



Russia's re-Entry into the Afghan Arena – A Discussion Paper

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Russia's recent engagement with the main stakeholders in Afghanistan – the Ghani administration and the Taliban – and regional and global powers active in the country, reflects both continuity and change in its policy towards Kabul. The Kremlin has been trying to play a more prominent role in Afghanistan and the 'Moscow format' talks has prepared a framework for its entry into a crowded political arena to resolve a long-festering crisis. It may be said that the 9 November 2018 meeting was a move for a regionally coordinated initiative for resolving the Afghan imbroglio with a major role for Russia. The subsequent meeting with Afghan stakeholders on 5-6 February 2019 underlines Russian determination that it remains involved in the current flux around Afghanistan.

Moscow's current activism is linked to recent shifts in global and regional dynamics. Following USSR's break-up, an internally-focused Russia did not aspire to be a player within Afghanistan although it saw Taliban regime as against its interests and played an important role in creating and assisting the Northern Alliance. After the 9/11 attacks Russia also sought to engage itself with a framework of cooperation created by the West in the name of "the Global War against Terrorism." However, US insistence on denying Moscow a major role plus on account of its own self-absorption, Russian positions were on the whole muted.

The expansion of NATO towards Russian borders, the colour revolutions in former Soviet republics, Russia's assertion under President Putin, and at the same time a relative weakening of Western financial clout further corroded the possibility of wider cooperation between Russia and the trans-Atlantic powers. Russia and the West continue to fundamentally differ on Ukraine and Syria.

For Moscow the location of Afghanistan in its regional security is central: an unstable Afghanistan can create instability in Central Asia, which in turn can affect the Caucasus and other parts of Russia. Drug trafficking is also a serious concern. Further, Moscow has repeatedly raised

concerns over infiltration of *Daesh* in Afghanistan and considered this as the latest dangerous entry in the existing cocktail of terrorists in the country.

Moscow has signed long-term military base leases with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia was also reported to have played a role in getting the American military base in Kyrgyzstan closed in 2017. Seemingly, Russia is trying to avoid in Central Asia the re-creation of an arena of contestation with the West as exists on its Western border with Eastern Europe. Stabilizing Afghanistan and reduction of rivalries in the region will enable it to focus more sharply on emerging theatres in Asia-Pacific, the Far East and the Northern Sea Route.

Inevitably, Russia also senses as others do the increasing war weariness in the US and desire in its political class to end the country's longest military engagement. This, alongside the absence of a clear political direction internally within Afghanistan, the incremental gains having notched up by the Taliban, has led to the intensification of Russian efforts in Afghanistan on several fronts.

Bilaterally, Russia has started engaging Pakistan more frequently. In a wider context, the 'Moscow format' meeting of November'18 and the meeting of Afghan stakeholders in February this year create a regional and bilateral platform respectively in which Russia is visible as a major player. Russia also revitalized regional mechanisms with a bearing on to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) had established a Contact Group on Afghanistan in 2005. Afghanistan is an associate member of the Organization. Economically and politically SCO has the potential to contribute in the development and peace processes in Afghanistan.

In conclusion, it can be asked what are Russia's interests given its keenness to politically address the Afghan problem. It can be stated that the latest set of initiatives are aimed at countering instability which can infect Central Asia and other areas of great concern to Russia. Secondly, the US withdrawal amidst war exhaustion enables Russia to re-emerge as a major factor in a region where it has traditionally been important. Finally, Russian involvement at a moment of flux in Afghanistan enables it to have an understanding with the Taliban that it would not in the future permit Russian interest to be harmed from territory it controls.

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