



Russia's Greater Involvement in Afghanistan: International Aspects

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Russia's establishment of contact with the Taliban and organisation of three international peace conferences on Afghanistan points at its growing re-engagement in the country. Russian authorities have revised their Afghan policy in light of the deteriorating security situation there, the failed peace negotiations, and lack of a clear American strategy towards the region. Afghanistan has emerged like Syria and Libya as another arena in the Russia-West rivalry, which may further undermine the war-torn country's stability. NATO should reverse the negative trends in Afghanistan by increasing support to the Afghan security forces and reviving limited cooperation with Russia, for instance, on regional peace initiatives.

On 14 April, Russia held a conference in Moscow on the future of Afghanistan with the participation of representatives from 10 regional countries. It was the third of its kind in recent months. At the first one in Moscow on 15 December, representatives of Russia, China and Pakistan met. The second conference saw diplomats from Iran, India and Afghanistan join them in Moscow on 15 February. Russia established contact with the Taliban in 2015 and supports negotiating peace with them. It calls for withdrawing some Taliban names from a UN sanctions list. At the same time, Russia has not abandoned its close relations with the government in Kabul. It is still one of Afghanistan's important political interlocutors, trade partners (fifth highest export destination) and key suppliers of defence equipment (including MI-17 helicopters, AK-47 rifles and ammunition). Russia continues to call for Afghanistan to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and has intensified cooperation with China and Pakistan to expand its influence in the region.

Officially, the main goal of Russia's re-engagement in Afghanistan is to fight a local brand of so-called Islamic State (ISIS-Khorasan), which has made inroads in the area since 2015. The Russians see the Taliban as their main ally and a crucial force in defeating ISIS in that fight. In addition, Russia points to the renewed chaos in Afghanistan as having a negative impact on security in Central Asia. In reality, Russia is trying to fill a strategic vacuum left after the U.S. reduced its presence in Afghanistan, regain lost regional influence, and rebuild its position as a major global power. Three factors have made the Russian policy so active: the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, the failed peace negotiations with the Taliban, and U.S. disinterest in the region.

Security in Decline. Afghanistan's security situation has deteriorated every year since the end of the NATO combat mission at the end of 2014. According to the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), by mid-November 2016, 57.2% of the country's territory was under the control or influence of the central government in Kabul, or 15% less than a year earlier. The Taliban controlled 16.2% while 26.6% was deemed contested. The United Nations estimated over 11,500 civilian casualties (dead and injured) in 2016, a 3% increase compared to 2015. According to SIGAR, Afghan security forces (ANSDF) recorded their highest-ever number of casualties in a year: to 12 November 2016, a total of 6,785 ANSDF members had been killed (up by 35% from 2015) and almost 12,000 wounded. Major attacks on the

Mazar-e-Sharif military base at the end of April and another in Kabul's city centre on 31 May with about 150 people killed in each were indications that 2017 may be the worst since foreign intervention started in 2001. Moreover, the production of opium, which gives the Taliban up to 60% of their income, rose by 43% in 2016 compared to 2015. Gains on the battlefield and the luring prospect of defeating the government and taking over Kabul lessen the Taliban's willingness to enter peace talks.

Faltering Peace Process. Russia's support for a political solution to the Afghan war is nothing exceptional. However, it comes at a time when its Western partners are losing patience and once again consider the Taliban the main enemies there. NATO members have endorsed the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process with the Taliban under certain conditions (adherence to a new constitution, cutting off ties with Al-Qaeda, rejecting warfare) for at least the last couple of years. Yet, all attempts to pursue peace talks with the Taliban (such as meetings in Qatar since 2013 or with the U.S.- and China-backed Quadrilateral Coordination Group since 2015) have failed for both local and regional reasons (internal divisions within the Taliban and, for example, Pakistan's ambivalent policy, respectively). Russia would like to be seen as a more efficient mediator than the U.S., but there is little evidence to suggest it has strong leverage over the Taliban at the moment. Taliban representatives did not show up to any of the Moscow meetings and their main condition for talks—the withdrawal of foreign troops—remains unmet.

More valuable is a diplomatic initiative by Russia directed at regional neighbours of Afghanistan. The competing interests of external players (especially Pakistan and India) have been a significant, though underestimated, impediment to peace and development in Afghanistan. Hence, assembling all regional stakeholders and working towards an acceptable vision for Afghanistan's future is crucial. Though the meetings in Moscow did not result in a breakthrough in the process, it gave momentum to the process. It led Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to hold a conference in Kabul on 6 June with the participation of over 20 delegations, including Russia and the U.S.

Towards a New U.S. Strategy. It may not be a coincidence that the revival of Russian activity in Afghanistan occurred during the political transition in the U.S. and subsequent formation of a new administration. Russia wanted to use the lack of a clear U.S. policy on Afghanistan to take over leadership there. Donald Trump did not significantly address America's longest war during the presidential campaign and so far has not defined his aims since his election. The American public is tired of their country's long engagement in Afghanistan, which has cost the lives of 2,356 U.S. troops, more than a trillion dollars in military spending, and \$117 billion for reconstruction. Despite this, the chief of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, called in February for several thousand more troops to end what the Pentagon has described as a "stalemate" in the conflict. By mid-April, new National Security Adviser Gen. H.R. McMaster had paid a visit to Afghanistan to review U.S. strategy. He was followed by new Defence Secretary James Mattis a week later. Both reassured their Afghan hosts about the enduring U.S. commitment and support for Afghan security.

Partly in response to Russia's activities in the country, the American military suggests regularly that Russia might be supplying the Taliban with arms (which it categorically rejects) and has rung alarm bells that any legitimisation of the Taliban weakens the government in Kabul. Mattis said in London on 31 March that Russia's activity in Afghanistan "gives us concern." During a visit to Kabul, he warned that arming the Taliban would be a violation of international laws. The U.S. rejected the Russian invitation to the Moscow conference in April and a spokesman for the State Department called it a "a unilateral Russian attempt to assert influence in the region that we felt wasn't constructive at this time." The day before, the U.S. dropped its largest conventional bomb on ISIS militants in Nangarkhar, which might also have been a message to Russia.

Conclusions. Russia's engagement in Afghanistan is another move to prove its global reach and can be useful leverage in negotiations with the U.S. on other issues. Transformation of the global Russia-U.S. rivalry into a proxy war in Afghanistan would have a negative impact on stabilisation of the country. By reaching out to the Taliban, Russia may be predicting the fall of the government in Kabul and preparing itself for a new situation. Russian engagement could complicate the internal situation (for instance, if it is arming the militants) and nullify efforts by the U.S. and other Western countries.

NATO should increase its security assistance to the Afghan army to reverse recent negative trends and force the Taliban to the negotiating table. It appears that a new U.S. strategy expected soon will go this direction and endorse a few thousand more troops assigned to Afghanistan. The U.S. would expect its allies to help share the burden. The Alliance's failure to act decisively could mean a further deterioration of security in Afghanistan and increase the power vacuum to be filled by others. The Taliban would benefit from that scenario militarily while Russia would politically.

At the same time, NATO should revive its dialogue with Russia on Afghanistan. Both sides can strengthen cooperation where they share strategic interests—elimination of ISIS, support for peace agreement and economic stabilisation. Russia, the U.S. and the EU also could join hands to push for regional peace initiatives, such as the Kabul process.