



THE MOSCOW FORMAT: SEARCHING FOR PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN - YET AGAIN

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do
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Will wonders never cease? Of all countries, who would have expected Russia to bring the Taliban on to the negotiating table. On November 9, 2018, in what is known as the Moscow Format, Russia hosted representatives from the Taliban's political office, headed by Sher Abbas Stanakzai,¹ members of the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC), as well as representatives from Pakistan, China, Iran, India, and the Central Asian States .

Although members of the Afghan government did not participate, the fact that members of the HPC took part, along with President Ghani's uncle, Abdul Qayoum Kochai, Afghanistan's ambassador to Russia, indicates the tacit approval of Kabul for the interaction. Similarly, the US took part as an observer.

This was the second round of the Moscow Format. The first round of the Format took place on April 14, 2017, in which representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, China, India and the Central Asian States took part. Discussions at the first round revolved around the Afghan peace process.² The US did not attend the talks. Prior to the formation of the Moscow Format, Russia had hosted six-party talks on Afghanistan, with representatives from Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Iran, and

¹ Taliban representatives of the political office included, Sher Abbas Stanekzai Shahab ud Din Dilawar, Qari Deen Muhammad, Muhammad Zahid Ahmadzai and Suhail Shaheen.

² "International Afghanistan Peace Conference starts in Moscow," *Express Tribune*, April 14, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1383473/international-afghanistan-peace-conference-starts-moscow/>

India in February 2017.³ The Moscow Format was introduced in 2017 on the basis of the six-party mechanism for consultations as part of Russia's informed policy of taking the lead in seeking a solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

Although Russia has hosted several meetings and initiatives focusing on Afghanistan, such as the Russia-China-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan,⁴ the current Moscow Format is unique and unparalleled because it has brought a new sense of optimism by bringing a different and much needed dimension to the Afghan peace process.

Firstly, the fact that the Taliban, for the first time, openly and publically participated in direct talks and brought the group's view point to the forefront is a breakthrough in itself. Considering the fact that the group had always disregarded erstwhile initiatives as illegitimate and ineffective, the Taliban's participation has given credence to Moscow's initiative.

Secondly, from being a group that has shown little inclination to engage in talks, with the exception of direct talks with the US, the Taliban have demonstrated a significant change in their desire to engage with other major actors to find solutions for peace.

Thirdly, while the format was not meant to be for negotiations but rather expressing viewpoints, the Taliban interacted with the HPC, as well as representatives from other regional countries, particularly India. This was the first time that the Taliban and New Delhi shared the same platform which is yet another unprecedented development, considering the fact that the Taliban and India have been antagonistic towards each other. However, there have been some signs of a minor rapprochement in the recent past such as the Taliban acknowledging India's decision to resist US calls for greater involvement in Afghanistan, and their declaration that they “won’t let Afghanistan be used as a base against another country,”⁵ addressing fears that anti-India forces may become more emboldened if the Taliban return to power.

Fourthly, what makes this initiative significant is the role Russia has assumed for the first time since its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1979, in a country where many still consider it an invader and an enemy. More interesting is the fact that the Taliban, who have been traditional enemies of the Russians and in fact fought them as former Mujahidden, appear to have validated Russia's growing role. While Russia and the Taliban may appear to be strange bedfellows, their coming together is

³ See http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2642417

⁴ The Russia-China-Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue held its first meeting in Beijing in April, 2013, followed by a second round on November 20, 2013 in Islamabad and third in Moscow on December 27, 2016. See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1104196.shtml

⁵ Sanjeev Miglani, "Taliban praises India for resisting Afghan entanglement," *Reuters*, June 17, 2012, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-india-reluctant-to-send-troops-to-afghanistan/a-40706506>

evidence of the evolving regional dynamics and the growing concerns over the presence of Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) as a common threat.

Russia, like Afghanistan's neighbours, considers the growing presence of ISKP as a major terrorism challenge. As a result, Moscow has altered its policy by not only engaging and cooperating with regional countries to counter the ISKP, but also with the Taliban. Moscow's vision for the future of Afghanistan now entails recognition of the Taliban as an essential component of the Afghan peace process.⁶ As stated by the Russian Foreign Ministry in this regard, Moscow has increased its cooperation, and is now sharing intelligence with the Afghan Taliban to counter ISKP's influence in the region.⁷ In fact the US has been accusing Moscow of providing weapons to the Taliban.⁸

Complete details of the discussions that took place in Moscow meeting have not been made public.

A Change of Tone

Speaking about the initiative in an interview of the Taliban representatives with *Ruptly* news agency,⁹ Sher Abbas Stanakzai was of the view that the meeting was "a good initiative" and described it as a "success". He expressed the Taliban's gratitude to Russia for inviting the group. Mohammad Sohail Shaeen, another member of the Taliban Doha office said that the group "sincerely" aspired for a peaceful solution and expressed that it was open to participating in any initiative/ meeting focusing on bringing peace to Afghanistan.

Stanakzai further stated that the Taliban struggle was limited to the liberation of Afghanistan as an independent and sovereign state. "From the very beginning, they have been calling for direct talks with the US, and even though it has taken the US more than 17 years to realise this, the Taliban 'welcomes' the US's decision."¹⁰

Also, while the Taliban still rely on warfare to achieve their goals, at the same time there are increasing signs that they are also tilting in favour of a negotiated settlement, as the Taliban said

⁶ Arkady Dubnov, "Moscow courts the Taliban" *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, September 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77244>

⁷ Shaikh Muhammad Bilal, "America's Failure in Afghanistan: What are the Russian Plans?" *Modern Diplomacy*, June 29, 2018, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/06/29/americas-failures-in-afghanistan-what-are-the-russian-plans/>

⁸ "US Accuses Russia of Arming Taliban to Hide Its Own Policy Failures – Moscow," *Sputnik*, March 20, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201803291063033901-us-russia-taliban/>

⁹ "REFEED: Interview with Head of Taliban delegation following Afghanistan peace talks *EXCLUSIVE*," *Ruptly*, November 9, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgceUdD_S20

¹⁰ Ibid.

that wherever there is war, the final decision is always taken on the negotiating table and that is what the group aspired for as the time was right to settle the Afghan issue.¹¹

Apart from stating the demand for a negotiated settlement, initially with the US (which includes the withdrawal of all foreign forces), and at a later stage with Kabul, a previously unseen side of the Taliban was reflected in Moscow. While the term 'demand' was used, at the same time, Abbas Stanakzai also said whenever they have met US officials, they have always "requested" the withdrawal of foreign forces.¹² It is this subtle change of tone which shows the Taliban are willing to adapt to changing circumstances and alter their rigid stances.

In fact, Mohammad Sohail Shaeen even went further to say that while the Taliban wanted the US to withdraw, if the US had any concerns in Afghanistan be it security, the group was willing to address them.¹³ This is a major example of the shift in the Taliban rhetoric, reflecting its increasingly realistic approach. Interestingly, Deputy Chairman of the HPC, Haji Din Mohammad, said that Kabul is willing to negotiate with the Taliban, and if peace was to return to Afghanistan, there would not be any need for the US presence. He said that if peace was achieved with the Taliban, a schedule would be agreed upon for the US withdrawal.¹⁴

Sher Abbas Stanakzai stated that the group's struggle was limited to the liberation of Afghanistan as a free and sovereign state. He was of the view that the Taliban were not against any country, and aspired to have good relations, particularly with its neighbours, as well as the rest of the world including the big powers. The Taliban, he said, has no intention of interfering in other countries and that they would not let Afghanistan's soil be used against any neighbour nor against the West, including America. Similarly, Stanakzai stated that the group will not tolerate any terrorist group like the Daesh and will not let it become a threat or problem for Afghanistan's neighbours.¹⁵ Again, this is a conscious effort on the part of the Taliban to distance themselves from terrorist groups and highlight themselves in a more favourable light regionally, as well as internationally, as a legitimate stakeholder aspiring for a peaceful future.

While the Moscow Format was not intended to achieve a peace settlement, it has played an important role in giving the Taliban a much needed platform to express their views. This in itself is a

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Moscow hosts Afghan peace talks, Taliban attends," *RT*, November 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNifLLLR650&t=133s>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "REFEED: Interview with Head of Taliban delegation following Afghanistan peace talks *EXCLUSIVE*," *Ruptly*, November 9, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgceUdD_S20

significant breakthrough and should not be seen in isolation as the Taliban are an essential part of the peace process.

In the recent past, a number of positive developments have taken place clearly highlighting willingness on all sides to move forward towards some form of a negotiated settlement. The first such major development was the Taliban's open letter to the US, calling for direct talks. This was followed by President Ghani's unprecedented offer for peace talks "without preconditions" made to the group during the second round of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in Kabul on February 28, 2018. This included; recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political group, to hold new elections involving the Taliban, a constitutional review, opening of an office for the Taliban in Kabul, proposed ceasefire, release of Taliban prisoners, removal from the international blacklists, security arrangements and pledges to reintegrate and provide employment to those Taliban willing to join the process.¹⁶

More recent positive developments include the two rounds of Taliban-US talks in Doha, release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, (aka Mullah Baradar) in October 2018,¹⁷ followed by Mullah Abdul Samad Sani by Pakistan,¹⁸ along with the release of five additional Taliban members by the US to join the Taliban's political office in Qatar.¹⁹

Thus, such developments have clearly added impetus to the peace process, and a further sense of optimism for a peaceful future settlement. But whether the Moscow Format will be the harbinger of peace in Afghanistan, is open to question. Despite the recent positive developments, there are a number of complexities and spoilers involved in the peace process, starting from elements within the Taliban opposed to talks, as well as those in Kabul who refuse to acknowledge and engage with the Taliban. At the same time, the growing presence of the ISKP is further exacerbating the already complex state of affairs in Afghanistan. At this critical juncture, it is essential that all the stakeholders continue with the positive momentum, and continue to engage in dialogue as the only solution to end the turmoil in Afghanistan. Hence, it appears that for the first time, all the pieces of

¹⁶ "Ghani Makes Taliban An Offer To Join Peace Process," *TOLOnews*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/ghani-makes-taliban-offer-join-peace-process>

¹⁷ Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar co-founder of the Taliban was detained in 2010 by Pakistan and was subsequently released in October 2018. see Sibte Arif, "Mulla Baradar released from Pak jail," *The News*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/383844-mulla-baradar-released-from-pak-jail>

¹⁸ Hamim Kakar, "Pakistan releases another key Taliban leader Mullah Sani," *Pajhwok*, <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2018/11/12/pakistan-releases-another-key-taliban-leader-mullah-sani>

¹⁹ Mohammed Fazl, Khairullah Khairkhwah, Mullah Norullah Nori, Nabi Omari and Mohamad Nabi were released from Guantanamo in June 2014, in exchange for Bowe Bergdahl. See Saeed Shah, Sami Yousafzai and Craig Nelson " 'Taliban Five,' Once Held at Guantanamo, Join Insurgency's Political Office in Qatar, *WSJ*, October 30, 2018, " <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taliban-five-once-held-at-guantanamo-join-insurgencys-political-office-in-qatar-1540890148>

this complicated jigsaw are now on the same table, the need now is to put them together through utmost care and meticulousness.