



## ISSUE BRIEF

INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES ISLAMABAD

Web: [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)

Phone: +92-920-4423, 24

Fax: +92-920-4658

### THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS AND THE ROLE OF MOSCOW

By  
**Amina Khan**  
*Senior Research Fellow*

Edited by  
**Najam Rafique**

February 26, 2019

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do  
not represent those of ISSI)*



Even as the recent round of peace talks on Afghanistan continue between the Afghan Taliban and the US, there is a growing realization within and amongst Afghanistan's immediate neighbors (Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, and the Central Asian nations) that the region can no longer solely depend on the international community, and that it is time for them to take ownership of the region and fend for themselves by overcoming their differences, build positive relations and a common vision for the region, and more so, for Afghanistan.

While Pakistan, Iran, China and the Central Asian states have already been playing an instrumental role in the Afghan peace process through several track two initiatives, more recently, Moscow too has become active, as one has seen in the Moscow Format talks in November 2018, as well as recent intra Afghan talks in Moscow in February 2019.

Of all the countries, no one expected Russia to bring the Taliban and leading Afghan political figures on the same table to negotiate about the future of Afghanistan. While more than 50 delegates participated in the meeting in February 2019, the level of participation from the Afghans was surprisingly important. Amongst the prominent were; former president Hamid Karzai, former vice president Yunus Qanuni, former interior minister, Hanif Atmar, ex governor Atta Muhammad Noor, Latif Pedram, Ismail Khan, Hikmat Karzai, Dr Omar Zakiwal, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, Mohammad Mohaqiq, (deputy to chief executive Abdullah Abdullah), former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, Maulvi Abdul Salam Zaeef, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkel, Hakim Mujahed, Mawlawi Qalamuddin and

Wahid Muzhda. Two women parliamentarians also participated, including Raihana Azad and Fowzia Kuif.<sup>1</sup>

The talks in Moscow, however, did not include members from the Afghan government, who vehemently opposed the meeting and questioned the authority and legitimacy of those that participated.<sup>2</sup>

While a number of meetings have taken place in the recent past on the peace process, the ones in Moscow were historic and unparalleled because they were the first official intra Afghan dialogue, stimulating optimism by bringing a different and much needed dimension to the Afghan peace process. Although Moscow denied organizing the meeting, which was being hosted by a Moscow-based organization of Afghan diaspora leaders, the fact that the Taliban, for the first time, openly and publically participated with other Afghans in direct talks and brought the group's view point to the forefront is a breakthrough in itself. Influential Afghan figures including some contesting presidential elections, along with serving and former advisors to President Ghani openly exchanged views with the Taliban and discussed what a future political framework could be agreed upon.

Interestingly, while President Ghani has opposed the notion of an 'interim' set up, which the Taliban and the US have been deliberating upon, majority of the political figures in Moscow supported the idea of an interim set up, which according to them would pave the way for a transparent election.<sup>3</sup> Despite claims by Kabul that the Taliban are isolated, the meeting clearly showed that the group has been reaching out to different political figures and factions and is making alliances for any future political set up - this was also evident from the fact that those that took part validated the Taliban's stance on a number of issues such as US troop withdrawal, an interim set up, changes to the current Afghan constitution and future elections.<sup>4</sup> Most of the political figures that took part in the meeting have expressed their desire to contest the upcoming presidential elections, as well as declared their political allegiances, hence it appears that the dialogue was also used as a platform to explore and fortify future political alliances.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/tahirqadiry/status/1092074173751529472/photo/2>

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Carroll, "Afghan government furious as Russia invites Taliban", *Independent*, February 4, 2019 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/taliban-moscow-russia-intra-afghan-talks-ghani-karzai-atmar-a8762716.html>

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Ruttig, "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed": First steps in Afghan peace negotiations, AAN, February 4, 2019, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/nothing-is-agreed-until-everything-is-agreed-first-steps-in-afghan-peace-negotiations/>

<sup>4</sup> Syed Zabiullah Langari, "Joint Declaration Issued After Moscow Talks," *Tolo News*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/joint-declaration-issued-after-moscow-talks>

Moreover, there was consensus on a number of issues that is being considered as a blue print for the future Afghan state which was reflected in the joint statement released by the participants at the end of the Moscow Talks. All the parties agreed on the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, asking all countries to avoid interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs, providing assurance to the international community that Afghanistan will not be used against any other nation, protection of social, economic, political and educational rights of the Afghan women in line with Islamic principles, protection of political and social rights of the entire people of Afghanistan and protection of freedom of speech in line with Islamic principles, and undertaking efforts for attracting international assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan's infrastructure.<sup>5</sup>

The Taliban group said that they (unlike the past) did not want a monopoly of power, as acquiring the whole country by force will not help as it will not bring peace to the country, the group did not want a complete 'military' victory but wanted to find a solution through peaceful means and dialogue, with the aim that once foreign forces withdraw there should be no intra Afghan conflict and longer term peace indicating that they may be open to a power sharing set up in the future.<sup>6</sup>

While the Taliban continue to emphasize on the withdrawal of US forces, at the same time the group has stated that the Taliban would like to have friendly ties with the US and would want the US to come back and help build the country through reconstruction and development - a clear departure from their previous views.<sup>7</sup> The group further stated that the future Afghan constitution must be based on "principles of Islamic religion, national interests, historical achievements and social justice, Afghan nationalism, committed to human dignity, national values and human rights, and could guarantee territorial integrity of the country and all rights of all the citizens. The draft of such constitution should be prepared by Afghan scholars and intellectuals in an atmosphere of freedom."<sup>8</sup> Considering the fact that the Taliban would never talk about concepts such as human rights, Afghan nationalism, rights of all the citizens including women, is certainly indicative of a growing change within the group. During the interactions, two female participants including Fawzia Koofi, an Afghan Member of Parliament, openly questioned the Taliban about the stance regarding women, to which the Taliban responded by saying that all those rights that are given to women in Islam and within Afghani culture would be granted to them<sup>9</sup>, as the Taliban considers woman as the builders of a

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Secunder Kermani and Sami Yousafzai, "Taliban 'not seeking to seize all of Afghanistan'," *BBC*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47139908>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Complete transcript of speech delivered by delegation of Islamic Emirate in Moscow Conference," February 5, 2019, <http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=41268>

<sup>9</sup> Secunder Kermani and Sami Yousafzai, "Taliban 'not seeking to seize all of Afghanistan'," *BBC*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47139908>

Muslim society and is committed to all rights of women that have been given to them by Islam. Islam has given women all fundamental rights, such as business and ownership, inheritance, education, work, choosing one's husband, security, health, and right to good life.<sup>10</sup> While there is no doubt that there is a fair amount of doubt and suspicion when it comes to the pledges of the Taliban, but the fact that the group is making a conscious effort to address such issues warrants recognition.

Despite the positive developments in Moscow, the gathering has further added to Kabul's concerns of being left out of the peace process, as well as raising questions about the legitimacy of President Ghani's government. Ghani on the other hand has not only criticized but openly questioned the authority of those Afghan's that took part in the dialogue and has said that without Kabul's participation there can be no peace deal. In fact, President Ghani deliberately gave a public interview on the first day of the Moscow talks, referring to the talks as 'unsanctioned' and having no executive authority.<sup>11</sup> The fact that certain influential politicians such as Hanif Atmar, who have fallen out with President Ghani and are opposing him in the upcoming elections took part in the talks has further highlighted the national divide in Afghanistan and the urgent need for national consensus and reintegration. Many of those that attended oppose the Ghani regime and their participation is seen by Kabul as a clear sign that they are working to undermine the current government's legitimacy. Within hours of the meeting, a vicious blame game had begun between those attending the talks and the Afghan government highlighting that the ethnic and political divide is one of the biggest obstacles to achieving peace in Afghanistan.

Also, what makes this initiative significant is the new role Russia is assuming for itself in a country where many still look upon her with suspicion and even contempt. Evolving regional dynamics and growing concerns over the presence of Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) appear to be behind Moscow's growing interest. As a result, Moscow has altered its policy by not only engaging and cooperating with regional countries to counter the ISKP, but also with different Afghan figures, as well as the Taliban. Moreover, it is not only the Taliban that appear to be validating Moscow's reassertion, Afghan political figures also realize the growing role of Russia and their participation in the talks is a clear example of this. Hence, Russia has done what the US has not been able to do - bring the Taliban to the forefront and hold the first intra-Afghan dialogue between the Taliban and prominent Afghan figures. While the Moscow dialogue has clearly added impetus to the peace process, by bringing in the new dimension of intra-Afghan talks, a lot still depends on the upcoming Doha talks and how events will unfold. Despite the recent positive developments, there are a

---

<sup>10</sup> "Complete transcript of speech delivered by delegation of Islamic Emirate in Moscow Conference," February 5, 2019, <http://alemarahenglish.com/?p=41268>

<sup>11</sup> "Exclusive Interview With President Ghani On Afghan Peace," *Tolo News*, February 5, 2019, <https://www.tolonews.com/must-see-videos/exclusive-interview-president-ghani-afghan-peace>

number of complexities and spoilers involved in the peace process, starting from elements within the Kabul and the Taliban who oppose talks, to the Taliban's opposition to engage with the Ghani government.

Another major issue that is causing friction, particularly in Kabul is the multiplicity of process and lack of coordination. While initiatives are welcome, at the end of the day, there is only one path to attaining peace and stability in Afghanistan which is through Kabul between the two principle stakeholders, namely the Afghan government and Taliban. There can be no peace deal without the inclusion and support of the Afghan government. Multiple processes and lack of coordination, with little clarity of the authority of one process over the other is further complicating the already complex state of affairs in Afghanistan and is at the same time undermining the position of President Ghani which has been evident from the dialogues in Qatar as well as Moscow. Although the Taliban have stated that they would be open to talks with the Afghan government after reaching an agreement with the US on the schedule for withdrawing all foreign troops from Afghanistan,<sup>12</sup> the Taliban should show some flexibility in this regard and not consider engaging with Kabul as a sign of weakness or surrender, but rather furthering their cause by engaging with a recognized government in Afghanistan that enjoys the peoples support.

At this critical juncture, it is essential that all the stakeholders continue to engage in dialogue and as the only solution to end the turmoil in Afghanistan.

---

<sup>12</sup> "REFEED: Interview with Head of Taliban delegation following Afghanistan peace talks \*EXCLUSIVE\*," *Ruptly*, November 9, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgceUdD\\_S20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgceUdD_S20)