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## **Afghanistan Focus**

### **Afghan Peace Process and the Emerging Regional Order**

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#### **Synopsis**

While an Afghan-centric peace process is being emphasised at the international level, a power struggle between regional and global powers on the Afghan endgame is gradually gaining momentum. The realignment of powers within the South and Central Asia and the Middle East is once again putting Afghanistan at the forefront of the historic great game which existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In recent months, Russia and China have come forward – at the expense of US and NATO - to take cooperative initiatives to ensure a peaceful end to the Afghan imbroglio. Will Russia and China's efforts to effect an Afghan settlement barring US and NATO's involvement end the Afghan conflict or will it ignite another great power struggle in the Afghan theatre?

## Commentary

The security situation in Afghanistan, where Taliban are jeopardizing the US backed government, has long been a global concern. On the other hand, Russia's swelling interests are also of keen importance in the regional context. In December 2016, Russia hosted meetings with Pakistan and China over the growing influence of Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan, where it was stressed that the regional countries' role in peace-building in Afghanistan had become crucial.<sup>1</sup> The fact that two major stakeholders of Afghan Peace Process – Afghanistan itself and the US – were not invited to the said meetings was highly resented; therefore, another round was held on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2017 in Moscow in which, Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, and India participated. However, it seems that Russian effort to stabilize in Afghanistan portrays a larger geostrategic objective, apart from exploring a solution to the current Afghan quagmire. During these meetings, it was expressed that the Afghan peace process should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, the other side of the picture depicts that a new great game among the competing major powers is being flaring up in the Afghan arena.

The absence of Afghanistan in the initial trilateral talks, held over the same issue in Moscow, raised several eyebrows. It was feared that Pakistan in cohorts with China and Russia might be trying to form a consortium in the backdrop of a budding Indo-Afghan relationship. India and Afghanistan view Pakistan's role in Afghan conflict with a critical eye, as they blame Pakistan for aiding and abetting anti-government elements in Afghanistan who are destabilizing the country.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, Pakistan and Afghanistan are attempting to improve their relations, though unsuccessful so far in order to conclude an effective border management strategy. The two countries have recently exchanged lists of militants wanted by the two respective countries, who have taken refuge in each other's respective territory and are engaged in conducting terrorist attacks in the two countries.

During the two meetings in Moscow, participants understood the importance of a negotiated peace settlement in Afghanistan by bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. The presence of Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) elicited strong concerns among the participating countries

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<sup>1</sup> "Pakistan, China, Russia warn ISIS influence growing in Afghanistan," *The Nation*, December 27, 2016. <http://nation.com.pk/national/27-Dec-2016/pakistan-china-russia-warn-of-increased-is-threat-in-afghanistan>

<sup>2</sup> "An Afghanistan conference without Afghanistan," *DW*, December 27, 2016. <http://www.dw.com/en/an-afghanistan-conference-without-afghanistan/a-36922029>

regarding their destabilizing impact on South and Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>3</sup>Therefore, fostering a softer narrative towards Taliban by bringing them to the negotiating table would be a positive step towards peace process. Moreover, Russia has also termed Taliban as being a lesser evil and a legitimate stakeholder in the whole prevalent conflict in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

It is pertinent to mention here that Russia has allegedly been supporting the Taliban movement against the US backed Afghan government for long. In 2016, during an interview with Reuters, a Taliban official revealed strong ties with Russia dating back to 2008, owing to the presence of a common enemy – the US, in a statement saying “in early 2008, when Russia began supporting us, ISIS didn't exist anywhere in the world," one senior Taliban official told Reuters. "Their sole purpose was to strengthen us against the US and its allies.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Russia excessively differentiates between “Good Taliban” and “Bad Taliban”. Moreover, Maria Zakharova – Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman – also made revelations about the alliance between Russia and Taliban in 2015, while referring to Russian endeavors for mitigation of the growing influence of IS in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, Pakistan's relations with Russia are witnessing an improvement since past decade. Recently, Russia has lifted the ban on sale of arms to Pakistan who will soon be receiving four military helicopter gunships from Russia.<sup>7</sup> The momentous China-Pakistan Economic Corridor stands as a mascot of friendship between Pakistan and China. Meanwhile, India is aligning with the US and it seems that players have begun to take their positions in the emerging new regional order.

The regional powers' pursuit of their interests in the peace process of Afghanistan, the stress on the oft repeated maxim of an Afghan-led, Afghan owned peace process, and the absence of a relevant prolepsis raises many questions. It is noteworthy that before acrimonious statements on

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<sup>3</sup> “Russia Returns to Afghanistan,” *The National Interest*, January 12, 2017.

<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-returns-afghanistan-19040?page=2>

<sup>4</sup> “Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS,” *CNN*, December 25, 2015.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/24/europe/putin-taliban-isis/>

<sup>5</sup> “Russia appears to now be helping out the Taliban,” *Business Insider*, January 27, 2017.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/russia-supporting-taliban-2017-1>

<sup>6</sup> “Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS,” *CNN*, December 25, 2015.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/24/europe/putin-taliban-isis/>

<sup>7</sup> “Russia and Pakistan's Reluctant Romance,” *The Diplomat*, February 25, 2017.

<http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/russia-and-pakistans-reluctant-romance/>

not being invited by the Kabul officials, Russia had held a number of meetings with only two partners, Pakistan and China. Had the three countries found some plan or strategy to build peace in Afghanistan, it would never have been able to succeed as long as Afghanistan itself was not made part of the discussion and the process that would have followed. Furthermore, the stress laid on Taliban being a lesser evil, and Russia's collaboration with them, apparently for countering IS in Afghanistan, might be pointing in a different direction.

Russia's assistance to Taliban goes not only against IS, as claimed emphatically, but also against its historical rival, the US. Presently, about 8,400 US troops are present in Afghanistan, backing the Afghan government and participating in operations against violent non-state actors which not only include the IS, but the Taliban and their multiple allies as well. Russia's support to the Taliban, at this time, can be construed as a step towards solidifying its military presence in Afghanistan which, if successful, can lend it political monopoly over the region. Moreover, with Russian assistance, Taliban can succeed in causing substantial damages to American forces in the region, thereby ousting them effectively.

It can also be anticipated that Russia might collaborate with China and Pakistan to form a union against the US to revive its status of 1970's as an equal geopolitical leader to the US.<sup>8</sup> Pakistan, Russia, and China can be termed as natural allies owing to the strategic location of the three. This alliance, if materialized, can be a decisive factor, not only for creating lasting peace in Afghanistan, but also for boosting trade and commercial activities at regional level. While Russia endeavors at regaining its control over the region decades after the Soviet war in 1980s, India, at the same is strengthening its ties with the US. In this context, the Russian efforts might in part be a warning signal for India regarding its inclination towards its traditional adversary.

However, the impact of Russia's deliberations on Afghanistan can be predicted in a number of ways. If Russia's intentions are only to regain its global status by ousting America from the region, it is feared that the changing regional dynamics will not help diminishing violence in Afghanistan. Since long, the conflict in Afghanistan has ceased to be ideology driven and trends of violence have largely shifted more towards geo-politicking and proxies, where several state and non-state actors are fighting among themselves for no other cause than to take over small

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<sup>8</sup> "Russia Returns to Afghanistan," *The National Interest*, January 12, 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-returns-afghanistan-19040?page=2>

pieces of land. However, these actors seem to be mere pawns in the hands of greater regional powers. This new great game of powers might as well set the stage of Afghanistan for another similar drama after its conclusion, and peace-building in Afghanistan would remain an unresolved issue as ever. However, if Russia truly intends to end violence in Afghanistan, there is a need for more prudent steps to be devised and taken. While talking about Afghan Peace Process the regional powers should understand that peace can be restored to the country only if the whole process is not politicized in any way. The prevalent conflict in Afghanistan has complex roots and branches; therefore, the political designs of regional and global powers, aimed at augmenting their influence, will only add more complexity to it and will further tangle the situation.