



Russia's Increasing Role in Afghanistan: Impact on the Peace Process

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The relations between Afghanistan and Russia have gone through several ups and downs in the last 50 years. The impact of the political turmoil in Afghanistan which started with the coup by Mohammed Daud Khan overthrowing King Zahir Shah in 1973 and eventually led to the Soviet military intervention during 1979-1989, still continues to trouble the country. The Soviet intervention in December 1979 to support the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan's (PDPA) government proved very costly for the country as it led to a decade-long war between the Soviet forces and the pro-PDPA forces, on the one hand, and anti-Soviet forces consisting of Mujahedeen groups that was backed by US through Pakistan, on the other. The military intervention by Soviet Union started a phase of armed struggle by the proxy powers, which continues till date. The complete withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in February 1989 has failed to end the internal political strife in the country. Instead, Afghanistan was pushed back to another phase of uncertainty.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 had cast a shadow on its influence in global power-politics, but post-Soviet Russia managed to not only remain a major factor in the region, but also in Afghanistan and beyond. Moscow has come a long way in readjusting itself to the changing geopolitics in the neighbourhood in the post-1991 period which coincided with the civil war between the warlords in Afghanistan paving the way for the Taliban to capture power in 1996. Moscow supported the fight against the Taliban by aiding its main rival, the Northern Alliance.ⁱ

The terror attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, influenced the Russian approach towards Afghanistan. President Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to support US-led 'war on terror' in the aftermath of the 9/11ⁱⁱ. The event left a deep impact on the international community and on the world order. The event exposed the vulnerability of even the most powerful superpower i.e. the US. Russia, recouping from the collapse of the Soviet Union,

supported the US and its allies in containing terrorism, providing logistics etc. Russia has played an important role in Afghanistan since the beginning of the 'war on terror'. It supported US and NATO's action against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the aftermath of September 11. It also provided diplomatic and logistical support to the US military presence in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was one issue which brought Russia and the US together to the extent it made former Afghan President Hamid Karzai pronounce that Afghanistan was probably the only place where the interests of Moscow and Washington didn't clash.ⁱⁱⁱ

On the one hand, support to the US-led "war on terror" provided an opportunity for Russia to defend its action against the insurgent groups operating on its territory, particularly Chechen separatists. On the other, military action against al-Qaeda and the Taliban were seen by Russia as protecting Russia's security interests in the Central Asian region.

Phases of Russia's Policy in Afghanistan

Both Russia's specific interests and aims, and its own policy towards Afghanistan, have been subject to a certain evolution over the last 10 years. At a basic level, several of those interests have remained unchanged. Russia wanted to be as influential as possible in Afghanistan.

Given the loss that Russia had faced during its defeat in Afghanistan which led to its withdrawal from the country in 1989, it seemed that Russia had retreated from its interest. However, this was not the case. Kabul was not off Russia's radar, though there might not have been pro-active policy actions towards Afghanistan in the period from 1990s-2000's.

The 1990-2000 period was a transitional phase for Russia, the successor of Soviet Union, where the focus was more inward. Meanwhile, the situation in Afghanistan was stalled with occurrences such as civil unrest, warlordism, the Taliban uprising, ISI supporting and funding the Taliban, Osama bin Laden taking safe haven in southern Afghanistan, starting of the ethnic unrest, the Northern Alliance.

After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001^{iv}, Russia's policy towards Afghanistan went through various stages: From the offensive in 2001-2002, when Russia attempted to build up a strong presence and influence in Afghanistan; through a period of stagnation in 2003-2006, when Russia realised that it could not compete effectively with predominantly western influences in the country; to the period since 2007, which marked Russia's return to active policy in Afghanistan, with Moscow beginning to take advantage of the deteriorating security situation for improving its relations with the government in Kabul, and increasing its own importance to western coalition forces.^v From 2009 into 2015, Russia served as a supply route for US and NATO forces through what was known as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which reduced Washington's dependence on Islamabad for the Pakistan-based ground lines of communication into Afghanistan.^{vi} Russia's activeness was also reflected in its foreign policy concepts of both 2013 and 2016.

Russia's 2013 foreign policy, the 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', approved by President Vladimir Putin in February 2013 clarified that the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and the forthcoming withdrawal of international military contingents posed a great

security threat to Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) members. Russia together with Afghanistan and concerned countries, UN, the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) and other multilateral institutions including Russia-NATO initiatives, wanted to make consistent efforts to find a just and lasting political solution in Afghanistan. The solution will be based on the consent of all the ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Russia also wanted to achieve a post-conflict recovery in Afghanistan as a peace-loving, sovereign neutral state with a stable economy. The same policy stand was reiterated in its current foreign policy concept that was published in November 2016.

Russia has been involved in a series of developmental projects for the restructuring of Afghanistan and eliminating the production of opium through the UN Security Council (UNSC) backed programme called 'Rainbow-2'. The main direction of Russia's return to Afghanistan till 2013 seemed to be economic assistance and investment in infrastructure. Russia believes that the infrastructure which was built by Soviet specialists in the 1980s, and is maintained with the help of Soviet technology is an integral part of Afghanistan's development. The 'transit capacity' of Afghanistan in implementing TAPI gas pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) and CASA-1000 (the construction of electric power line from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan), in which Russian companies are actively involved, is important for future development for all the countries involved, especially Russia and Afghanistan. Russia's foreign policy focuses on creating favourable external conditions for a steady and dynamic growth of the Russian economy. With the EAEU and also the INSTC coming up, Russia's focus and involvement in the region, including in Afghanistan will increase.

Russia's Increasing Role

The increasing role of Russia in Afghanistan could be due to certain factors such as first, the complications of the fall out between the Kremlin^{vii} and the US^{viii} that changed the friendly equation between them, leading to the strengthening of the Great Game in Afghanistan. Second, Russia's ambition of retrieving its superpower status and protecting its national interests and security (including in its neighbourhood) led to pro-active actions from the Kremlin's side including the Taliban. Russia and Central Asian republics are directly affected by the illegal drug production and trafficking from Afghanistan^{ix} along with the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism^x from Afghanistan becoming a serious security concern.

One Russian analyst had said that "Russia is following all of the developments in Afghanistan with great attention. In recent years, this attentiveness was supplemented by the readiness to engage with anyone who is interested in talking rather than shooting. At the same time, Russia does not accept any obligations. It is like a visit to a museum; you look at everything with great attention, but you do not touch. Some people might say that this is a passive position, others that the position lacks responsibility. However, there is a certain logic in it. Intervening and leaving the job half-done is worse, than not intervening at all."^{xi}

It seems that Russia is no longer a visitor to a museum; where one looks at everything with great attention, but does not touch. The growing attentiveness can be seen as the outcome of the spreading of terrorism, narcotics etc. and also Russia's assertive military policies in Syria against

the IS. In addition, it might be the Kremlin's success in establishing a 'working out' relationship with the Taliban, in the hope of bringing them to participate in the Russia-initiated peace talks since 2016^{xii}.

In an interview, Russia's ambassador to Kabul, Alexander Mantytskiy on 9 December 2016, said that his government's contacts with the militant group were aimed at ensuring the safety of Russian citizens and encouraging peace talks.^{xiii} Special Presidential Envoy to Afghanistan and director of the ministry's Second Asian Department Zamir Kabulov said that Moscow is willing to provide a platform for a dialogue between representatives of the Afghan leaders and the opposition.^{xiv} Russia believes that peace in Afghanistan is impossible without contacts with the Taliban, which is one of the participants in the political process in Afghanistan.^{xv} During an interview with the editor-in-chief of the Afghanistan.ru news portal, Omar Nessar in 29 May 2011, Kabulov said that Russia "agrees with those who consider that the Afghan issue cannot be resolved militarily."^{xvi}

Peace initiatives

Several attempts in the past to initiate a peace and reconciliation process with insurgent groups in Afghanistan to end the ongoing conflict in that country have not been successful. Notable among the recent efforts in this regard was the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of the US, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The QCG initiative that met five times since January 2016 has remained a non-starter. It was expected that QCG would be able to lay a road-map for peace negotiations, particularly with Taliban. The participants had emphasised the immediate need for direct talks between representatives of the Government of Afghanistan and representatives from Taliban groups in a peace process to preserve Afghanistan's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Unfortunately, it failed to achieve any tangible progress towards starting a constructive peace process in the war-ravaged country. The reason behind the failure, some Afghan political experts say, has been the failure of the Afghan government to be strong enough to influence the members of the group. The experts say that the Afghan government has failed to convince Pakistan's strategic allies, the US and China, to use their influence on Pakistan to stop harbouring the Taliban's leaders and for not taking action against Haqqani network operatives on its soil^{xvii}.

Russia, with its contacts with the Taliban and the support of the various stakeholders such as the Central Asian countries, Iran, Pakistan and China, took the opportunity to host rounds of talk with the Afghan stakeholders, including the Taliban^{xviii}. Since December 2016, Russia has hosted three rounds of discussions^{xix} with them.

During the December 2016 trilateral consultations (Russia, China and Pakistan) on Afghanistan, Russia and China "reaffirmed their readiness to take a flexible approach to exempting certain persons from sanctions lists in the efforts to establish a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban Movement."^{xx}

The latest talk was held in April 14, 2017 at Moscow. In this meeting, the Central Asian countries, for the first time, also attended^{xxi} apart from the regular stakeholders of the peace process. However, the Taliban refused to support the peace talks. They said that "the process

seems to be motivated solely by the ‘political agenda’ of the organizers.”^{xxii} The Taliban’s dissatisfaction was interesting given the fact that Russia has been trying to bring this terrorist group on board and that had rubbed the Afghan government and India on the wrong side.

Outcome of the April 2017 Talk

The outcome of the meeting was heralded by stakeholders as successful as the participant states after the meeting reiterated their support for peace in Afghanistan through peaceful means. They also urged the Afghan government to be supportive of the efforts. The Taliban have offered to forego military solution in favour of talks on the issue of reconciliation. Overall the major emphasis has been put on collectively addressing a more imminent threat i.e. the spread of ISIS terrorist group^{xxiii}, though the position of the Taliban was not clarified.

Consideration of the April meeting as successful would be nothing short of an illusion. It is because nothing new was achieved in this particular meeting either. The reasons for not achieving any concrete resolutions from the previous peace talks could be for four reasons:

- Difference in understanding between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ terrorist was there, which might not have allowed the respective stakeholders to measure the intensity of the threat faced by ‘terrorism’ per se rather than a particular group.
- Unresolved issue of terrorists’ safe havens might be another cause of the unsuccessful outcome of the meeting.
- Ambitions of all the stakeholders including Russia.
- Genuine willingness of the multiple stakeholders behind resolving the problems Afghanistan faces is questionable. As long as national interests^{xxiv} differ amongst the stakeholders it will be difficult to reach a solution.

Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan MP originally from Badakhshan province, said that “at the conference, Russia must be convinced that to suppress Daesh, the Taliban should not be backed, because both groups have the status of enemy.”^{xxv} Russia has been accused of providing arms and funds to the Taliban which both the sides have denied.^{xxvi} Russia is seen to be taking an interest in encouraging the Taliban to engage in peace talks with the Afghan government to end the protracted conflict.^{xxvii} Russia’s position on Afghanistan has been that the country should develop relations with all forces in Afghanistan based on three main principles: recognition of Afghanistan’s constitution, disarmament, and reaching full national accord.^{xxviii}

Afghanistan’s Reaction to Russia-initiated Peace Process

The Afghan government praised Russia’s initiatives regarding the April peace talks. However, there were sharp reactions from Kabul last year when Russia initiated a peace process in a trilateral format in Moscow on 27 December 2016. The meeting had raised many questions not only for its intention, but, for the manner in which it was held. The surprise exclusion of Afghanistan from the December 2016 trilateral had evoked sharp reactions from that country. Raising questions regarding the absence of Afghan officials in the meeting, the Afghan ministry of

foreign affairs spokesman Ahmad Shekib Mostaghni had said that such meetings without the presence of Afghan officials will not represent a real picture of the situation of Afghanistan in the meeting.^{xxix} The speaker of the lower house of parliament, *Wolesi Jirga*, Abdul Rauf Ibrahimi, had called it a clear interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.^{xxx} However, the main objective of the Trilateral meet, as stated by Maria Zakharova, spokesperson, ministry of foreign affairs, Russia, was “to further promote the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan, under the leadership of Afghans themselves, and maintaining the known principles of the armed opposition’s integration into civilian life”.^{xxxi}

Russia needs to carefully tread the path and balance between the Afghan government and the opposition groups. Fawzia Koofi who doesn’t support Russia’s working relations with the Taliban, at the same time wants the involvement of Russia. According to her, Russia’s involvement is important because it can influence stakeholders such as the Central Asian countries, China and Pakistan for a resolution in Afghanistan.

Russia’s Change of Mind towards Taliban

Till late 2015, Russia had been clear on having no distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ terrorists and the need to defeat the terrorist groups, including the Taliban. In an interview in 2011, Kabulov said that it’s impossible to solve the Afghan problem without the military’s involvement because this would mean that the coalition forces are surrendering. Afghanistan has to speak with Taliban from the position of strength, and consequently, military should be involved.^{xxxii}

During a meeting at the Valdai Club on 22 October, 2015, Putin said “Why play with words dividing terrorists into moderate and not moderate. What’s the difference?” He also added that “some countries are playing a double game, that while they fight against terrorism they also ‘place figures on the board’ in their own interests.”^{xxxiii} However, since the growing menace of Daesh in Syria and its ripple effect on the neighbouring countries in the region, including Central Asian countries and Afghanistan^{xxxiv}, Russia has entered into negotiations with the Taliban. In a report dated December 2016, Kabulov was quoted as saying that Russia’s interests are the same as Taliban^{xxxv} in fighting the Islamic State.^{xxxvi} The rationale behind this could be Russia’s uneasiness over some groups in Afghanistan proclaiming their allegiance to the IS.

While meeting with the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai on June 2015, Putin expressed Russia’s uneasiness at some groups in Afghanistan proclaiming their allegiance to the IS. Karzai confirmed that the Islamic State was trying to gain a foothold in Afghanistan, and warned that the militants were using his country as a “trampoline” for expanding into Central Asia.^{xxxvii}

The Kremlin has good relations with both President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum. Russia tries to maintain relations with Afghan political leaders across the north of Afghanistan. However, the takeover of Kunduz by the Taliban^{xxxviii} in October 2015 and the emergence of the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the early 2015 were enough reason for Russia and the Central Asian countries to feel uncomfortable. Apart from these groups, a host of Pakistani groups such as Lashkar-e-

Jhangvi, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Sipah-e-Sahaba are also posing a threat to these countries. The possibility of creating instability and threatening the sovereignty in the region by home-grown terrorists such as IMU with the help of al-Qaeda, the Taliban and currently IS, makes the situation perilous.

Russia's willingness to deal with the Taliban, despite the fact that the Central Asian militants fought alongside the Taliban in Kunduz, creates a puzzle in one's mind. It is because on one side, Russia is fighting hard to contain terrorism and Islamic radicalism from spilling over into its territory and neighbourhood. On the other, it is trying to work with the Taliban. It seems Russia is choosing the lesser threat amongst the lot.

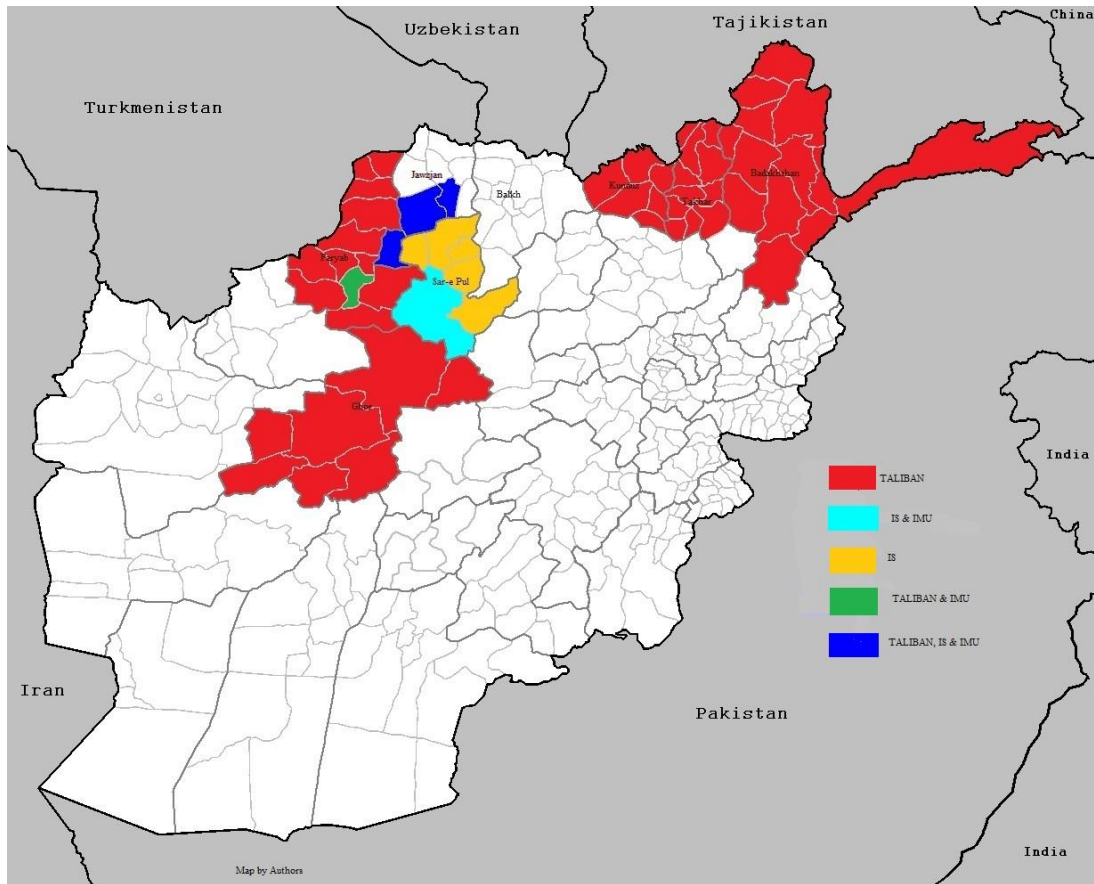
The reasons for Russia's choice first, are because of the fact that the Taliban were able to defeat the IMU in November 2015. The main arena of Taliban-ISKP military confrontations began in the southeastern districts of Nangarhar Province in 2015 where ISKP began and continues to have a presence. Beyond the confrontations in Nangarhar, the Taliban also started campaigns against ISKP affiliates and supporters elsewhere in Afghanistan with notable success. Taliban gained a decisive victory in the southern Afghan province of Zabul against IMU, ISKP's main Uzbek affiliate. The Taliban also began opposing the mainly Uzbek Jundallah, an IMU splinter group operating in northeastern Afghanistan in proximity to Tajikistan.^{xxxix} This victory of Taliban has come as a blessing for the group as Russia and the Central Asian countries see the Taliban as a buffer group against home-grown terrorists in these countries.

In the seven northern provinces that border three Central Asian countries^{xl}, the situation is as follows: in each of those provinces, at least one or two districts are under the control of militants. That is, the provinces are divided into districts, and the militants are not distributed evenly throughout the province but are concentrated in certain districts.^{xli} The militants (Tajiks, IMU, Jundallah, Jamaat Ansarullah, Turkistan Islamic Party, Taliban and other terrorist groups) have been trying to control many districts in the provinces bordering Central Asia^{xlii}.

Captured Districts* by the Militants: ([See Map Below](#))

Militant Groups	Provinces and Districts	Status/Remarks
Taliban	In Badakhshan Province the districts captured were Zebak ^{xliii} Warduj, Yamgan and Baharak districts. Darqad district of Takhar Province was captured. Taywara district in Ghor province and the border district of Kohistan in the adjoining northern province of Faryab were captured. Qaysar district, Pushtun Kot, Almar,	Most of them have taken back by the Afghan forces.

	<p>and Ghormach^{xliv} district of the same province (Faryab Province) were captured by the Taliban^{xlv}. They captured Khanabad, Chardara and Dashti Archi districts of Kunduz^{xlvi} province.^{xlvii} The Taliban increased their pressure on Qaramol Dawlat Abad, Shirin Tagab and Khwajah Sabz Posh Districts in northern Afghanistan along the Maimana-Andkhoy highway in Faryab province^{xlviii} but has not been able to capture.</p>	
IS	<p>Darzab district in Jowzjan province</p>	<p>In April 2017, there was a clash between the Taliban and the IS group in this province. The Jowzjan governor Reza Ghafouri said that about 100 ISIS members and 200 to 300 Taliban are present in Qush Teppa and Darzab districts.^{xlix}</p>
IMU	<p>This group is present in the provinces of Faryab (Khwahaj Sabz Poshⁱ, Alamar, Khwaja Mosa village in the Pashtunkot districtⁱⁱ), Jowzjan (Qush Teppa, Darbaj districtⁱⁱⁱ), Sari-Pulⁱⁱⁱⁱ (Kohistanat district^{lv}) and Aqcha area in Jowzjan province.</p>	<p>In 2015, Afghan government officials have said the Taliban has joined forces with militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other organizations with the goal of spreading northward into Central Asia.^{lv} They came to Herat province to help train local Taliban fighters, including teaching them how to make improvised explosive devices.^{lvi}</p>



* Zebak, Warduj, Yamgan, Baharak (Badakhshan), Darqad (Takhar), Taywara (Ghor), Kohistan, Qaysar, Pushtun Kot, Khwaja Sabz Posh, Almar, Ghormach, Dawlat Abad, Shirin Tagab (Faryab), Khanabad, Chardara and Dashti Archi (Kunduz), Darbaz, Aqcha and Qush Teppa (Jowzjan) and Kohistanat districts in the Sar-e Pul province. Although several attacks took place in the Balkh province, insurgents have been unsuccessful in capturing any of the districts in the province.

For the Central Asian countries, Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Jowzjan, Faryab, Badghis and Herat provinces are linked to their security. It is necessary to understand the reason behind Russia's willingness to work with the Taliban because though the Taliban captured some district, these have been taken back by the Afghan forces. Russia's willingness to work with them could be to stop the Central Asian terrorist groups from linking up with the Taliban and creating a mini-caliphate in the border areas of Afghanistan and the Central Asian states.

In addition to the threats and insecurities, there are some additional angles to Russia's interest in Afghanistan. They are:

- Russia sees the Taliban as a nationalist force whose nationalism is restricted to Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Daesh's plans of pan-jihadism^{lvii} through constructing Caliphate in global level might have given the Russian government reasons to work with the Taliban and defeat the IS.

- Russia's willingness to work with the Taliban is for the safety and protection of Russian citizens and to bring the group to the table for the peace talks as Russia's ambassador to Kabul, Alexander Mantytskiy had told reporters during an interview on December 2016.^{lviii}
- Russia's ambition to be an influential player at the regional and global level and have an equal say in the outcome of the future of Afghanistan
- The Great Game that started in the region in the 19th century is not yet over. The effects of the strategies of the Soviet Union along with that of the other external powers are still evident.
- Russia wants to secure access for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), whose connectivity vision is towards East, including through Pakistan. The INSTC is another economic engagement which is important for Russia and the stability of Afghanistan is crucial for Moscow's ambitions. Russia understands the significance of the consent of all the warring groups in the region, including in Afghanistan and Pakistan, for a smooth functioning of these economic engagements.

Conclusion

With national interests at stake, Russia is concerned about the US presence and also the rise of Daesh in the region, including in Afghanistan.

While Russia wants to balance the US influence^{lix} in Afghanistan, it will try to keep America involved in the security issues. The Kremlin understands that without the involvement of all the external powers, the goal of peace and stability in Afghanistan cannot be achieved.

Russia already has strong relationships with India, Iran^{lx}, China, Pakistan and the Central Asian countries which are all part of one or the other multilateral initiatives such as SCO, BRICS, EAEU etc. that could help the Afghan people and the government.

There is a certain modus operandi which needs to be followed for a successful impact and outcome in Afghanistan. They are the following:

- Non-distinction between 'good' and 'bad' terrorists.
- Neither supporting nor overlooking the fact about countries that have been safe havens to terrorists.
- Each stakeholder looks at its own national interests and security first, however, the larger goal of containing terrorism and flow of drug trafficking from their roots will be important. Hence collective, transparent and genuine approach will be needed.
- No bloc politics should be entertained otherwise the problem in Afghanistan will remain unresolved and unstable.

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Disclaimer: The views are that of the authors and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

ⁱJoakim Brattvoll, "Is Russia Back in Afghanistan?", Policy Brief 04, 2016, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), http://file.prio.no/publication_files/prio/Brattvoll%20-%20Is%20Russia%20Back%20in%20Afghanistan,%20PRIO%20Policy%20Brief%2004-2016.pdf

ⁱⁱDuring a joint statement, President Putin and former US President George W. Bush on 21 October 2001 said that the current situation in Afghanistan is a direct consequence of the policies pursued by the Taliban, which turned that country into an international centre of terrorism and extremism. They reaffirm that Russia and the US are ready to cooperate closely with the United Nations to promote a post-conflict settlement in Afghanistan which would provide for the formation of a representative, broad-based government capable of ensuring the restoration of a peaceful Afghanistan that maintains good relations with countries of the region and beyond it. "Joint Statement on Counterterrorism by the President of the United States and the President of Russia", The White House, October 21, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011022-11.html> (Accessed on October 20, 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱMasood Saifullah, "Why is Russia so interested in Afghanistan all of a sudden?", Deutsche Welle (DW), January 3, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/why-is-russia-so-interested-in-afghanistan-all-of-a-sudden/a-36989680> (Accessed on July 31, 2017).

^{iv}The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 marked a new era of Russia's relations with Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai, head of the interim government, visited Moscow twice in 2002. During Karzai's visit to Moscow in 2002, the Russian and Afghan governments signed 17 bilateral agreements.

^vMariekienkiszak, "Russia's Afghan Problem: The Russian Federation and the Afghanistan problem since 2001", OĖrodek Studiów Wschodnich, 2011, pg. 7. https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace_38_en.pdf (Accessed on July 3, 2017).

^{vi}Arif Rafiq, "Russia Returns to Afghanistan", The National Interest, January 12, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-returns-afghanistan-19040> (Accessed on July 31, 2017).

^{vii}The Kremlin understands that the West is not ready to give Russia an equal partnership in the world order but a secondary position, unacceptable to Moscow.

^{viii}Due to the Ukraine crisis of 2014 and the protracted Syrian civil war since 2015.

^{ix}Russian drug addicts confirmed that after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, there was a "wave" of heroin flowing into Russia. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, it is the world's largest national market for heroin, consuming about 20 percent of all the heroin trafficked from Afghanistan annually. Russia's most important goal is the liquidation of global drug crimes at the highest levels. Despite its focus on the issue, Russia can't seem to stop the flow of cheap heroin across its borders from the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. According to Yuri Krupnov, director of the Institute for Demography, Migration and Regional Development in Moscow, "Heroin defiles and corrupts everything. It is such a powerful geo-economic, geo-political force, with anonymous authors, that it is impossible to confront it." Japhet Weeks, "Video: Russia's Afghan addiction", *PRI*, July 25, 2011. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2011-07-25/video-russias-afghan-addiction> (Accessed on July 18, 2017).

^xDue to threat faced from Chechnya and North Caucasus for decades, Russia fears the rise of Islamic radicalism and its influence within the country and in its neighbourhood creating challenges for the region. Russian officials' claim that rebels in Chechnya have close links with al-Qaida and the Taliban. Russia fears that the Chechen militants were being sent for training in the Afghan camps. The 1999 invasion of Chechnya by Russia has aggravated the extremist problem. With the withdrawal of the NATO-led troops, the borders of Afghanistan will become porous for the Islamic radicals. Tatarstan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are the other Islamic fundamentalist threats facing Russia from Central Asia. In addition to this, is the rise of the Daesh and Russia's home-returned terrorists who fought alongside the Daesh in Syria, thereby increasing Russia's fears.

^{xia}Ivan Safranchuk Keynote Speech at the Tirialogue Club International”, *Central Asia Trialogue club*, May 10, 2016. <http://pircenter.org/en/news/6828-ivan-safranchuk-gave-a-keynote-speech-at-the-trialogue-club-international> (Accessed on July 19, 2017).

^{xii}In February 2016, Afghan officials and Taliban members met in Qatar to discuss the Afghanistan challenge. Though the meeting was reportedly described as "positive" by both sides, they failed to agree on the Taliban officially entering the talks. According to the official, the sides also failed to agree on the formal details of the talks. "Afghanistan, Taliban Discuss Possible Resumption of Peace Talks—Reports", *Sputnik*, March 6, 2016. <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201603061035848870-afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks/> (Accessed on October 20, 2017). The head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's department responsible for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov said that the escalation of the Afghan conflict could be inevitable due to the Taliban's refusal to resume peace talks with the government. According to the diplomat, the decision of the Taliban Islamic movement was expected as they demand the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan, the lifting of sanctions and the release of all Taliban members from prison. "Taliban's Refusal to Renew Talks with Afghan Govt will Escalate the Conflict", *Sputnik*, March 9, 2016. <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201603091036011440-Taliban-refusal-renew-talks-afghanistan-government-escalate-conflict/> (Accessed on October 20, 2017).

^{xiii} "Russia-Taliban ties worry Afghan, US officials", *Dawn*, December 9, 2016. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1301365/russia-taliban-ties-worry-afghan-us-officials> (Accessed on October 21, 2017).

^{xiv}"Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 27, 2017", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, April 27, 2017. http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/2739385 (Accessed on October 20, 2017).

^{xv}"Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 7, 2016", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, December 7, 2017. http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/2551594 (Accessed on October 20, 2017).

^{xvi}Omar Nessar, "Zamir Kabulov: One should go to Afghanistan open-heartedly", *Afghanistan. Ru*, May 29, 2011. <http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/243.html> (Accessed on October 20, 2017).

^{xvii}"QCG Fails To Draw Taliban to Peace Table: Analysts", *Tolo News*, May 10, 2016. <http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/qcg-fails-draw-taliban-peace-table-analysts> (Accessed on October 23, 2017). A date for the next QCG meeting has not however been set, but Afghans in general want government to ask the U.S and China to use their influence on Pakistan to stop supporting the militant group. *Ibid*.

^{xviii}The Taliban have said they would not rule out attending Russian-organized peace talks. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Stars and Stripes that representatives may attend "if the agenda was really about solving Afghanistan's problems." "Russia hosts Afghan conference to reassert Central Asia role", *Eurasian News (EAN)*, February 15, 2017. <http://eurasianews.info/en/important/russia-hosts-afghan-conference-to-reassert-central-asia-role.html> (Accessed on October 24, 2017).

^{xix}Moscow hosted similar consultations in December between diplomats from Russia, Pakistan, and China to discuss the start of a national reconciliation process. The format was expanded in mid-February to involve Afghanistan, Iran, and India. "Russia Hosts Afghanistan Meeting Boycotted By Washington", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 14, 2017. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-hosts-afghan-meeting-us-boycotts/28431362.html> (Accessed on July 18, 2017).

^{xx}"Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, December 27, 2016", *The Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, December 27, 2016. http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/2581141 (Accessed on October 31, 2017).

^{xxi}The US boycotted the meeting. The acting U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said on the eve of the talks that the purpose "seemed to be a unilateral Russian attempt to assert influence in the region". *Ibid*.

^{xxii} Faridullah Hussainkhail, "Russia Denies Allegations That It Is Funding The Taliban", *Tolo News*, May 24, 2017.

<http://www.tolonews.com/node/45866> (Accessed on July 18, 2017).

^{xxiii} S. Sadia Kazmi, "The many facets of International Afghan Peace Conference in Moscow", *Foreign Policy News*, April 29, 2017. <http://foreignpolicynews.org/2017/04/29/many-facets-international-afghan-peace-conference-moscow/> (Accessed on July 18, 2017).

^{xxiv} For an example, countries talk about containing terrorism however, it has been seen that sometimes addressing the common challenge also becomes a herculean task among countries because of their perspective of seeing the issue.

^{xxv} Sharif Amiri, "Kabul To Send 'Clear Message' To Taliban At Moscow Talks", *Tolo News*, April 12, 2017.

<http://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/kabul-send-%E2%80%99clear-message%E2%80%99-taliban-moscow-talks> (Accessed on July 18, 2017).

^{xxvi} Faridullah Hussainkhail, "Russia Denies Allegations That It Is Funding The Taliban", *Tolo News*, May 24, 2017.

<http://www.tolonews.com/node/45866> (Accessed on July 18, 2017).

^{xxvii} Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Taliban Declines to Support Moscow-Backed Peace Talks", *VOA News*, April 13, 2017.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-declines-to-support-moscow-backed-peace-talks/3808505.html> (Accessed on July 18, 2017).

^{xxviii} "Interview to Mir broadcasting company", *President of Russia*, April 12, 2017.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54271> (Accessed on July 19, 2017).

^{xxix} Kabul reacts on Pakistan-China-Russia summit on Afghanistan, *Khaama Press*, December 27, 2017,

available at <http://www.khaama.com/kabul-reacts-on-pakistan-china-russia-summit-on-afghanistan-02562>

^{xxx} Ibid.

^{xxxi} " Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, December 27, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/258141

^{xxxii} Omar Nessar, "Zamir Kabulov: One should go to Afghanistan open-heartedly", *Afghanistan. Ru*, May 29, 2011. <http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/243.html> (Accessed on October 20, 2017).

^{xxxiii} "Putin: No need to distinguish between 'moderate' & other terrorists", *RT*, October 23, 2015.

<https://www.rt.com/news/319405-putin-valdai-discussion-club/> (Accessed on July 19, 2017).

^{xxxiv} ISIS announced its existence in Afghanistan on January 26, 2015. It named the former Pakistani Taliban chief for Orakzai, Hafiz Saeed Khan, as head of ISIS's "Khorasan Province," a historic name for a region that encompassed Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asian countries. In August 2015 called the "ISIS rumour" in Afghanistan a pretext by the US government and the CIA to invade Afghanistan. Fatemeh Aman, "Peace with Taliban Could Stem ISIS Growth in Afghanistan", *Middle East Institute*, March 2, 2016. <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/peace-taliban-could-stem-isis-growth-afghanistan> (Accessed on July 19, 2017).

^{xxxv} Russia maintains that as far as the Taliban is concerned, "they have to respect the internationally agreed red lines, give up terrorism and violence, sever all ties with Al Qaeda, agree to follow democratic norms and not do anything which will erode the gains of the last 15 years." "India distances itself from Russia's Taliban comment", *Economic Times*, December 15, 2016. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-distances-itself-from-russias-taliban-comment/articleshow/56006495.cms> (Accessed on July 17,

2017).

^{xxxvi} Ibid.

^{xxxvii} Howard Amos, "Karzai Hails Deepening Russian-Afghan Ties", *The Moscow Times*, June 25, 2015.

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/karzai-hails-deepening-russian-afghan-ties-47699> (Accessed on July 19, 2017).

^{xxxviii} A large number of Central Asian militants - Uzbeks, Chechens, Tajiks and Kazakhs - fought alongside the Taliban during the insurgents' brief capture of the northern Afghan city of Kunduz. Gabriel Dominguez, "Why Central Asia is increasingly worried about Afghanistan", *DW*, November 4, 2015.

<http://www.dw.com/en/why-central-asia-is-increasingly-worried-about-afghanistan/a-18826223> (Accessed on August 8, 2017).

^{xxxix}Amin Tarzi, "Iran, Russia, and the Taliban: Reassessing the Future of the Afghan State", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, June 14, 2017. <http://www.fpri.org/article/2017/06/iran-russia-taliban-reassessing-future-afghan-state/> (Accessed on August 8, 2017).

^{xl}Kunduz province in northern Afghanistan has always been a major gateway to Central Asia and a merge point for different extremist groups. Aman, "Peace with Taliban Could Stem ISIS Growth in Afghanistan", *Middle East Institute*, op.cit.

^{xli}Safranchuk Keynote Speech at the Tirialogue Club International", *Central Asia Trialogue club*, op.cit.

^{xlii}Markets in Khorugh/Khorog and Ishkashim near Tajikistan are shut down. Only the one in Ruzvat, Darvaz District, continues to function. Nadin Bahram, "Taliban threat forces closure of 2 Tajik border markets", *Caravanserai*, November 3, 2017. http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2016/11/03/feature-01 (Accessed on October 24, 2017).

^{xliii}Zebak lies 35km south of Ishkashim District in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO). While Qala-e-Zal borders a nature preserve in Khatlon Province, Tajikistan. Nadin Bahrom, "Taliban presence at Tajik border alarms Dushanbe", *Caravanserai*, May 11, 2017. http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/05/11/feature-01 (Accessed on October 24, 2017).

^{xliv}It was taken back by the Afghan officials.

^{xlv}Provincial officials and military commanders in Badakhshan, Takhar, and Kunduz have blamed security setbacks on Russia supplying local Taliban units with arms. Afghan Channel 1 TV reported on February 28 that Russia was supplying arms to the Taliban units in Kunduz's Qala-e Zal, Iman Sahib, and Dasht-e Archi districts. Bruce Pannier, "Central Asia's Anxious Watch On The Afghan Border", *Gandhara Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 22, 2017. <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-central-asia/28383820.html> (Accessed on October 24, 2017).

^{xlvi}Whoever controls Kunduz, a vast, rich agricultural region, controls the roads to northeastern Afghanistan as well as smuggling and trade routes into neighboring Tajikistan and the rest of Central Asia. Sudarsan Raghavan, "Taliban has a major northern Afghan city within its grasp for the first time since 2001", *The Washington Post*, June 22, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-has-a-major-afghan-city-within-its-grasp-for-the-first-time-since-2001/2015/06/22/b60741b0-18dd-11e5-93b7-5eddc056ad8a_story.html?utm_term=.55a8115443b4 (Accessed on October 30, 2017).

^{xlvii}Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Captures 2 Districts in Central Afghanistan", *VOA*, July 23, 2017.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-afghan-district-headquarters/3955444.html> (Accessed on October 27, 2017).

^{xlviii}"Quarterly Report to the United States Congress", *SIGAR*, October 2017, pg.102.

<https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-10-30qr.pdf> (Accessed on November 10, 2017).

^{xlix}Sulaiman, "Central Asia watches as Taliban, ISIS clash over money, territory in Afghanistan", *Caravanserai*, May 26, 2017. http://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2017/05/26/feature-02 (Accessed on October 27, 2017).

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^{li}Jan Mohammad, "Could IMU Chief's Death Curb Rebel Force in Afghanistan?" *IWPR*, May 10, 2009.

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^{lii}"Russia: We don't support Taliban, but they assist ISIS", *Middleeast Press*, May 25, 2017.

<http://middleeastpress.com/english/russia-we-dont-support-taliban-but-they-assist-isis/> (Accessed on November 13, 2017).

^{liii}"Afghanistan: Army fighting with ISIS in 'Uzbek' areas bordering with Turkmenistan", *Ferghana*, June 22, 2017. <http://enews.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=3383&mode=snews> (Accessed on October 30, 2017).

^{liv}"IMU recruiting for Daesh in Sar-e-Pul", *Heart of Asia*, February 5, 2017.

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^{lv}"Taliban Captures Afghan District On Tajik Border", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, October 28, 2015.

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^{lvi}Pannier, "Central Asia's Anxious Watch On The Afghan Border", *Gandhara Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, op.cit.

^{lvii}“Daesh vs. Taliban: Afghanistan Between Devil and Deep Blue Sea”, *Sputnik*, December 29, 2015. <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201512291032437973-daesh-taliban-afghanistan/> (Accessed on October 31, 2017).

^{lviii}“Russia-Taliban ties worry Afghan, US officials”, *Dawn*, December 9, 2016. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1301365/russia-taliban-ties-worry-afghan-us-officials> (Accessed on October 31, 2017).

^{lix}The US to stop Soviet Union made the case that if the country’s actions were not halted then occupation over Afghanistan would be a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world’s oil supplies. “Jimmy Carter’s Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan”, *The American Presidency Project*, January 4, 1980. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32911> (Accessed on July 19, 2017).

^{lx}Iran has come a long way reshaping its policy towards Afghanistan ever since the killing of Iranian diplomats by Taliban at Mazar-e- Sharif in September 1998. During the Bonn conference in late 2001, Iran contributed significantly to break a stalemate over the composition of Afghanistan’s first post-Taliban government. Reasons for Iran’s willingness to work with Taliban are because of the porous border, presence of Taliban in the bordering provinces of Afghanistan can work as a barrier and prevent the Daesh spill over into Iran. Tehran, too like Russia and Central Asian countries, faces the threat of drug trafficking. Though initially, Iran too supported the anti-Taliban operation by the US-led forces, but the long stay of the US is seen as a threat to Iran’s national interests.