

AIR Spotlight - SCO Meeting and Afghanistan

AIR Spotlight is an insightful programme featured daily on the All India Radio Newsonair. In this program, many eminent panelists discuss issues of importance which can be quite helpful in [IAS exam](#) preparation. In this article, the topic of discussion is the recent SCO meeting that discussed the prevailing Afghanistan situation.

Participants:

- Anil Wadhwa, former diplomat
- Nilova Roy Chaudhary, journalist

Context:

India's External Affairs Minister Sri S. Jaishankar participated in the 8 members' [Shanghai Cooperation Organization \(SCO\)](#) meeting to discuss the situation in Afghanistan. The meeting was held in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

Introduction:

- US and NATO troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan and now the [Taliban](#) has increased its offensive against the Afghanistan government to take over the country.
- Taliban has been successful in occupying most of the Afghan territory.
- India has also temporarily pulled out its diplomatic staff from the security consulate in Kandahar.

Highlights of the SCO meeting:

- The SCO meeting was significant in the backdrop of what is happening in Afghanistan.
- The pulling out of NATO and US troops has put Afghanistan in a very uncertain situation.
- Meetings between the US and its allies and the Taliban had been going for months without any satisfactory outcome.
- The resurgent Taliban aided by Pakistan 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.
- As of now, the legitimate government based in Kabul is controlling less Afghan territory. There is no formula to decide how powers will be shared between the Taliban and the elected Afghan government.
- Apart from the Afghanistan issue, the SCO meeting also discussed issues related to public health and economic recovery.
- Combating extremism and terrorism was also discussed in the meeting.
- For India, it is very important that the linkage of combating terrorism and extremism with what is happening in Afghanistan is clearly spelt out.
- This is exactly what the foreign minister stated in the meeting.
- Mr Jaishankar asked other members of the SCO to act against terrorism and terror financing.

- There was also a contact group meeting on Afghanistan in which the foreign minister of Afghanistan, Mr Mohammed Haneef Atmar was also present.
- 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: First is to preserve the governance in Afghanistan. The second is to ensure that the existing government in Afghanistan is not overthrown. The third and most important is not to threaten the neighbouring countries with terrorism and extremism.
- Mr Jaishankar also emphasized that the future of Afghanistan cannot be its past. In 1996, the Taliban had taken over the country and after that, there was a backlash led by the Northern Alliance, which was then supported by India, Russia and Iran.
- 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.
- In future, if the Taliban plunges Afghanistan into an uncertain future, there will be a backlash as it happened last time and in that case, it is ultimately the people of Afghanistan that will suffer.

Role of Pakistan:

- The situation is grim as there is no political convergence insight that is emerging.
- Pakistan has not given up its agenda to control Afghanistan through the Taliban. India needs to be very careful about this.
- Apparently, after taking over Kandahar, the Taliban has sought a three-month ceasefire. This will give time to Pakistan to close off its border with Afghanistan.
- Pakistan aims to turn the Taliban against India and this has been the aim of Pakistan since the beginning.
- 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.
- How Pakistan will play its part depends on the internal politics of Pakistan and the control that Pakistan has on the Taliban. The situation is very fluid and one should be mindful that if violence spreads then Pakistan itself will not be spared.

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, which is why it had apparently shut off its border with Afghanistan. Hence, for Pakistan, it is not a very rosy scenario, whatever its original intentions might be.

- 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. In opposition to it, the relation between the Taliban especially the Haqqani network and Al-Qaeda have remained strong based on ideology, friendship and shared struggle. In fact, the Taliban regularly consulted with Al-Qaeda during its negotiations with the USA.
- The Taliban also has ties with central Asia and Chinese terrorists and extremist groups.
- China is also going to be affected by it because if there is extremism in the Xinjiang province of China, it will create problems for the whole of China.
- If the Taliban offensive continues, investments will dry up and people will be forced to leave the country.
- 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.
- As long as the civilian government in Afghanistan holds ground there are chances to force the Taliban to fall in line in terms of what the neighbouring countries and international community wants in Afghanistan.

Possibility of military support:

- Possibility of SCO sending military support in Afghanistan can be explored. It has to be led by Russia and China. India is always of the view that it should not get involved militarily on foreign soil.
- India has made an investment worth 3 billion dollars in Afghanistan along with training police personnel and diplomats. 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.
- How far that translates on the ground remains to be seen.
- On the issue of military support, getting support from SCO will be a tall order because there will be too many divergent views.

Conclusion:

- 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. Both parties should decide on the election after discussing how they would run the country together. Till then peace should prevail.

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