

Foreign Devils on the Road to Afghanistan

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Global Research, March 14, 2023

[Indian Punchline](#) 12 March 2023

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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On March 7, the western powers huddled together in Paris for a restricted meeting on Taliban and the Afghanistan situation. It was an exclusive meeting of the Special Representatives and Envoys for Afghanistan of Australia, Canada, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The random pick was striking — on a need-to-know basis — Turkiye out, Norway in. Presumably, the West won't trust the Turks to keep secrets. But Norway makes itself indispensable as a European country with a first-rate intelligence apparatus that has served western interests.

Curiously, Australia and Canada took part, but then, they belong to the Five Eyes. And the Five Eyes goes wherever an agenda to destabilise Russia or China is mooted. Washington decides such things.

The Paris meeting rings alarm bells. On March 7, the UN Security Council also held a meeting on women and peace at UN headquarters in New York, where, interestingly, the US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield bracketed the "the violence and oppression of women and girls" in Afghanistan, Iran and "areas of Ukraine occupied by Russia."

France's excessive interest in hosting the meeting comes as no surprise. France is mentoring the so-called National Resistance Front of Afghanistan [NRFA] headed by the Panjshiris loyal to Ahmad Massoud, eldest son of anti-Soviet military leader Ahmad Shah Massoud.

President Emmanuel Macron took a hands-on role to woo Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon to lend his country as the sanctuary for NRFA to stage an armed insurrection against the Taliban government in Kabul with western help.

Macron has a chip on his shoulder that Russia's Wagner Group replaced the French troops in the Sahel region in north Africa, which used to be France's playpen since the deployment of troops in 2015 to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to set up military bases,

ostensibly to fight 'jihadists'.

But the French presence became increasingly unpopular in the region and the Islamist threat only spread while France dabbled in local politics in its former colonies, and eventually, Macron's motives became suspect in the African eyes and the perception grew that the French expeditionary force was acting more like an occupation force.

As the African states began replacing the French contingents with Russia's Wagner Group, Macron announced in November the end of his celebrated 'Operation Barkhane'.

Macron is looking for opportunities to hit back at Russia in its own backyard in the Caucasus and Central Asia. But he's punching way above his weight. Nonetheless, the Paris meeting on Tuesday expressed "grave concern about the increasing threat of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, including ISKP, Al Qaeda, Tehrik-i-Taliban-Pakistan and others, which **deeply affects security and stability inside the country, in the region and beyond**, and called on the Taliban to uphold Afghanistan's obligation to deny these groups safe haven." The [joint statement](#) is carefully drafted — an alibi for western intervention is available now. [Emphasis added.]

The Taliban has actually had considerable success on the ground in stabilising its rule against heavy odds. But the Western powers are furious that the Taliban is no longer bending over backward to seek engagement. The West's sponsorship of NRFA antagonised the Taliban. Taliban sees NRFA as presaging the return of warlords bankrolled by the West.

The NRFA has failed to get traction. Macron's personal diplomacy with Rahmon notwithstanding, the latter cannot afford to annoy Moscow — and the Kremlin's top priority is to somehow stabilise the Afghan security situation. The Russians and the Chinese are willing to work with the Taliban and make them stakeholders in the security and stability of their country.

Indeed, on the same day the western powers ganged up in Paris, [Delhi announced](#) that it was shipping another consignment of 20,000 tons of wheat to Afghanistan via the Chabahar route as humanitarian assistance. The Russian Ambassador in Kabul Dmitry Zhirnov also spoke about [Russia's deepening engagement with the Taliban](#), focused on economic ties. (Interestingly, the ambassador disclosed that Moscow may repair and reopen the hugely strategic [Salang Tunnel — a Soviet legacy](#) — connecting Kabul with northern Afghanistan and Central Asia.)

[China recently signed](#) a \$540 million oil-and-gas deal reached an agreement to extract oil in the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan. One of the first phone calls the new Foreign Minister Qin Gang made after his appointment was to call up the Taliban counterpart in Kabul to stress the security concerns in Afghanistan. No doubt, similar concerns were reflected in the [meeting in the Kremlin](#) between Russian President Vladimir Putin and India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval recently.

Russia is [very keen to work with India](#) regarding Afghanistan. China shares Russian concerns in Afghanistan's security and stability. On the contrary, the US and EU visualise that Russia's preoccupations in the Ukraine conflict is an opportune time to stir up the Central Asian pot. But that is a simplistic, self-serving assumption.

The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken who toured Central Asia last month learnt to his

dismay that the regional states are simply not interested in getting entangled in Washington's zero sum games. The [joint statement](#) issued after Blinken's meeting with his Central Asian counterparts steered clear of any references critical of Russia (or China.)

Prof. Melvin Goodman at Johns Hopkins and noted author who used to be a CIA analyst, has [described Blinken's Central Asian tour](#), first by a senior Biden Administration official to the region, to be "a fool's errand that merely exposed the futility of U.S. efforts to practice dual containment against Russia and China... All five Central Asian countries refused to support the United States in last month's UN resolution calling for Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine and to recognise Ukraine's full sovereignty over its territory. All five Central Asian countries will need support from Russia or China if faced with internal opposition in their own countries."

The neutral stance of the Central Asian states is consistent with their independent position alike on the breakaway ex-Soviet regions of Abkhazia, Ossetia, Crimea, Lugansk, Donetsk, Zaporozhya and Kherson. The salience is: Moscow never threatened the Central Asians that 'Either you're with us, or are against us.'

The Central Asians witnessed the retreat of the Western alliance from Afghanistan and will not regard them as dependable providers of security. They are also wary of the West's dalliance with extremist groups. The widely held belief in Central Asia is that the Islamic State is an American creation. Above all, the western countries pursue mercantilist foreign policies eyeing the region's mineral resources but take no interest in the region's development. On the other hand, they are intrusive and prescriptive.

At the Paris meeting, behind closed doors, the American input would have been that the Central Asian states will not support a regime change project in Afghanistan. Even Tajikistan, which has ethnic affinities with the Tajik population of Afghanistan, will mark distance from the NRFA lest it got sucked into an Afghan civil war. Macron fancies himself to be a born charmer, but Rahmon is a hardcore realist.

Looking ahead, the real danger is that, having failed to get the Taliban to bend while also unable to build an anti-Taliban resistance movement or incite the Central Asian states to decouple from Moscow and Beijing, the US and its allies may now be left with the only remaining option, which is to create anarchical conditions in Afghanistan where there are no winners.

The ascendance of the Islamic State and its [open threats](#) to the Russian, Pakistani, Chinese, Iranian and Indian embassies functioning in Kabul are signposts. The Paris meeting of western spies and 'diplomats' was an exercise in stocktaking.

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Featured image: UN Security Council held a meeting on women and peace and security at UN Headquarters, New York, March 7, 2023 (Source: IP)

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