

Afghanistan Takes Center Stage in the New Great Game

Moscow hosted talks last week to promote peace in Afghanistan as neighbors and regional heavyweights eye the rewards of stability in the long-troubled land

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Global Research, November 19, 2018

[Asia Times](#) 16 November 2018

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [US NATO War](#)
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In the “graveyard of empires,” Afghanistan never ceases to deliver geopolitical and historical twists. Last week in Moscow, another crucial chapter in this epic story was written when Russia pledged to use its diplomatic muscle to spur peace efforts in the war-torn country.

Flanked by Afghan representatives and their Taliban rivals, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov talked about “working together with Afghanistan’s regional partners and friends who have gathered at this table.”

“I am counting on you holding a serious and constructive conversation that will justify the hopes of the Afghan people,” he said.

Back in the 1980s, the Soviet Union launched a disastrous war in the country. Thirty years later, Russia is now taking the lead role of mediator in this 21st-century version of the Great Game.

The line-up in Moscow was diverse.

Four members of the High Peace Council, which is responsible for attempting a dialogue with the Taliban, took part in the talks. Yet the Afghan foreign ministry went the extra mile to stress that the council does not represent the Afghan government.

Kabul and former Northern Alliance members, who form a sort of “protective” circle around President Ashraf Ghani, in fact refuse any dialogue with the Taliban, who were their mortal enemies up to 2001.

The Taliban for their part sent a delegation of five, although spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid was adamant there wouldn’t be “any sort of negotiations” with Kabul. This was “about finding a peaceful solution to the issue of Afghanistan.”

Diplomats in Pakistan confirm the Taliban will only negotiate on substantial matters after a deal is reached with the United States on a timetable for complete withdrawal.

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova stressed this was the first time a

Taliban delegation had attended such a high-level international meeting. The fact that the Taliban is classified by Moscow as a “terrorist organization” makes it even more stunning.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, left, listens during the second round of talks on an Afghan settlement, in Moscow, on November 9, 2018. Photo: AFP/ Vladimir Astapkovich / Sputnik

Moscow also invited China, Pakistan, India, Iran, the five Central Asian “stans” and the US. Washington sent just a diplomat from the American Embassy in Moscow, as an observer. The new US special envoy for peace in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, widely known in the recent past as “Bush’s Afghan”, has not exactly made much progress in his meetings with Taliban officials in Qatar in the past few months.

India – not exactly keen on a Pakistan-encouraged “Afghan-led peace” process – sent an envoy at a “non-official level” and received a dressing down from Lavrov, along the lines of ‘Don’t moan, be constructive’.

Still, this was just the beginning. There will be a follow-up – although no date has been set.

Enduring so much freedom

Since the US bombing campaign and invasion of what was then Taliban-controlled Afghanistan 17 years ago, peace has proved elusive. The Taliban still has a major presence in the country and is essentially on a roll.

Diplomats in Islamabad confirm Kabul may exercise power over roughly 60% of the population, but the key fact is that only 55% of Afghanistan’s 407 districts, and perhaps even less, submit to Kabul. The Taliban are on the ascendancy in the northeast, the southwest and the southeast.

It took a long time for a new head of US and NATO operations, General Austin Scott Miller, to admit the absolutely obvious.

“This is not going to be won militarily ... This is going to a political solution,” he said.

The world’s most formidable military force simply cannot win the war.

Still, after no less than 100,000 US and NATO troops plus 250,000 US-trained Afghan army and police failing over the years to prevent the Taliban from ruling over whole provinces, Washington seems determined to blame Islamabad for this military quagmire.

The US believes Pakistan’s covert “support” for the Taliban has inflamed the situation and destabilized the Kabul government.

No wonder the Russian presidential envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, went straight to the jugular.

“The West has lost the war in Afghanistan ... the presence of the US and North

Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] hasn't only failed to solve the problem, but exacerbated it."

Lavrov, for his part, is quite concerned by the expansion of Daesh, known regionally as ISIS-Khorasan. He warned, correctly, that "foreign sponsors" are allowing ISIS-K to "turn Afghanistan into a springboard for its expansion in Central Asia". Beijing agrees.

A grand plan by China-Russia

It's no secret to all the major players that Washington won't abdicate from its privileged Afghan base in the intersection of Central and South Asia for a number of reasons, especially monitoring and surveillance of strategic "threats" such as Russia and China.

In parallel, the eternal "Pakistan plays a double game" narrative simply won't vanish – even as Islamabad has shown in detail how the Pakistani Taliban have been consistently offered safe-havens in eastern Afghanistan by RAW (Indian intelligence) operatives.

That does not alter the fact that Islamabad has a serious Afghan problem. Military doctrine rules that Pakistan cannot manage the South Asian geopolitical chessboard and project power as an equal of India without controlling Afghanistan in "strategic depth."

Add to it the absolutely intractable problem of the Durand Line, established in 1893 to separate Afghanistan and the British India empire. A hundred years later, Islamabad totally rejected Kabul's appeal to renegotiate the Durand line, according to a provision in the original treaty. For Islamabad, the Durand line shall remain in perpetuity as a valid international border.

By the mid-1990s, the powers in Islamabad believed that by supporting the Taliban they would end up recognizing the Durand line and on top of it essentially dissolve the impetus of Pashtun nationalism and the call for a "Pashtunistan".

Islamabad was always supposed to drive the narrative. History, though, turned it completely upside down. In fact, it was Pashtun nationalism plus hardcore Islamism of the Deobandi variety that ended up contaminating Pakistani Pashtuns.

Yet Pashtuns may not be the major actors in the, perhaps, final season of this Hindu Kush spectacular. That may turn out to be China.

What matters most for China is Afghanistan becoming part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). That's exactly what Chinese envoy Yao Jing [told](#) the opening session of the 4th Trilateral Dialogue in Islamabad earlier this week between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"Kabul can act as a bridge to help expand connectivity between East, South and Central Asian regions," Jing said.

Pakistani Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed said:

"The Greater South Asia has emerged as a geo-economic concept, driven by economy and energy, roads and railways and ports and pipelines, and Pakistan

is the hub of this connectivity due to CPEC.”

For Beijing, CPEC can only deliver its enormous potential if Pakistan and India relations are normalized. And that road goes right through Afghanistan. China has been aiming for an opening for years. Chinese intel operatives have met the Taliban everywhere from Xinjiang to Karachi and from Peshawar to Doha.

The China card is immensely alluring. Beijing is the only player capable of getting along with all the other major actors: Kabul, the Taliban, the former Northern Alliance, Iran, Russia, Central Asia, the US, the EU, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and – last but not least – “all-weather” brothers Pakistan.

The only problem is India. But now, inside the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), they are all on the same table – with Iran and Afghanistan itself as observers. Everyone knows that an Afghan Pax Sinica would involve tons of investment, connectivity and trade integration. What’s not to like?

So this is the ultimate goal of the ongoing Moscow peace talks. It’s part of a concerted SCO strategy that has been discussed for years. The long and winding road is just starting. A Russia-China-driven peace process, Taliban included. Stable Afghanistan. Islamabad as guarantor. All-Asian solution. No Western invaders welcome.

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