afghanistan.
- **Iran:**
 - As a country that shares borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan, Iran perceives active security threats from both.
 - And a Taliban regime in Kabul would only increase this threat perception.
 - Despite the mutual hostility and the theological divide between the two, Iran opened channels to the Taliban a few years ago, and recently, even hosted a Taliban delegation at Tehran.

WHY IS AFGHANISTAN IMPORTANT FOR INDIA?

- **Security:** A stable Afghanistan is crucial for regional and domestic security and stability for India.
- **Connectivity:** The most important role of Afghanistan is always considered as India's gateway to Central Asia.
- **Energy ambitions:** Peaceful Afghan is essential to address the energy needs of India.
- **Regional Balance of Power:** Afghanistan is tied to India's vision of being a regional leader and a great power, coupled with its competition with China over resources and its need to counter Pakistani influence.
- **Natural Resources:** The country is home to resource deposits worth one trillion dollars, according to the US Geological Survey.
- **India's development initiatives:** made an investment worth 3 billion dollars.

WAY FORWARD FOR INDIA:

- **Continued Training and Investments:**
 - India should provide more military training to Afghan security forces and invest in longer-term capacity-building programs.
 - It should actively support and invest in the National Directorate of Security
 - Finally, given the continued levels of violence and the impact of the coronavirus on the Afghan economy, India should expand its development assistance.
- **Working With and Through Others:** India should look to broaden its engagements with Iran and Russia, explore opportunities for cooperation (as limited as they might be) with China, and find common ground with the United States on Afghanistan's future.
- **Establishing diplomatic contacts with a politically empowered Taliban** will be crucial to safeguard New Delhi's existing and future economic interests in the country.
- An amicable relationship with the Taliban will provide India with some leverage over Afghanistan's future.
- India has always reiterated that the peace process has to be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled.



CONCLUSION:

- Possibility of SCO sending military support in Afghanistan can be explored.
- The Afghanistan Ambassador to India has made an important statement in New Delhi that If need arises, the Afghanistan government will seek military support from friendly countries which also include India.
- It is in nobody's interest to support the violent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban.
- International communities are of the view that some sort of agreement should be reached between the elected government of Afghanistan and the Taliban.
- The Afghanistan government and the Taliban should reach an agreement over democratic process and conduct elections. Till then peace should prevail.

<https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34011/Visit+of+External+Affairs+Minister+to+Dushanbe+for+SCO+Council+of+Foreign+Ministers+Meeting+July+13+2021>

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/jaishankar-meets-afghan-counterpart-discusses-recent-developments-taliban-resurgence/articleshow/84384396.cms>

<https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/afghanistan-and-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/jaishankar-afghanistan-focus-sco-ministerial-meet-tajikistan-taliban-external-affairs-minister-1827780-2021-07-14>

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NEWS IN BRIEF: PRELIMS SPECIAL

RoSCTL Scheme

- Government approved continuation of Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies (RoSCTL) on Export of Apparel/Garments and Made-ups for another three years.
- The move **critically reduces the price of Indian products in the global market because manufacturers don't have to add the cost of state and central taxes on it.**
- The move would help the struggling textile industry by making the pricing of Indian apparels more competitive in the global market.
- This would help increase exports and create more jobs.
- Under the RoSCTL scheme, **exporters are issued a duty credit scrip for the value of embedded taxes and levies contained in exported products. Exporters can use this scrip to pay tax while importing equipment, machinery.**
- Realizing the importance of refund of embedded taxes, cesses and duties, the Ministry of Textiles first launched a scheme by the name of Rebate of State Levies (ROSL) in 2016.

<https://newsonair.com/2021/07/15/union-cabinet-hikes-da-for-central-government-employees-to-28-percent/>

Scheme for promotion of flagging of merchant ships in India

- The Cabinet approved a scheme to **provide subsidies to merchant ships in India, approved in accordance with the Atmanirbhar Bharat goals.**
- **Subsidy will be provided to the Indian shipping companies in global tenders floated by Ministries and Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs).**
- The Centre will provide Rs. 1,624 crore over 5 years as a subsidy.
- A ship that is flagged in India after February 1, 2021, and which is between 10 and 20 years at the time of flagging in India will get extended subsidy support at the rate of 10%.

<https://newsonair.com/2021/07/14/da-for-central-govt-employees-increased-to-28/>

World Youth Skills Day

- World Youth Skills Day **observed on 15 July.**
- In 2014, the United Nations General Assembly declared 15 July as World Youth Skills Day, **to celebrate the strategic importance of equipping young people with skills for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship.**
- The day was **marked to achieve the Incheon Declaration: Education 2030**, which is a part of Sustainable Development Goal 4 that urges to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”
- World Youth Skills Day 2021 Theme – **“Reimagining Youth Skills Post-Pandemic”.**

<https://newsonair.com/2021/07/15/world-youth-skills-day-pm-exhorts-youth-to-skill-reskill-upskill/>



School Innovation Ambassador Training Program

- School Innovation Ambassador Training Program (SIATP) launched.
- The programme **aims at nurturing lakhs of students with innovation capabilities, develop a culture of innovation and lay the foundation of a new and vibrant India.**
- The program launched is a **collaborative effort by the Ministry of Education's Innovation Cell, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, CBSE and AICTE.**
- The initiative will benefit a large number of schools for tribal children across the country by giving wings to the creativity of the children and provide a platform so that they can give something new to the world with their ideas. The program is **aimed at 50000 schoolteachers.**

<https://newsonair.com/2021/07/16/education-minister-tribal-affairs-minister-jointly-launch-school-innovation-ambassador-training-program/>

Kisan Sarathi

- Digital Platform Kisan Sarathi launched for farmers.
- It is a **digital platform to facilitate farmers to get 'right information at right time' in their desired language.**
- It is available in Hindi and other regional languages through which farmers can interact and avail personalised advisories on agriculture and allied areas directly from the respective scientists of Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVKs), the nodal centres that ensure growers benefit from research and technology.

<https://newsonair.com/2021/07/16/government-launches-digital-platform-kisan-sarathi/>

MH-60R Multi Role Helicopters (MRH)

- Indian Navy accepts the **first batch of two MH-60R Multi Role Helicopters (MRH).**
- The Indian Navy is procuring 24 MH-60R Multi Role Helicopters (MRH) **manufactured by Lockheed Martin under foreign military sales from the US government at an estimated cost of \$2.4 billion.**
- MH-60R is the **most advanced maritime multi-mission helicopter in operation.**
- The induction of these all-weather MRH would enhance Indian Navy's three-dimensional capabilities.

<https://newsonair.com/2021/07/17/indian-navy-accepts-1st-batch-of-two-mh-60r-multi-role-helicopters-from-us/>