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Russian Reassertion in Afghanistan: Implications of the Doha Peace Agreement 2020

Introduction

Russia has old stakes in Afghanistan. In the Cold War period, it was the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan's economy and trainer of its military force. Nevertheless, its social and political involvement was not acceptable to the people of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union sent troops to Afghanistan at the request of the Afghan government, but Afghan people who had not accepted foreign occupation of their land resisted the then superpower. The Soviets decade-long involvement ended in a complete withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan. The Soviet's ten-year-long war had been one of the most distressing epochs in modern Russian history. It crippled Soviet economy, and the USSR disintegrated in the following three years. The Russian embassy, one of the most important diplomatic missions in Kabul, was evacuated in 1992 when a fire was set to it during an intensified Afghan civil war. Russia confined its political activities since then to its own internal matters.

Vladimir Putin became Russian president in 2000. After the 9/11 incident, Putin was the first who telephoned to offer condolence to George W. Bush. Russia extended full moral support to the US in the war against terrorism. From 2000 to 2012, Russia grew economically and politically and maintained relations with the Afghan government and the most powerful insurgent group, the Taliban*. In Putin's third term in the presidency, Russia re-emerged in global politics with

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a strong will to compete with America and align with China. When the US declared plans to withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan, Russia reasserted in Afghan politics as a strong regional power. The US combat operation ended in Afghanistan at the end of 2014 amid insurgency and chaos. It was realized that there was no military solution in Afghanistan, and dialogue with the insurgent groups was the only option. With the facilitation of Pakistan and support of the US and China, intra-Afghan peace talks began in 2015, but the lack of sincerity created a deadlock in this phase. At the end of 2016, Moscow confidently entered the Afghan peace process being an old and experienced regional actor, and within two years, for the first time, the state representatives of Afghanistan and Taliban* met under one roof in Moscow

The format of the meeting held in 2018 and the Russian role as a peace broker in the conflict in Afghan was unacceptable for the US and the Afghan government. However, the Russian effort to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan through conducting meetings and peace talks with the Afghan officials and the Taliban* compelled the US to speed up the peace process and sign the peace agreement with the Taliban*.

An overview of Russia-Afghan relations 1989–2001

Russian interest in Afghanistan goes back in the period in history earlier than the Anglo-Russian Great Game in the 19th century. After waiting for two hundred and fifty years, the Soviet Union, former Russia, sent troops to Afghanistan at the end of 1979 to protect the Soviet-backed pro-communist regime in Kabul¹.

The Afghan people resisted Soviet occupation, and the resistant groups were supported by the US, Pakistan, China, Western and Muslim countries. It resulted in a complete withdrawal of the Soviet troops on 15 February 1989. Later that year the “Congress of People’s Deputies” passed a resolution that condemned the war. When the Soviets left Afghanistan, their superpower status was in its terminal phase, thus, Moscow decided to end their involvement in Afghanistan, even in the Muslim world. When the Soviet Union eventually fell in 1991, the newly emerged Central Asian states intentionally left the commonwealth of the post-Soviet Union. However, in the 1990s other fronts emerged for Russia in Chechnya, Tajikistan, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. In these states, the Muslim militant resembled the Afghan *mujahideen* (holy warriors), whom the Soviets had fought in Afghanistan.

Islam had been a fundamental part of Russian politics. Muslims comprise 18% of Russia’s population and reside in the “North Caucasus, Bashkortostan, and Tatarstan”. The Tatars were Russia’s second largest nationality. There were six post-Soviet Muslim states, too, on Russia’s southern border “Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan”².

The Soviet withdrawal did not end the pro-Soviet Najibullah regime that resisted the pressure of the *mujahideen* for more than three years. However, a civil war began due to the failed transition of power. In November 1991, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of one of the mujahideen groups, was called to Moscow.

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The Soviet foreign minister, Boris Pankin, in the meeting, approved of the transfer of state power to a provisional Islamic government³. On 25 December 1991, the Soviet “hammer and sickle flag” was lowered and replaced by the tricolour Russian flag. Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union, leaving Boris Yeltsin as president of the newly independent Russian state⁴. The North of Afghanistan is bounded by states of Central Asia, which Russia sought to keep within its orbit. Yeltsin announced that from 1 January 1992, arms supply would be halted to Kabul. Najibullah⁵ had to resign on 16 April 1992⁶. On 28 August about 14 rebel rockets hit the Russian embassy compound in Kabul, wounding two technicians⁷. Earlier in the same month, two Russians had been killed, and one was wounded. The incidents prompted Moscow to close its mission in Kabul. The embassy remained closed when *mujahideen* took the rein of Kabul, and later — under the rule of the Taliban⁸.

In the post-Najibullah period, Rabbani’s government was considered moderate compared to the other *mujahideen* groups. Russia extended support to his government during 1992–96⁹. Rabbani’s government could not last long owing to the civil war that his group and other *mujahideen* got involved in.

The Taliban* movement was formed in 1994 in rural southern Afghanistan. The Taliban* ousted Ahmed Shah Massoud’s forces and the government of Rabbani, both of whom had been a part of the guerrilla coalition that toppled the Soviet-backed Najibullah’s regime in 1992¹⁰. On 27 September 1996, most of Afghanistan’s territory was under the control of the Taliban*. They formed a parallel regime with Rabbani. Except for only three states, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE), the world community did not recognize the new authorities in Kabul. In the changed circumstances, Russia supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance controlled a few parts of Afghanistan in and around the Panjshir Valley, located northeast of Kabul.

Russia feared the penetration of Islamic extremism into Central Asia, North Caucasus, and other Muslim republics. Nonetheless, Russia was wary about any involvement in Afghanistan apart from materially assisting its anti-Taliban allies in the country’s North. Russia shared significant intelligence related to Afghanistan with the US and consolidated its influence and interests in Central Asia. The strategy was part of a broader effort by Russia and the US to improve their relations following the end of the cold war as well as focus on combating the spread of terrorism and drug trafficking in the region. Russia supplied heavy weapons, training, and logistical support to the northern alliance. The northern alliance served like a buffer between the Taliban* and the Afghan border with the former Soviet republics as Moscow wanted to ensure that Islamic fundamentalism would not spill into the former Soviet republics to the north¹¹.

In 1998, another menace, greater than the Taliban*, entered Afghanistan known as al-Qaeda* (the base or foundation). Al-Qaeda* was declared a terrorist organization and became another security risk for Russia, Central Asia, and Caucasus region. Since the states in the regions formerly belonged to Russia, it aspired to maintain soft dominance there¹². The Taliban* regime was condemned for providing

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refuge to the head of al-Qaeda*. In August of that year, two US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, were bombed. 224 people were killed, including 12 Americans, and more than 4,600 were wounded¹³. With Russian support, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1267 on 5 October 1999. It was the first UNSC Resolution that imposed sanctions on the Taliban* regime. It banned outside flights from Afghanistan by Ariana airlines and froze assets of the Taliban*¹⁴. It all happened when the Taliban* refused to extradite Osama Bin Laden, the head of al-Qaeda*, for the trial to America. Al-Qaeda* was a direct threat to Russia as it provided funds and fighters to Chechnen jihadis against Russia. It further integrated Chechen Muslims in its Afghan operations against the Russian-backed Northern Alliance¹⁵. The Western support of Muslims against communism and supply of weapons and funds to various Afghan insurgent groups during the Soviet-Afghan war resulted in growing Islamic fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism. After the fall of communism, the West stopped backing, funding, and training those groups, but they continued functioning independently under other names in different parts of the world. It was difficult for Russia to control the spread of extremism and terrorism alone. The 9/11 incident provided an opportunity for Moscow to align itself with the world in the war against terrorism.

Russian support for global war against terrorism 2001–2006

The acts of terrorism on 11 September 2001, in the US were alarming for the whole world. The political use of religion to defeat communism in the decade of 1980s became a menace in the following years. The US blamed al-Qaeda*, whose head was living in Afghanistan, for the terrorist attacks. The US demanded the Taliban* should immediately hand over al-Qaeda's* head. The US and Russia found common ground for mutual strategic cooperation. Russia had been engaged in an anti-terrorism war in Chechnya and had shared interests with Americans in Afghanistan. The Taliban* support for Central Asian Muslims was destabilizing Russia's neighbours. The US war against terrorism was also against Russia's potential enemies that were external military threats to the Russian Federation. Russia participated in the US-led anti-terrorism campaign, provided military assistance to the northern alliance, shared regional intelligence, and, most importantly, gave access to military bases in Central Asia¹⁶. The US needed bases in Central Asia to enter land-locked Afghanistan, and Russia allowed the US to use the Soviet-era bases. An important airbase near the border with Afghanistan was in Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan¹⁷. In December 2001, another US airbase was established in Manas, outside of Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek¹⁸, to support coalition operations in Afghanistan. The bases became functional and hundreds of American troops were garrisoned there. Having established in Kyrgyzstan, the US desired to make it permanent, which set a precedent in Central Asia for the first time in history. However, Russia did not interfere in Afghan politics neither contested the US influence over the Hamid Karzai administration.

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When western-backed Karzai was installed as an interim president of Afghanistan in December 2001, Russia came into contact with his government, and some local warlords to remain aware of the political developments. Moscow provided some military assistance to Kabul, offered training to Afghan forces, and sold arms, military equipment, and spare parts.

During the first two years of the war, Russia extended full support to the US in the war against terrorism. In two years, the US decision to send troops to Iraq in 2003 provoked a crisis. In the US, it was considered a part of the global anti-terrorism campaign. However, for many Russians, the attack on Iraq was perceived as an effort by the US to monopolize the world petroleum markets. Russia opposed the US policy against Iraq¹⁹.

On 5 July 2005, an unprecedented statement was issued in an annual summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) comprised of China, Russia, and four Central Asian republics. It called on the US to declare a deadline for the evacuation of its military bases from Central Asia. The US rejected the demand²⁰.

Russian revival in Afghanistan 2007–2010

On 23 February 2007, Russia formally opened an embassy in Kabul. It began building up new relationships with Afghanistan²¹. During a ceremony, the Russian minister laid floral wreaths at the monument to those Russian soldiers who had been killed in a decade long the then Soviet war in the 1980s²². It took Russia fifteen years to officially resume an active policy towards Afghanistan. Russia was concerned about its own security concerns as Afghanistan was geographically adjacent to it. Keenly observing the continuously deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, it decided to strengthen ties with the Afghan government and increase its importance to the Western coalition forces.

In 2008, Russia was one of the world's most rapidly growing economies that paid off its foreign debts and was rebuilding its military from the chaos it fell during the 1990s. Russia was emerging as a more uncomfortable partner for the US. However, in December 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev ratified US President Barack Obama's strategy for Afghanistan²³. The Obama administration realized that the Afghan problem could be resolved only via dialogue. He inclined towards the Taliban* for negotiation and was followed by Hamid Karzai. After being elected second time in August 2009, Karzai announced readiness for reconciliation with the Taliban*.

The first step was the formation of a council of tribal leaders, later known as the "Afghan High Peace Council", to seek peace talks with the Taliban*. In June 2010, the council endorsed a plan towards a significant step of the peace talks²⁴. The tribal council sought moderate members among the Taliban* to persuade them to participate in the peace talks. The objective was to protect a few Taliban* leaders in a foreign state with whom the Afghan officials could begin the reconciliation process by engaging them in the peace talks. On 28 September 2010, the Afghan government announced the members of the High Peace Council²⁵.

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The US and Afghan governments' inclinations towards the peace talks appealed to Russia, who was also flexing muscles to step into Afghan quagmire by taking part in a negotiated solution to the Afghan crisis. Russia desired to re-emerge in Afghan politics as a mediator to remove the previous image of the invader. Moscow's role involved negotiating the intimate and broad-level regional stakeholders, and convening meetings, tracks of negotiations, and formats.

Russian reassertion in Afghanistan 2011-2015

The year 2011 shifted global attention toward the Arab Spring which led to changes in regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Moscow responded calmly, supported the West, and refused to veto the relevant resolutions in the UN Security Council. On 2 May the US Navy seals killed al-Qaeda* head, Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan. The Russian President was among the few world leaders whom Barak Obama informed about the death of Bin Laden before the news was released worldwide²⁶. The first small batch of 650 US soldiers left the northeastern province of Afghanistan on 13 July 2011, which marked the beginning of the phased withdrawal of the foreign troops planned to be completed at the end of 2014²⁷. Russia-US relations remained warm during Medvedev's presidency. However, the harmony did not last long due to the re-election of Putin in 2012.

For the third time, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin became President of Russia, for the next six years. He was ambitious to make the West admit that the territories, which had formerly been under Soviet influence, must be considered areas of Russian responsibility. Putin wanted to enhance the Russian image as a supporter of peace, stability, and non-interference²⁸. To step into the Afghan peace process, Russia initially formed a trilateral platform to begin an informal consultation with China and Pakistan. The first meeting of the trilateral platform was held in Beijing in April 2013, and after seven months, the second was held in November in Islamabad. After nearly three years, Russia hosted the third in Moscow²⁹. In the meantime, the Afghan and western officials allegedly said that Russia had been meeting with the Taliban*, by-passing the Afghan government. The Western media reported that Russian involvement in Afghanistan was not confined to arming Islamists; it was also providing weapons and cash to influential local people in northern Afghanistan³⁰.

Two months before the withdrawal of western combat troops from Afghanistan, on 24 October 2014, Putin delivered a speech against the West. In an annual gathering of Western and Russian journalists and officials, he accused the US of breeding terrorists by disrupting the established order in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He highlighted the differences in positions, between Moscow and the West on a range of matters. Putin indicted America for trying to reshape the whole world for its own benefit³¹. Russian ties with the West distinctly declined due to the annexation of Crimea and the war in south-eastern Ukraine. Russia and the US opposed each other in the Syrian and Ukrainian crises. Russia saw the US mission in Kabul as failed, and its presence in the region as a threat³². Russia was transforming globally into an

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assertive and authoritative state. The phased withdrawal of foreign combat troops from Afghanistan, amid chaos, was completed on 28 December 2014, which further raised regional security concerns. There were reports about another more significant threat than the Taliban* and al-Qaeda*, looming from the war in Iraq and Syria now in Afghanistan — the “Islamic State (IS)”³³.

The Islamic State* of Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)* formally declared their presence in Afghanistan in January 2015 (days after the withdrawal of combat troops), where the Taliban* was the dominant insurgent force³⁴. The presence of ISIS became another threat to Russia. At this point, the Russian and Taliban* interests coincided. In the middle of this year, in a meeting with Putin, the former President of Afghanistan Karzai said, “Russia is a neighbor of Afghanistan; what happens in Afghanistan has a direct influence on Russia”³⁵. In the 15th SCO meeting held on 9–10 July 2015, the Russian President expressed concerns over the Islamic State* group. He emphasized the necessity to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation³⁶. The new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani also attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit and directly talked with Putin. Both avowed commitments to stabilizing Afghanistan and fighting terrorism. On the other hand, the Afghan government began peace talks with the Taliban* on the same days, facilitated by Pakistan. The Afghan government sabotaged the peace process by revealing the death of Mullah Omar, the supreme leader of the Taliban*. The news exposed the leadership crisis and power struggle within the Taliban*³⁷. There were apprehensions that the dissatisfied group in the Taliban* could join ISIS*; however, Mullah Akhtar Mansour became the second head of the Taliban*.

In the last quarter of 2015, news of Putin’s meeting with the Taliban* leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour at a military base in Tajikistan created suspicions in the West and in the Afghan government although Russia and the Taliban* both denied such a meeting³⁸. In fact, Russia was deeply concerned about the growth of ISIS* in its nearby region. An atmosphere of distrust between Russia and the US developed, as the former accused the latter of raising an Islamic State* in Afghanistan. Russian officials held the view that the US was backing the former extremist militants from Central Asia to begin another holy war against Russia³⁹.

Russian diplomatic turn in Afghan peace process 2016–2018

After a pause of six months in January 2016, the peace talks revived without the Taliban’s* participation. A group of four states — Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, and the US — was formed called the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG). The Taliban* were consistent in their demand for the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from their country. From January to May, there were five meetings of the QCG. The last and fifth meeting was held on 18 May 2016, in Islamabad, and after three days, the head of the Taliban* was targeted and killed by a US drone on 21 May 2016, in Baluchistan, a province in Pakistan⁴⁰.

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The killing undermined the credibility and sincerity of the US in Taliban^{*} circles. The Afghan government had already harmed the Taliban^{*}'s interests by revealing the death of their supreme leader in 2015⁴¹; once again, the peace process was halted not due to the Taliban^{*}. Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, criticized America for a weak Afghan government and for failing to control Islamist militancy. He began describing the Taliban^{*} as a national unit rather than a threat beyond the country's borders⁴².

When no peace talks were underway, Russia convened the first major diplomatic summit on Afghan settlement in Moscow on 26 December 2016, with representatives from Russia, China, and Pakistan. The informal trilateral format was to stabilize Afghanistan and to counter-terrorism. Neither Afghan officials nor the Taliban^{*} were invited; even the US was also ignored. It raised concerns in Washington that it was being bypassed in negotiations over Afghanistan's future. The Afghan government also condemned the meeting and challenged its authenticity due to its own absence⁴³. The summit was held days after the announcement of the results of the American presidential election. It was the first time when Russia had participated in a broader regional process. The parties expressed concerns about the presence of ISIS^{*} in Afghanistan.

Amid growing security concerns and the impasse in the QCG-led peace process, in 2017, Russia introduced a negotiation mechanism aimed at Afghan issues, named "Moscow Format", as part of its diplomatic efforts to press for a political solution to the Afghan problem. It invited five regional states, including Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Iran, and India. The representatives of these countries agreed on the intra-Afghan peace process⁴⁴. The meeting was held on 15 February 2017, in Moscow⁴⁵.

In the capital of Russia, the third round of the peace talks on Afghanistan was held on 14 April 2017. Moscow doubled the number of countries from 6 to 12 countries, which now included Afghanistan, India, Iran, Pakistan, China, America, Russia, and five former Soviet republics in Central Asia. The US and Afghan officials did not participate in the talks⁴⁶. Russia and its allies called on the Taliban^{*} to lay down arms and negotiate with the Afghan government. Moscow further declared its readiness to serve as a platform for dialogue to end 16 years of conflict⁴⁷. In 2017, the newly elected president of America, Donald Trump was busy reviewing South Asian policy and did not take part in any peace process, whether led by Russia or China. Russian consultation on Afghanistan brought Moscow into the focal point of global politics. In July 2018, the Trump administration decided to begin secret talks with the Taliban^{*}. The US officials and representatives of the Taliban^{*} met twice, but no significant breakthrough was achieved.

Russia became more assertive in the Afghan conflict in the year 2018, as on May 7 of this year, Putin began his fourth term in Presidential office⁴⁸. In continuation of its efforts, Russia convened a multilateral consultation under Moscow Format to bring peace and stability through national reconciliation. It adopted a balanced strategy by inviting Ashraf Ghani, Taliban^{*}, regional states, and the US. The Taliban^{*}

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were invited for the first time to an international forum that was also attended by the Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) members⁴⁹. The landmark meeting was held on 9 November 2018 to find a regional solution to the longest war in Afghanistan. The Format brought all relevant actors to one table that had no precedent since the peace talks had begun. The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, was sitting between Afghanistan's HPC members and their Taliban* rivals as an experienced man and mediator in the Afghan conflict. The meeting was attended by 11 countries⁵⁰.

For the first time, the Taliban* delegation had attended an international diplomatic conference. The HPC members repeated President Ashraf Ghani's offer of peace talks without preconditions. However, the Taliban* delegation reiterated their demand for the pull-out of all foreign forces from Afghanistan. In Western capitals and in Kabul, the Moscow meeting was perceived with suspicion⁵¹.

The Russian success in the peace process in the protracted Afghan war compelled the US to negotiate with the Taliban* openly. It was a turning point in the US argument that the Kabul government should lead a peace process.

Russian role in the US-Taliban* peace agreement

The Russian achievements in the Afghan peace process were alarming for the US. The first direct overt talks between America and the Taliban* began on 21–22 January 2019, in Doha, the capital of Qatar. After a loss of about 2,300 soldiers and more than \$ 900 billion in expenditures since 2001, the US had to agree to withdraw all foreign troops from Afghanistan. The two reached an agreement after two days of extensive negotiations. The Taliban* affirmed to them that the land of Afghanistan would not be used by any terrorist group against the US and its allies⁵². The US-backed Afghan government was ignored in the meeting. Zalmay Khalilzad, a representative of the US specifically for Afghanistan, claimed that a framework peace agreement had been reached with the Taliban*, deemed to begin a process to re-ingrate the Taliban* into the governing structure of Afghanistan.

In response to the US lead in the peace process, an inclusive meeting was held in Moscow on 5–6 February 2019⁵³. The invitees belonged to several leading Afghan political rivals opposed to the US talks with only Taliban*. Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai and serving Prime Minister Abdullah Abdullah also attended the meeting. Due to the participation of about all national stakeholders, it was termed a part of the intra-Afghan peace process despite the non-attendance of Afghan officeholders⁵⁴. The meeting seemed a reflection of a new world order, in which Russia appeared as a global superpower — a former status, it aspired to regain.

The Russian centenary celebration of diplomatic relations with Afghanistan on 28 May 2019, further asserted Moscow in Afghan affairs and in the peace process. The foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, presented an overview of Russia-Afghan century-old relations, in an event organized by the foreign minister of Russia. In his address, he mentioned the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s but added that it did not decrease respect and sympathy between the people of both countries.

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Russia and the Taliban* jointly asked for the pull-out of foreign forces from Afghanistan and deplored their presence as the main impediment to peace in Afghanistan. Sergey Lavrov took credit for accelerating Afghan peace-building efforts due to the Kremlin's initiatives that furthered the peace talks. He assured Afghanistan that Russia would help the old friend in the fight against terrorist groups and drug-trafficking networks⁵⁵. The event was attended by the Taliban*, HPC members, former President Hamid Karzai, and other Afghan political factions⁵⁶. On the next day, May 29, the second round of intra-Afghan peace talks was held in Moscow. These talks again forced the US to speed up the same process that had been slowed after the Taliban* refusal to end antagonism⁵⁷.

From June to August 2019, there were several peace talks between the US and the Taliban* to reach an agreement. In the meantime, US President Donald Trump secretly planned a meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's team and the Taliban* at Camp David before the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 incident⁵⁸. However, on 8 September he abruptly called off the meeting for an indefinite time period after the insurgents' attack in Kabul. The incident killed twelve people including two NATO servicemen and one American soldier⁵⁹.

To advance regional support for forcing the US to leave Afghanistan, a Taliban* delegation visited Moscow in mid-September 2019, one week after the collapse of the US-Taliban* meeting. It further underscored Russia's role as a creditable partner⁶⁰. To avoid an interruption that could lead to a deadlock in talks, on 25 October Moscow hosted a meeting between four countries, including the US chief negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad, along with Chinese and Pakistani representatives to end the hostilities and to resume talks between the US and the Taliban*. Russia, China, and Pakistan extended support for the earliest renewal of the peace negotiations and reaching an agreement between the US and the Taliban* movement, which could pave the way for launching the intra-Afghan talks⁶¹. The US embassy's website in Russia stated that the meeting was "positive and constructive"⁶². About a month later, the US-Taliban* peace process began in Doha on 7 December, as the US President had been frustrated with the most protracted US military involvement in a third world country⁶³.

On a leap year day February 29, 2020, US Special Representative or chief negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad and the head of the militant Islamist group, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, signed the potentially historic agreement in Doha, Qatar. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attended and addressed the ceremony⁶⁴. The peace talks began in September 2018, and in 18 months, the deal was signed. A seven-day "reduction in violence" in Afghanistan was agreed upon before signing the deal.

Russia welcomed the peace agreement and hoped it would end the war and lead to intra-Afghan negotiations. Zamir Kabulov represented Russia at the signing ceremony. Outside the event, he separately met with his counterpart Zalmay Khalilzad and Abdul Ghani Baradar, the head of the Taliban* political office in Doha⁶⁵.

The US-Taliban* peace agreement received broad support from Russia, China, Pakistan, and NATO. As per the deal, the US, Taliban*, and the Afghan government

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made commitments. The US committed to pulling back all military forces and supporting civilian personnel and its allies within 14 months. The Taliban* would be responsible for releasing 1,000 Afghan security forces prisoners, and the Afghan government would free up to 5,000 Taliban* prisoners as a gesture of goodwill.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that Russia played a decisive role in the Afghan peace process leading to the final agreement between the US and the Taliban*. Russia's association with Afghanistan remained different from Britain and America. Russia had signed an agreement with the insurgent group in Afghanistan and accordingly withdrew all troops. After the fall of the USSR, the Islamists trained to defeat communism posed a threat to Russia in the post-withdrawal phase, and afterward to the US. Russia had been facing acts of terrorism before the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Russia extended full support to the US in the war against terrorism which marked a rare precedent in the history of their relations. The US unending war in Afghanistan and the former airbases in Central Asia became a strategic threat to Russia. The US withdrawal plans revived Russian interest, as being a regional power, it asserted itself in Afghan affairs. The presence of ISIS* in Afghanistan was considered a more significant threat, and Russia favoured the intra-Afghan peace process and the Taliban* as a national entity. When such dialogues failed, and a deadlock was extended, Russia adopted another strategy in the peace process. The Moscow Format of 2018 heightened Russian credibility in the Afghan conflict, and the US could not allow Moscow to take the lead. With the help of Pakistan, the US-Taliban* peace process intensified. The second deadlock in the US-Taliban* talks could not be prolonged because of the Taliban's* frequent visits to Russia and the pressure of the latter to resume the process. Russian ability to take a lead role in the peace process and its growing influence in Afghanistan to counter the US and NATO presence in the region compelled the US to sign a peace agreement that led to the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Moscow hoped to rekindle ties with Afghanistan that were frayed when it withdrew from the country in 1989 after its decade-long occupation.

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⁵ The President of Afghanistan backed by the USSR since 1986 to 1992.

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⁸ 'Russia formally opens embassy in Kabul', *Kuwait News Agency (KUNA)*, February 23, 2007. Available at: <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?language=en&id=1713253>

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FOR CITATION

Begum I. 'Russian Reassertion in Afghanistan: Implications of the Doha Peace Agreement 2020', *Modern History of Russia*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2023, pp. 430–444. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu24.2023.211>

Abstract: The research aims to explore the causes of Russian reassertion in Afghanistan and delves into its impact on the peace process. Russia has a deep-rooted history in Afghanistan. At the peak of its power, it sent troops to Kabul to protect the communist regime but faced strong resistance from the Afghan people. The Soviet-backed Afghan regime and the Soviet forces tried to control the insurgency for ten years; eventually, it had to pull back all troops from Afghanistan. The extended engagement in Kabul worsened internal conditions in Russia which attempted to prevent them from the Afghan scenario. During the brief period of the government of Mujahedeen and later, under the rule of the Taliban, it was concerned by the rise of Islamic militancy in Afghanistan that emerged as a peril for Russia and the Central Asian states where Moscow aspired to maintain a soft influence. The 9/11 incident transformed the political approach of the world community. The paper analyses the reasons for Russian support of the US in the war against terrorism, and Russian coordination with Central Asian states to facilitate the US in utilizing military bases of the former Soviet Union for the first time. Russia re-opened its embassy in Kabul in 2007. After two years, it endorsed a new strategy of the US President in Afghanistan based upon a troop surge, a withdrawal plan, and reconciliation with the moderate Taliban. Russia also formed a multi-dimensional policy towards Afghanistan. Kremlin developed ties with the Afghan government as well as diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. A hypothesis is made that due to the assertive Russian role in Afghanistan, the US had to speed up the peace process which resulted in the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan.

Keywords: Russia, Afghanistan, Taliban, peace process.

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Received: November 26, 2021

Accepted: December 29, 2022

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