

SCO can and will play a bigger role in Afghanistan, Chinese expert

Aarish U. Khan

ISLAMABAD: “SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organization] can and will play a bigger role in Afghanistan,” said Amb. Zhang Deguang, Chairman of China Foundation of International Studies (CFIS) and former Secretary General of SCO. He was speaking at a roundtable discussion at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) here on Tuesday heading a high-level delegation from China. He added that Afghanistan has been on the agenda of all of SCO’s recent foreign ministerial and heads of state meetings. Amb. Zhang maintained that SCO’s position on Afghanistan was very similar to that of China, which is to have a stable, independent, peaceful, and prosperous Afghanistan. He added that Afghanistan was also taking keen interest in the SCO and had participated in various conferences and meetings. He shared that while the SCO was keen on giving full membership to Pakistan, it still needed to work out certain administrative arrangements. He urged Pakistan to deepen its cooperation with SCO even before acquiring full membership of the organization.

Amb. Zhang said that China was closely cooperating with Russia and Central Asian Republics (CARs) on Afghanistan and wanted to continue to work together with Pakistan on finding a solution to the problems in Afghanistan. He shared that China was mindful of the sacrifices made by Pakistan in the war against terror. Amb. Zhang said that China was looking forward to strengthening trade and economic cooperation with Pakistan, which, he said, had a great potential. He shared that China was also thinking about enhancing people-to-people contacts, especially youth exchanges, between China and Pakistan.

Amb. Zhou Gang, Senior Research Fellow at CFIS and former Ambassador to India and Pakistan said that China and Pakistan were equally concerned about Afghanistan being its next-door neighbors. He was of the view that the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan might not be a smooth transition. He added that the U.S. would keep some military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014, but that it was not clear how the U.S. would consolidate the government of Afghanistan post-2014 and keep its relations with its immediate neighbors stable. Amb. Zhou suggested for a gradual withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan with a view to decrease the destabilizing spillover effects of the insurgency or drug production in Afghanistan for its neighbors. He also suggested keeping the peace process in Afghanistan Afghan owned and led.

Dr. Li Jianmin, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European, and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) said that Russia did not want to get involved in any counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan because of its Soviet-era past with Afghanistan. He added that Russia’s major concern with respect to Afghanistan was drug-trafficking through CARs to Russia. Dr. Li maintained that Russia was interested in participating in reconstruction activities in Afghanistan and that Afghan government had also approached them for completing or reconstructing the development projects that were initiated during the Soviet era.

Mr. Ashraf Azim, President IRS, suggested highlighting the SCO’s role at the public level in both Afghanistan and Pakistan through the media. He added that SCO should take some practical steps for

Report: Roundtable on “SCO and South Asia” with a high level delegation from China on September 11, 2012

the post-2014 situation in Afghanistan. Mr. Azim suggested that SCO’s security role in Afghanistan post-2014 should be institutionalized through a United Nation Security Council (UNSC) resolution. He also suggested that the expansion of membership of SCO be expedited. Mr. Aarish U. Khan, Research Analyst at IRS, appreciated the improvement of relations between Pakistan and Russia and called for greater cooperation between China, Russia, CARs, and Pakistan from the platform of SCO over the developing situation in Afghanistan. He added that while China viewed itself as a developing country focusing on internal development, regional countries looked up to it for playing its role in the region.

Other participants of the roundtable included: Ms. Zheng Shulan, Senior Research Fellow at CFIS; Mr. Li Jianmin, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European, Central Asian Studies at CASS; Mr. Zheng Yu, Director of Russian Diplomacy and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European, and Central Asian Studies at CASS; Dr. Zhu Honggen, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European, and Central Asian Studies at CASS; Mr. Li Sen, Third Secretary, Department of European-Central Asian Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ms. Farhat Parveen, Senior Research Analyst at IRS; Mr. Zia Khokhar, Senior Research Analyst at IRS; Mr. Khalid Malik, Senior Research Analyst at IRS; Mr. Nasir Zaidi, Senior Collation Officer IRS; Mr. Abul Barkat Ahmed, Editor IRS; and other researchers from IRS.