

THE TALIBAN AND THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION: SECURITY ENGAGEMENT AND ITS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

After two decades, the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in 2021, facing severe political isolation and economic collapse due to lack of international recognition. In this context, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) presents a potential regional platform for security cooperation, economic engagement, and political legitimacy. This article examines how the Taliban's security cooperation with the SCO—particularly in counterterrorism and narcotics control—creates openings for political recognition and economic participation. By applying Barry Buzan's security complex theory and the concept of third-generation regionalism, the study demonstrates that Afghanistan's instability is deeply embedded in the Central Asian security complex, compelling SCO members to engage pragmatically with the Taliban. Findings suggest that while security cooperation generates opportunities for functional alignment and regional interdependence, it does not automatically lead to political convergence or economic integration. Instead, the Taliban's participation in SCO-led security frameworks creates a conditional pathway toward limited legitimacy and selective economic cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's political system, with its distinct approach to governance, regained control over Afghanistan in 2021. While the group consolidated domestic authority, the absence of international recognition has created major political and economic challenges. Isolated from global institutions, the Taliban has increasingly turned to regional cooperation as a potential alternative to legitimacy and survival.

Since the end of the Cold War, regionalism has emerged as a central feature of international relations, offering states—and, in some cases, unrecognized regimes—a means of advancing

security, political, and economic objectives outside of global frameworks. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as the most significant regional body in Central Asia, represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the Taliban.

Afghanistan's geographic position and history of participation in SCO mechanisms make it a crucial, if complicated, player in the region's security and connectivity landscape. For the Taliban, engagement with the SCO is not only about countering shared threats such as ISIS and narcotics but also about leveraging regional frameworks for political legitimacy and economic cooperation. For

SCO members, meanwhile, Afghanistan's instability poses a direct security challenge that cannot be ignored.

This article analyzes the Taliban-SCO relationship with a specific focus on how security engagement translates into political and economic implications. Rather than assuming automatic "convergence," the study explores whether shared security concerns create functional alignment and selective cooperation, and how this shapes Afghanistan's regional role.

Research Objectives

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the Taliban's security engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).
2. To assess how security cooperation shapes opportunities for political legitimacy.
3. To evaluate the economic implications of SCO-Taliban interaction, including trade, investment, and infrastructure connectivity.
4. To analyze the extent to which theoretical frameworks—third-generation regionalism and regional security complex theory—explain this engagement.
5. To identify the limitations and challenges that hinder deeper Taliban-SCO cooperation.

Research Question

What impact does the Taliban's security engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have on the political legitimacy and economic opportunities of the Taliban government?

Hypothesis

The Taliban's security cooperation with the SCO—particularly in combating ISIS and drug trafficking—creates conditions for political recognition and selective economic cooperation through functional alignment of interests. However, this engagement does not necessarily produce full political or economic convergence, but instead facilitates pragmatic, issue-specific interdependence.

Research Methodology and Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study uses an explanatory-descriptive approach, relying on secondary data from academic journals, policy documents, think tank reports, and credible news sources. The method seeks to explain how security cooperation between the Taliban and the SCO influences broader political and economic outcomes.

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. Identifying areas of security cooperation (counterterrorism, narcotics control, border management).
2. Assessing how these security interactions create openings for political recognition and legitimacy within the SCO framework.
3. Evaluating the economic implications of this engagement, including trade, infrastructure projects, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Conceptual Framework

The study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks:

1. Third-Generation Regionalism

- Explains how regional cooperation today is multidimensional, involving not just states but also unrecognized regimes and non-traditional security issues.
- Unlike earlier regionalism, it allows for flexible participation without requiring formal membership or full political alignment.
- This framework is useful for analyzing how the Taliban—despite lacking international recognition—can still engage with SCO mechanisms on specific issues like counterterrorism and economic connectivity.

2. Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory

- Argues that security dynamics are often regional rather than global, with the stability of one state tied to that of its neighbors.
- Afghanistan's instability is inseparable from Central Asian security concerns, making SCO

member states directly affected by Taliban governance.

- This theory highlights why SCO members cannot simply isolate Afghanistan; instead, they must engage with the Taliban to manage threats such as terrorism, narcotics, and regional instability.

Together, these frameworks provide the analytical tools to explain how **shared security threats compel engagement**, and how that engagement **opens conditional pathways to political legitimacy and economic cooperation**. They also clarify the limits: functional alignment does not erase deeper ideological, political, or economic differences between the Taliban and SCO states.

Literature Review

Research on the Taliban's interaction with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is limited, largely because the Taliban only returned to power in 2021. Most existing studies on the SCO predate this shift, focusing either on its institutional development or on Afghanistan under the previous republic. Nonetheless, several strands of literature provide important insights into the Taliban's regional role, the SCO's security priorities, and the linkages between security cooperation and political or economic outcomes.

1. SCO as a Security-Oriented Organization

Studies consistently emphasize that security has remained at the core of the SCO since its inception. Adami and Azizi (2013) describe the SCO as the first effective multilateral framework for addressing regional security threats in Central Asia, including terrorism, separatism, and organized crime. Similarly, Simbar and Padarvand (2018) highlight Russia's concern over terrorist spillovers from Afghanistan, particularly the role of groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS. These works establish that Afghanistan's instability has always been a key variable shaping the SCO's security agenda.

2. Afghanistan's Geopolitical Role

Several scholars underline Afghanistan's geographic and strategic importance to Central Asia. Koulaei and Tishehyar (2012) argue that proximity enables

cooperation in areas such as counterterrorism, narcotics, and infrastructure. Sanai, Torabi, and Rezaei (2022) add that China views the Taliban's rise as both a challenge and an opportunity, given its rivalry with the United States and the security implications for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These studies indicate that Afghanistan is too deeply embedded in the regional security complex to be ignored.

3. Security Cooperation as a Basis for Political and Economic Engagement

Existing literature provides indirect evidence that security engagement may open pathways for broader cooperation. Baybourdi, Kokhaberi, and Shah Rezaei (2015) show how terrorism reshaped U.S. and regional strategies in Afghanistan, underscoring that external actors adjust their policies when faced with non-state threats. Vahedi and Attar (2021), examining U.S.-China competition, argue that shared concerns about extremism forced limited coordination, even amid rivalry. By extension, the Taliban's alignment with SCO security priorities—particularly on ISIS and narcotics—can similarly foster limited but pragmatic cooperation in other domains.

4. Gaps in the Literature

Despite these insights, the existing body of research has two major gaps:

1. Most studies predate the Taliban's return to power and therefore treat the group as a non-state actor, not as a governing authority.
2. Few works explicitly link SCO security engagement with Afghanistan's political legitimacy or economic prospects.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on the Taliban-SCO relationship after 2021, and by analyzing how security cooperation shapes political and economic outcomes.

Security Engagement between the Taliban and the SCO

Security has always been the foundation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). For the Taliban, whose governance is threatened by both domestic insurgency and international isolation, security engagement provides a critical entry point

into regional diplomacy. Three areas stand out: counterterrorism against ISIS, narcotics control, and border security cooperation.

4.1 Combating ISIS

The rise of ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) poses a direct threat not only to Afghanistan but also to SCO member states. Russia fears infiltration into Central Asia; China worries about potential linkages with Uyghur militants; and Iran remains concerned about sectarian violence.

Since 2015, the Taliban and ISIS have been in open conflict. After regaining power in 2021, the Taliban launched major campaigns against ISIS-K, reducing the group's operational presence in Afghanistan. This mirrors SCO's long-standing counterterrorism priority and creates an overlap of security interests.

- **Implication for Politics:** By aligning with SCO members on counterterrorism, the Taliban gain credibility as a responsible security actor, strengthening their case for regional political legitimacy.
- **Implication for Economy:** Shared counterterrorism efforts create safer conditions for trade corridors, particularly those linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

4.2 Counter-Narcotics Cooperation

Drug trafficking has long fueled corruption, insurgency, and regional instability. Afghanistan has historically been the world's largest opium producer, with SCO members—especially Russia, Iran, and Central Asian states—suffering from narcotics inflows.

In April 2022, the Taliban reinstated a nationwide ban on poppy cultivation, reportedly reducing production by over 90%. This policy aligns directly with SCO members' security priorities. While enforcement remains uneven, the ban represents a rare area where Taliban domestic policy and SCO regional concerns coincide.

- **Implication for Politics:** Demonstrating commitment to narcotics control enhances the Taliban's image as a regime capable of meeting international expectations, facilitating regional political engagement.
- **Implication for Economy:** By cooperating with SCO partners on drug control, the Taliban open the door to assistance in

alternative livelihoods, agricultural development, and economic aid.

4.3 Border Security and Regional Stability

Afghanistan's geography—bordering China, Iran, Pakistan, and three Central Asian republics—makes it central to SCO's security architecture. Persistent border insecurity (terrorist infiltration, arms trafficking, and refugee flows) has been a long-standing concern for SCO members.

The Taliban's cooperation with neighboring states on border management, including intelligence-sharing and joint patrols with some Central Asian states, indicates a **practical alignment with SCO security mechanisms**. Although these efforts remain limited, they demonstrate that the Taliban are willing to engage in institutionalized regional security frameworks.

- **Implication for Politics:** Engagement in joint security efforts, even informally, helps the Taliban move from isolation toward conditional recognition by neighboring states.
- **Implication for Economy:** Stable borders are a prerequisite for trade, transit, and infrastructure connectivity—making security cooperation the foundation for future economic integration.

Across these three domains, a clear pattern emerges: security cooperation does not guarantee political recognition or economic integration, but it creates the necessary conditions for both. The Taliban leverage shared security threats to position themselves as indispensable partners, while SCO members engage pragmatically to contain risks emanating from Afghanistan.

Political Implications

While the Taliban's engagement with the SCO begins in the security domain, it carries important political consequences. In the absence of Western recognition, regional forums like the SCO have become a central platform for the Taliban's search for legitimacy. Three dimensions are most relevant: de facto recognition, geopolitical positioning, and political alignment with SCO members.

5.1 De Facto Recognition through Engagement

Since regaining power, the Taliban have struggled to achieve international recognition. Western states continue to condition recognition on issues such as women's rights, inclusivity, and counterterrorism guarantees. By contrast, SCO states adopt a more pragmatic approach: they are less concerned with domestic governance structures and more focused on security stability.

Taliban participation in SCO-related meetings and regional dialogues, such as the Moscow Format and the Regional Contact Group, provides them with de facto recognition even if formal diplomatic recognition is withheld. Each instance of engagement signals that SCO members view the Taliban as the governing authority in Afghanistan.

5.2 Geopolitical Positioning: SCO as an Alternative to Western Isolation

The SCO offers the Taliban an alternative framework to counterbalance Western isolation. The absence of the United States within the organization is politically significant: it allows Afghanistan to align with Russia, China, Iran, and Central Asian states without U.S. interference.

Security cooperation with the SCO thus serves a dual purpose for the Taliban: it reduces immediate threats while simultaneously positioning Afghanistan within a regional order that challenges U.S. dominance. This geopolitical alignment strengthens the Taliban's bargaining power internationally.

5.3 Political Alignment with SCO Members

Although SCO members differ in their Afghanistan policies, there are notable areas of alignment:

- **Russia** has engaged the Taliban diplomatically and hosted them in Moscow, signaling readiness for deeper regional cooperation.
- **China** views the Taliban's control as a factor reducing U.S. influence in the region, while linking engagement to counterterrorism in Xinjiang.
- **Central Asian republics** seek security guarantees to prevent spillover of terrorism or drug trafficking.

Most SCO members themselves are governed by centralized, non-liberal political systems. This

reduces the normative distance between them and the Taliban, making engagement politically feasible. Political implications of Taliban-SCO security cooperation can be summarized as follows:

1. **Conditional Legitimacy:** The Taliban gain de facto recognition and political space within the region, even if international recognition remains elusive.
2. **Strategic Autonomy:** By working through the SCO, the Taliban pursue legitimacy without conceding to Western conditionalities.
3. **Regional Integration:** Security cooperation gradually embeds the Taliban into the political networks of SCO states, reinforcing their role as a regional actor.

Economic Implications

While political recognition remains contested, security cooperation between the Taliban and the SCO has opened limited but tangible economic opportunities. These opportunities do not represent full integration, but they demonstrate how shared security concerns create pathways toward trade, infrastructure connectivity, and resource exploitation.

6.1 Trade and Connectivity

Afghanistan's geography makes it a natural land bridge connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. SCO security frameworks that stabilize border regions indirectly benefit trade routes passing through Afghanistan. For instance:

- Enhanced border cooperation with Central Asian republics reduces the risk of illicit flows, making legal trade more feasible.
- SCO-backed transit corridors, such as those tied to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), increasingly view Afghanistan as a potential link between Central and South Asia.

Security engagement provides the minimum stability needed for trade. Without cooperation on terrorism and narcotics, no SCO member would consider Afghanistan a viable transit hub.

6.2 Natural Resources and Energy

Afghanistan is estimated to hold trillions of dollars' worth of untapped mineral resources, including copper, lithium, and rare earth elements. These are

vital for China's industrial economy and for regional energy markets.

- **China**, through its role in the SCO, has signaled interest in resource extraction projects, conditional on security guarantees.
- **Russia and Iran** also see opportunities in energy transit and regional electricity grids, which require Taliban control over territory and infrastructure.

Security cooperation is the Taliban's bargaining chip. By aligning with SCO members on counterterrorism and narcotics, they make themselves a necessary partner for future resource development.

6.3 The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The SCO functions as a strategic platform for advancing China's BRI. Afghanistan's location makes it crucial for potential rail and road links between Central and South Asia. However, these projects require stability, guaranteed by security cooperation.

- The Taliban's alignment with SCO counterterrorism efforts reassures China that its investments in the region will be less vulnerable.
- Participation in SCO-related economic forums, even informally, helps Afghanistan position itself as a future partner in regional connectivity.

Security cooperation does not guarantee Afghanistan's inclusion in major BRI projects, but without it, Afghanistan would be excluded entirely.

6.4 Aid, Investment, and Economic Diplomacy

While Afghanistan's formal membership in the SCO remains uncertain, observer participation allows the Taliban to lobby for aid, technical assistance, and investment. SCO states can justify limited economic cooperation with the Taliban by framing it as a security necessity.

This demonstrates how security imperatives spill over into economic engagement, consistent with theories of third-generation regionalism.

Economic implications of Taliban-SCO security cooperation can be summarized as follows:

1. **Trade Enablement:** Border security cooperation reduces risks for regional trade and transit.

2. **Resource Development:** Security alignment creates conditions for investment in Afghanistan's natural resources.
3. **Infrastructure Integration:** Participation in BRI-linked projects depends on continued counterterrorism cooperation.
4. **Selective Economic Engagement:** SCO members use security justifications to engage economically with the Taliban despite non-recognition.

Limits and Challenges

Despite areas of cooperation, significant limits constrain the extent to which Taliban-SCO engagement can translate security cooperation into political legitimacy and economic integration. These challenges can be grouped into four categories: non-recognition, divergent interests among SCO members, governance deficits, and structural geopolitical constraints.

7.1 Lack of Formal Recognition

While SCO states engage pragmatically with the Taliban, none have formally recognized their government. Recognition remains conditional on issues such as inclusivity, women's rights, and adherence to international norms. As a result:

- The Taliban remain excluded from many official SCO decision-making processes.
- Engagement is limited to issue-specific dialogues, preventing deeper institutional integration.

Security cooperation may grant de facto legitimacy but cannot fully substitute for formal political recognition.

7.2 Divergent Interests Among SCO Members

SCO member states are not unified in their Afghanistan policies:

- **China** prioritizes counterterrorism and economic projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- **Russia** seeks to maintain influence in Central Asia while limiting instability from Afghanistan.
- **India** remains deeply skeptical of the Taliban, partly due to Pakistan's influence.

- **Pakistan** views the Taliban as a strategic partner but faces tensions over border management.

These divergent interests limit the scope of collective SCO action, constraining the Taliban's ability to leverage the organization as a unified platform.

7.3 Governance and Domestic Policy Constraints

The Taliban's internal governance choices pose a barrier to deeper engagement:

- Policies restricting women's rights and political participation alienate potential partners.
- Weak institutional capacity undermines their ability to implement long-term agreements.
- Inconsistent enforcement of narcotics bans and counterterrorism policies creates doubts about credibility.

Without domestic reforms, the Taliban will struggle to transform security cooperation into sustained economic partnerships.

7.4 Geopolitical Constraints

Broader geopolitical rivalries also restrict SCO-Taliban cooperation:

- The United States, though absent from the SCO, continues to wield financial leverage through sanctions and control of Afghan reserves.
- Global rivalries (U.S.-China, Russia-West) politicize Afghanistan's position, complicating SCO consensus.
- Regional instability, including tensions in Pakistan and Iran, further disrupts long-term planning.

Afghanistan's role in the SCO will remain limited as long as great-power rivalries dominate regional politics.

The Taliban's engagement with the SCO is shaped by structural opportunities (shared security concerns) and structural constraints (non-recognition, divergent member interests, governance weaknesses, and geopolitical rivalries). These challenges explain why security cooperation produces only conditional, selective, and reversible forms of political and economic engagement, rather than full integration.

Conclusion

This article examined the Taliban's engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with a focus on how security cooperation shapes political and economic outcomes. By applying third-generation regionalism and Buzan's regional security complex theory, the study demonstrated that Afghanistan's instability is deeply embedded in the Central Asian security environment, compelling SCO members to interact with the Taliban despite the absence of formal recognition.

The analysis showed that security cooperation—particularly in combating ISIS, countering narcotics, and stabilizing borders—creates entry points for political legitimacy and selective economic engagement. These interactions provide the Taliban with de facto recognition, enable participation in regional dialogues, and open pathways for trade, resource development, and potential inclusion in connectivity projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

However, the study also highlighted significant limits and challenges. Divergent interests among SCO members, the Taliban's governance deficits, and broader geopolitical rivalries constrain the scope of cooperation. As a result, security engagement does not produce full political or economic convergence but instead generates conditional and issue-specific alignments.

The central finding is that the Taliban's security cooperation with the SCO functions as a pragmatic bargaining tool rather than a transformative integration mechanism. Security cooperation offers opportunities, but these remain contingent on the Taliban's ability to deliver credible commitments and on SCO members' willingness to prioritize engagement over caution.

For policymakers, the implication is clear: engagement with the Taliban within SCO frameworks can provide short-term stability and selective economic opportunities, but long-term integration will depend on domestic reforms in Afghanistan and on the broader evolution of regional geopolitics.

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