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Issue Brief

Afghanistan: US-Russia cooperation necessary but nearly impossible

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At least 20 Afghan policemen were killed in Taliban ambushes in south central Afghanistan, officials said on May 21, 2017. The latest in a string of insurgent attacks that come as the NATO-led military mission considers sending thousands of additional troops to the war-torn nation.¹ Meanwhile, a German aid worker and an Afghan guard were killed and a Finnish woman kidnapped as armed men stormed an international guesthouse in central Kabul.²

The future prospects for Afghanistan remain bleak as the state is becoming increasingly fragile mainly due to the increasing internal divide among different ruling factions and the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban. The US-Russian cooperation on this issue is imperative, but it seems highly unlikely at the moment. Russia, China and Pakistan are making regional efforts to establish peace and stability in the war-torn country, but these efforts are undermined by the constant negative Indian involvement in the country, trying to sabotage all efforts done to achieve tranquillity in Afghanistan and the over-reliance of the Afghan government on the United States of America.

The United States and the ISAF forces invested heavily to train the Afghan National Army (ANA) but the Afghan state and the ANA are still incapable of fighting against the Taliban forces and are even inept of surviving on their own without the US assistance. The ANA did manage to retake a few cities from Taliban control, but it has failed miserably in preventing the Taliban from taking large swaths of lands in the country-side.³

If this trend of Afghan land falling into the hands of the Taliban continues, the cities will eventually find themselves isolated and the Afghan state is bound to collapse. In this scenario, it is very difficult to picture Afghanistan as an arena of cooperation between US and Russia. On one hand, Russia was a historical enemy of the Taliban and US was an ally, but until recently the tables have turned. Russia now wants to talk to the



¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-idUSKBN18H085>

² <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/twenty-policemen-dozens-taliban-killed-shah-joi-170521075150681.html>

³ <http://www.businessinsider.com/taliban-map-afghanistan-2017-3>

⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/08/afghanistan-controls-160823083528213.html>

Taliban to strike a long-term deal in case the current state collapses.

The US tried its level best to keep Russia out of Afghanistan for as long as it could, but since the US mission in Afghanistan is in trouble and there has been a gradual increase in Russian stakes in Afghanistan, it is no longer possible for America to keep Russia out of the equation anymore, along with other parties who want a piece of the pie as well, for example China and Iran. Moreover, America also feels the need to share the burden of Afghanistan with other stakeholders as NATO countries, which helped America in Afghanistan after 9/11 are absolutely opposed to re-entering Afghanistan militarily. If America cannot get its NATO allies to enter Afghanistan, it can definitely not convince Russia to do so without wider concessions in other areas.

A possibility of cooperation between US and Russia did appear after Trump took over as President of the US, but the US establishment have dedicated itself to sabotage any sort of reconciliation between the two countries, partly in order to wreck President Trump and partly due to its pathological dislike for Russia.⁵ Without a wider agreement, it seems impossible to reach any viable agreement on cooperation on Afghanistan between the US and Russia.

The panacea lies in a regional agreement on Afghanistan before peace inside the country could be achieved. The US-Russia relations are going through a stalemate at the moment and both the countries reaching any agreement on cooperation regarding Afghanistan and other areas seem impossible for the time being. However, in the longer run, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) seems to be a good platform to reach an agreement on Afghanistan. The inclusion of Pakistan and India in the SCO could help stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. Different links within the SCO such as China-Pakistan link, China-Russia link, Russia-India link could be seen as the most hopeful prospects for any regional agreement on the matter.

It is however unsure regarding things moving towards any betterment for as long as the current Afghan government, backed by the US is in power. The current government is extremely weak, fragile and extensively divided. It is unable to make any good peace offer to the Taliban. The Taliban also seem reluctant to make any deals with the government since there is a huge trust deficit between them and the government.

⁵ http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/afghanistan-no-way-forward/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_campaign=19&utm_medium=email

Another hindrance to the peace settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban is the inability of the Afghan government parties to agree on the terms of settlement. This leaves barely any room for outside countries to do anything.

Afghanistan is one hundred percent dependent on foreign aid to survive. Majority of that aid comes from the US. Now the question arises, till how long will the US bear this burden? With the American patience running out, trouble at home, growing prowess of Russia and China in the region combined with the re-emergence of Taliban and the chaos in the Middle East, it seems highly unlikely that the US will be able to bear this burden for long.

The US will have to share the responsibility with other stakeholders such as Russia and China, keeping in view countries like Pakistan that is its best shot at restoring any order in the prevailing anarchy in Afghanistan. US and Russia have to put their past differences aside, pragmatically analyse the current challenges they are facing and find areas of converging interests. With the war in Syria, both US and Russia cannot afford another conflict zone opening up in Afghanistan which will be detrimental to both of their national interests and the interests of neighbouring states of Afghanistan.

The US desperately needs a foothold in South Asia to assert its significance in the region and Russia as a re-emerging power needs to establish its prowess in the region too. ISIS presence in Afghanistan poses an existential threat not just to Afghanistan and neighbouring states, but to international peace and security. US and Russia cannot afford the re-emergence of ISIS in another theatre and relive Syria and Iraq all over again. It is high time for both the powers to objectively view the situation in Afghanistan and not as a zero-sum game. Russia should strive for the establishment of a regional agreement on Afghanistan and the US, instead of hampering the peace processes should aid and compliment any efforts that are being made to bring peace and order in the country.