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Central Asia group admits Afghanistan as observer

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China, Russia and four Central Asian states granted Afghanistan observer status in their regional grouping on Thursday, moving to boost their influence with the impoverished, war-torn nation ahead of the withdrawal of most foreign combat troops by the end of 2014.

Chinese President Hu Jintao announced the plan at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's annual summit in Beijing.

Russia and China have long seen the six-nation group as a way to counter U.S. influence in Central Asia, and hope to play a significant role in Afghanistan's future development, especially in economic reconstruction. Granting Afghanistan observer status will strengthen their contacts, something Beijing and Moscow hope will dilute U.S. influence and more closely align Kabul's policies with their own aims.

The SCO also recommitted itself to closer security and economic ties and to combating drug trafficking, extremism and terrorism.

"All the member states should implement the agreement on striking the three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism," Hu told other leaders at a morning session. "We should establish and improve a system of cooperation in security and take coordinative actions to narrow the space of activities of the three forces, get rid of drug deals and other organized cross-border criminal activities."

Afghanistan, whose president, Hamid Karzai, attended the summit, joins India, Iran, Mongolia

and Pakistan as SCO observer states. The group also admitted Turkey as one of its three dialogue partners.

Underscoring China's growing economic dominance in Central Asia, Hu opened the summit by saying China would offer a \$10 billion loan to support economic development and cooperation among SCO member states. No details were immediately given on how the money would be used.

Despite the warming political ties, the SCO has yet to declare a unified strategy on Afghanistan and shows little sign of filling the void left by the withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign forces.

Already, Russia and fellow SCO member nations Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are doing their part to ensure an orderly NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, having agreed to allow the reverse transport of alliance equipment after Pakistan shut down southern supply routes six months ago.

The fourth Central Asian member of the SCO is Tajikistan.

The NATO pullout will also prompt the end of military operations out of Kyrgyzstan's Manas air base, fulfilling China and Russia's oft-stated opposition to a permanent U.S. presence in Central Asia.

While the SCO's security plans in Afghanistan remain unclear, economic outreach looks set to lead the way.

Firms from China — the world's second-largest economy which shares a small stretch of border with Afghanistan — have already moved into Afghanistan, which is hoping exploitation of its vast untapped mineral deposits will help offset the loss of revenue when foreign aid and spending drop with the withdrawal of international combat troops.

The U.S. Defense Department has estimated the value of Afghanistan's mineral reserves at \$1 trillion. Other estimates have pegged it at \$3 trillion or more.

In December, China's state-owned National Petroleum Corp. signed a deal allowing it to become the first foreign company to exploit Afghanistan's oil and natural gas reserves. That comes three years after the China Metallurgical Construction Co. signed a contract to develop the Aynak copper mine in Logar province. Beijing's \$3.5 billion stake in the mine is the largest foreign investment in Afghanistan.

China's government has also contributed substantial aid to Afghanistan over the past decade in the form of training and equipment for some security units and government offices, infrastructure investment, and scholarships for Afghan students.

Russia, which lost nearly 15,000 troops in its disastrous 1979-1989 invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, appears keen to recover some of its lost influence there. A key concern for Moscow

is stemming the flow of heroin into Russia, to be met by increased intelligence work in the country and bolstered border security in surrounding states.

Moscow also has offered generous assistance to rehabilitate Soviet-era dams and power stations and is exploring natural gas exploitation and infrastructure contracts — putting it on a potential collision course with China.