



MOSCOW AND THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

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Moscow once again brought the Afghan Taliban and leading Afghan political figures on the same table to negotiate about the future of Afghanistan in what is now known as the intra-Afghan dialogue. This was yet another attempt by Russia to portray itself as a peacemaker in Afghanistan, and attain a clear diplomatic success.

On May 28, 2019, a ceremony was held in Moscow to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Russian-Afghanistan relations, in which the Afghan Taliban and prominent Afghan politicians took part. This was followed by the second intra-Afghan talks between a 14-member Taliban delegation and various Afghan politicians including former President Hamid Karzai, former national security adviser Hanif Atmar, Atta Mohammad Noor, Fawzia Koofi and Dr. Omar Zakhilwal, former Afghan ambassador to Pakistan.¹

Prior to this, during the first intra Afghan dialogue, such a meeting took place in February 2019 between the Afghan Taliban and leading/senior Afghan politicians as well. However, what sets the May 2019 meeting apart is the participation and leadership of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, co-founder of the Taliban and the head of Taliban's political office, instead of Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, a senior member of the Taliban's Doha office, who has led such meetings in the past. In his first public speech since being released from prison by Pakistan in 2018, Baradar stated that, "while the Taliban are committed to peace, the first step is to remove obstacles the obstacle is

¹ "Russia: Taliban spokesperson says 'progress made' at intra-Afghan peace talks," *RUPTLY*, May 30, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQW_2IF_FyY

the occupation of Afghanistan, and that should end,"² - a clear signal towards the group's established demand of foreign forces withdrawal from Afghanistan. Interestingly Baradar's comments regarding US withdrawal were also echoed by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov who in his welcome address said that, "Moscow believes all foreign military forces should be withdrawn from Afghanistan."³

A joint statement was also issued after the meeting, in which both sides agreed to continue talks on, "intra-Afghan talks, ceasefire, the release of prisoners, protection of civilians, foreign troop withdrawal, end of the foreigners interference, perseverance of national sovereignty, and women rights."⁴

While former President Hamid Karzai, termed the discussions as 'positive', and said that, "both sides were leaving happy",⁵ however, Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman for Taliban's Qatar office, while speaking to reporters stated that, "some new issues were discussed, and finalized, others were not which would be discussed in the next meeting."⁶ While no agreement as such was reached at the end of the meeting, certain key points of conflict and four highly inter-connected stumbling blocks for the peace process emerged, these include: US troop withdrawal; an intra-Afghan dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban; Taliban guarantee of abstinence from violence and assurance to not support terrorist organizations; and, a comprehensive ceasefire.

For any meaningful progress, both sides will have to demonstrate flexibility and be willing to accommodate each other's demands. These four issues might seem to go hand in hand, however after two intra-Afghan dialogues in Moscow and six rounds of US-Taliban talks in Doha, both sides - US and Taliban - have yet to agree on a peace plan and are unwilling to compromise on their principle stances. In other words, Taliban's refusal to engage with Kabul and a reduction in violence until the US declares a timeframe for withdrawal, and the US refusal to set a timeframe for a withdrawal until the Taliban commit to a ceasefire, pledge that Afghan soil would not be used to launch terrorist attacks against the US and its allies, a reduction in violence, and an intra-Afghan dialogue with Kabul. Until both sides can figure out a fair compromise between these four inter-connected impediments, the peace process will continue to be stalled as one cannot happen independently, but rather all four must happen simultaneously in some capacity.

² "Taliban Wants Peace: Mullah Baradar," *Tolo News*, May 28, 2019, <https://youtu.be/Fu-wAA1mawQ>,

³ Ayaz Gul, "Taliban, Russia Demand Foreign Troops Leave Afghanistan," *VOA*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-russia-demand-foreign-troops-leave-afghanistan-/4935723.html>

⁴ "Moscow Meeting Wrapped Up With A Joint Statement," *Tolo news*, May 30, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=v69PVYbavkc

⁵ "Russia: Taliban spokesperson says 'progress made' at intra-Afghan peace talks," *RUPTLY*, May 30, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQW_2IF_FyY

⁶ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, although representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban did not engage in talks in Moscow, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reiterated a call for a ceasefire, similar to the one that took place during the first three days of Eid in 2018. While there were hopes that the group would enter into a ceasefire, the Taliban said that the group did not have, "convincing reasons" to accept a ceasefire.⁷ Speaking to reporters in Moscow, Sher Abbas Stanakzai said that, "as long as foreign forces continue to occupy Afghanistan, conduct countless raids on civilians killing scores of people, a ceasefire is not possible. The Taliban do not want a temporary ceasefire for a day or two, but one that is indefinite and lasts forever, however, that can only be possible once all foreign forces withdraw from Afghanistan."⁸

Moreover, the issue of a pledge by the Taliban not to host terrorist groups has, in a way, already been ensured by them wanting to become a political entity. The US might have fair reason to doubt assurances from the Taliban, such as that given by Sher Abbas Stanakzai who 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 neighbors,⁹ but they should have little reason to doubt sound motivation and reasoning that as a political entity, the Taliban will never support or host a foreign terrorist organization that could stand as a threat to their own political hegemony. A case in point is the Daesh/Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which has openly opposed the Taliban and preached an agenda of a global caliphate, as opposed to the Taliban's local struggle. As a result, both groups have been at war and many international stakeholders like China, Pakistan, Russia and the US, welcomed and encouraged the Taliban's fight against the ISKP.¹⁰

Hence, major compromises need to be made - for the US it has to be clear on its position and ensure a timeframe for withdrawal, whilst for the Taliban, they must put an end to their insurgency and agree to some form of a ceasefire. Although the Taliban have said that they do not seek a monopoly of power¹¹ and have been open to the notion of an interim set up,¹² the group's stance on political power remains vague and ambiguous to say the least.

⁷ "Russia: Ceasefire only possible when foreign forces leave Afghanistan – Taliban spokesperson" *RUPTLY*, May 28, 2019, https://ruptly.tv/en/videos/20190528-041?search_key=41f58b2b-3022-48ea-8cfe-528138f3f716

⁸ Ibid.

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 Daniel Brown, "The Taliban Reportedly Just Beat ISIS so Badly That More than 200 Fighters Surrendered to the Afghan Government," *Business Insider*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/taliban-beat-isis-so-badly-200-fighters-surrendered-afghan-government-2018-8>.

¹¹ 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>

Similarly, the Taliban's refusal to engage with Kabul as a 'puppet government' of the US is highly contradictory and does not hold much weight since the group has been openly engaging with the supposed puppet master but not the supposed puppet. Hence, compromises need to be made on all sides, and efforts need to be made towards a durable peace settlement that address the concerns of all stakeholders rather than a hasty peace settlement and withdrawal which is prone to collapse. In this regard, it is imperative that efforts are focused on a credible and sustained ceasefire which needs to be ensured by credible guarantors (possible contenders could be China and Russia), leading to intra-Afghan talks primarily between Kabul and the Taliban, followed by a responsible and measured withdrawal of foreign forces.

Considering the sudden Russian involvement in the Afghan peace process, it is important to note that prospects of peace talks with the Afghan Taliban in previous years have had little to no Russian involvement as Russia did not appear to be a major or relevant stakeholder in the resolution of this conflict. The recent reinsertion of Russia into the Afghan peace process however showcases that the Russian attempts to play the role of peace broker is the manifestation of the Russian ideal that it "is entitled to its seat"¹³ at the international table. This table is one that has historically been dominated by the US, and Russia's pivot towards Afghanistan is its bid to offer itself as a viable alternative to US unilateralism in international politics.

Recent efforts by Russia clearly demonstrates that Moscow is aiming to achieve three main strategic goals via this foreign policy pivot:

- I. Through the Afghan peace process, Moscow wants to curtail US military presence and influence in the region. The Afghan peace process is a great opportunity to call for a complete US military withdrawal, and during the Moscow intra-Afghan dialogue, Russia did exactly that by reiterating US military pull out from Afghanistan.
- II. Russia wants to further position itself on par with the US and its unilateral hegemony in the international community by becoming the main broker in the Afghan peace process. By hosting the intra-Afghan dialogue, Russia is positioning itself to be on diplomatic parity with the US by being viewed as a valid broker of Afghan peace by crucial stakeholders such as the Taliban and the Afghan opposition. This will not only give Russia the important seat at the

¹² 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/>

¹³ Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership* (Princeton University Press., 2014), 263.

negotiation table it desires, but will also encourage the US to engage with Russia on equal footing.

- III. By taking the lead in the Afghan peace process, Russia is demonstrating its global leadership as distinct and more inclusive from the US unilateralism that has led the process before. Even though Russia is allowing the talks to happen in Moscow, the official Russian position has been in denying 'orchestrating' the intra-Afghan dialogue.¹⁴ Instead, Russia has showcased the dialogue as a peace process for Afghanistan led by Afghans rather than a foreign sanctioned effort. Moscow has also vocally praised the efforts by the Afghan diaspora (Council of Afghan Society) for the initiative and has called "on all Afghan sides to start talks as soon as possible involving a broad range of social and political forces."¹⁵ In doing so, Russia is showcasing pragmatism and inclusion.

Russia clearly has the potential to become a pivotal player in guaranteeing a smooth continuation of the Afghan peace process. While Afghanistan cannot afford to continue on without meaningful developments in the peace process, however it remains to be seen whether or not the Afghans will be able to grasp this moment of opportunity from Moscow.

¹⁴ Kathy Gannon and Rahim Faiez, "Taliban to Take Part in 'Intra-Afghan' Talks in Moscow," *The Diplomat*, February 05, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/taliban-to-take-part-in-intra-afghan-talks-in-moscow/>.

¹⁵ "Hosting Taliban Delegates, Russia Calls For Withdrawal Of Foreign Forces From Afghanistan," RFE/RL, May 28, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-envoys-arrive-in-moscow-to-meet-afghan-politicians-tribal-elders/29967224.html>