

## Russia and the Afghan Peace Process

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 618

October 2019

Ekaterina Stepanova<sup>1</sup>

*IMEMO, Moscow*

On September 8, 2019, President Donald Trump cancelled his secretly planned Camp David meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's team and the Taliban. The formal pretext was a terrorist attack in Kabul that killed a U.S. soldier, among others. The next day, Trump declared the peace talks dead. This halt in talks is temporary and should not be overdramatized, especially since on September 10, 2019, Trump sacked the main opponent of an Afghan peace deal within his administration, National Security Adviser John Bolton. The first results of nine rounds of US-Taliban talks held since July 2018 formed the basis for future talks: the two sides in August in Doha, Qatar, finalized a draft deal on the schedule of withdrawal of U.S. forces coupled with counterterrorist and ceasefire provisions. The Taliban took the subsequent impasse calmly. Still, the pause in talks with the United States, and the continuing absence of direct official negotiations between the Taliban and the current Afghan government, provide reasons to look at other negotiating tracks on Afghanistan, even if they have been secondary to the mainstream US-Taliban format.

Two of these other negotiating tracks have been fully designed, sponsored, and managed by Russia: the Moscow regional format and the Moscow-based intra-Afghan dialogue. Another, the US-Russia-China framework, has been co-sponsored by Moscow. This memo explains how Russia turned from a marginal post-Soviet player--almost outsider--on Afghanistan in the 1990s into a major diplomatic actor and supporter of a negotiated settlement. It also explores how Moscow's diplomatic initiatives are specific to other negotiating tracks, help advance Russia's interests, and fit into Russia's broader foreign policy patterns, such as regionalization of its approach to regional conflicts and the conundrum of Russia-West relations.

---

<sup>1</sup> [Ekaterina Stepanova](#) is Lead Researcher and Head of Peace and Conflict Studies at the National Research Institute of the World Economy & International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow.

## Meeting in Moscow: Regional Consultations on Afghanistan

In February 2019, former Afghan mujahedeen leaders and strongmen of the Northern Alliance met in Moscow to discuss peace with their sworn enemy, the Taliban. Three months earlier, the Taliban delegation addressed diplomats in Moscow in its first appearance at broad, regional peace consultations on Afghanistan, notwithstanding the movement's presence on [Russia's list of terrorist groups](#). All of this was a culmination of the long evolution of Russia's Afghan policy, which saw:

- 1) a decade of post-Soviet neglect in the 1990s;
- 2) support for local forces allied with the US-led coalition over 2001–02;
- 3) follow-up reliance on the Afghan northern factions;
- 4) a subsequent shift toward a more regionalized approach better balanced vis-à-vis key Afghan factions; and
- 5) pro-active diplomacy in support of a negotiated settlement.

The withdrawal of most U.S./NATO forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 led to some upgrade of Russia's security presence in, and economic cooperation with, its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This, however, was not seen by Moscow as a sufficient hedge against developments in Afghanistan after 2014. Both of the main challenges faced by Russia – the massive inflow of Afghan narcotics and potential spillover of instability and extremism from Afghanistan into Central Asia – remained unaddressed on the Afghan side. Both issues have escalated since 2014. Narcotics production skyrocketed: 2017 became a historical peak for poppy cultivation, which reached an area 42 times larger than it had in 2001, the last year of Taliban rule.<sup>2</sup> This was coupled with intensifying fighting and terrorism compounded by the Islamic State phenomenon that cloned itself in Afghanistan.

At the same time, Russia's leverage on intra-Afghan matters remained more limited than the influence of any of Afghanistan's key neighbors (the "Big Four" are Pakistan, Iran, China, and India). For historical and pragmatic reasons, Moscow is determined to keep a distance from having a military presence in Afghanistan, an option which it has [described](#) as "absolutely ruled out" and "non-existent." Facing both security challenges from, and major policy constraints on, Afghanistan, Russia was left with little choice but to pursue two interrelated strategies.

The first strategy was a regionalization of Russia's Afghan policy that implied stepped-up dialogue and cooperation with the main regional players on Afghanistan, both traditional partners (Iran, India, China) and former unlikely partners (Pakistan). For Russia, regionalization started well before 2014 and primarily reflected fundamentally changing regional realities (including the growing role of the "Big Four" powers as

---

<sup>2</sup> "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018," Vienna/Kabul: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018, p. 6.

stakeholders on Afghanistan) but was further spurred by the decline in the U.S./NATO presence after 2014 and Moscow's growing security concerns.

The second strategy was a turn to actively supporting a negotiated solution. Russian foreign policy decisionmakers gradually came to realize that none of Moscow's Afghanistan-related concerns could be alleviated so long as the armed conflict between the U.S./NATO-backed Kabul government and the Taliban persists (not to mention escalates), which impedes basic functionality and control of the state. This was the primary driver behind Moscow's shift toward active diplomatic support to a negotiated solution. The fact that Russia both retained certain concerns and interest in Afghanistan, and kept a certain distance from it, made Moscow well-suited for a mediating role.

These two courses – regionalization and support for negotiated solution – came together in the form of the Moscow inter-governmental regional peace consultations, the first of the three tracks led or co-sponsored by Russia. The main specifics of the Moscow regional format were that it provided a space for regional powers to talk about prospects for peace in Afghanistan at a *macro-regional, macro-Eurasian level*. Having started as three-party talks in December 2016, by April 2017, the Moscow format expanded to eleven-party consultations, involving Russia, Afghanistan, its “Big Four” neighbors, and all Central Asian states – the broadest regional gathering at the time. In November 2018, delegates from the Taliban and the Afghan High Peace Council (loosely affiliated with the government) attended the format, but not Kabul officials. In contrast to the more technical Astana ceasefire format on Syria that was co-brokered by Russia's regional partners Turkey and Iran, Moscow's regional format on Afghanistan involved states of the entire region in order to discuss a broad set of policy issues. It remained region-focused, was not shaped or influenced by extraregional actors that took part in the military intervention in Afghanistan (the United States and NATO), and tried to keep a distance from intra-Afghan political struggles.

### **Moscow Inter-Afghan Dialogue**

Inter-Afghan dialogue has been most difficult, as the Taliban refuses to talk to the Ghani government, which they dismiss as a proxy, whereas Kabul has been formally open to talks, but de facto set excessive conditions, hardly acceptable for an insurgency that is gaining and not losing on the ground. The closest the two came so far was the participation of the Taliban and several Kabul officials acting in private capacities in an informal larger meeting in Doha on July 7-8, 2019. But prior to that, Russia remained the only facilitator that managed to bring a range of key Afghan factions and the Taliban together at a very senior level – twice in 2019, in February and May.

The Track Two inter-Afghan dialogue, distinct from the Moscow regional format, added a genuine Afghan dimension to Russia's diplomacy on Afghanistan. However, its main input was not so much the involvement of the Taliban, which had become an almost

routine visitor to key regional capitals, as it was Moscow's ability to deliver senior Afghan politicians, especially key northern strongmen (the Taliban's fiercest domestic protagonists) to talk to the insurgency. As a result, the February 2019 dialogue was the first of its kind to provide some idea about substantive issues that could form the basis of broad inter-party consensus: participants [agreed](#) on "unity," "territorial sovereignty," and "Islamic system in Afghanistan" as "home to all equal and brother ethnic groups," and "reform, preservation and strengthening of... defense establishments and other national institutions that are the public property of all Afghans."<sup>3</sup> This input of the Moscow dialogue was later publicly acknowledged at the intra-Afghan peace conference in Doha (July 2019).

The February 2019 Moscow meeting was not only the first significant direct contact between leaders of the former Northern Alliance and the Taliban since the former helped oust the latter from power in Kabul in late 2001. Three decades after the completion of the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the presence of key living mujahedeen leaders in Moscow, to discuss matters critical for their country, finally turned that dramatic page in the Russian-Afghan bilateral relations. It is by building up on its contacts with the northerners while staying on neutral terms with the Taliban and by encouraging northern factions (including by offering them some additional/informal security support guarantees) to find a *modus vivendi* with the insurgency at the national level, that Moscow can most efficiently contribute to the substance of the peace process.

The Moscow dialogue also curbed speculation about Russia not speaking with one voice on Afghanistan, leaving no doubt that its Afghan policy has evolved in the direction of consolidation of official discourse, greater coordination, and unity of action. One long-sought balance to strike in relation to intra-Afghan matters was the north-south aspect. The handling and results of the Moscow intra-Afghan format removed concerns by some Russian experts and foreign policymakers that Moscow's rapprochement with Islamabad and contacts with the Taliban might alienate its more traditional post-Soviet Afghan partners, the northern factions. Another key balance to strike was in relation to Russia's Central Asian partners: in parallel to its diplomatic activity on Afghanistan, Moscow took pains to court and reassure the Central Asians, especially its CSTO allies, of its sustained security and political support to them and its primary focus on Central Asia rather than Afghanistan.

Finally, the inter-Afghan dialogue was also a step forward in developing a Track Two format as such, especially in terms of authenticity of talks. In contrast to the Russia-brokered Sochi Congress on Syria (January 2018) that was dominated by government loyalists, Moscow's inter-Afghan dialogue displayed broad representation of genuine "veto" players in Afghan politics and security. The absence of any formal mediators and

---

<sup>3</sup> English summary: "[Joint Declaration Issued After Moscow Talks](#)," TOLO News, February 6, 2019.

foreign diplomats proved to be the right choice, judging by how far direct [dialogue](#) among strongmen on the opposite sides of the Afghan civil war advanced. However, the downside of the dialogue's focus on bringing together most of the key Afghan strongmen was the minimal, token representation of Afghan "civil society," underscoring how low this aspect stands in the list of Russia's priorities.

### **Conclusions and International Implications**

In the late 2010s, Russia, formerly a post-Soviet outsider on Afghanistan, carved out a diplomatic niche for itself in international efforts to promote a negotiated solution in Afghanistan. These broader efforts involve several, sometimes overlapping, tracks and formats, including at the regional level. Negotiations have faced a range of substantive and procedural challenges, both internal and external to the process, including the lack of direct talks between the Kabul and the Taliban, the need for a peace process involving the insurgency to be reconciled and coordinated with the Afghan domestic political/electoral process, the susceptibility of talks to dynamic interplay with continuing violence by all conflict parties, zigzags in the Trump administration's policy, and more.

However, the overall context for peace consultations at the current stage has been more favorable compared to previous peace processes, including the 1988–89 Geneva talks on post-Soviet Afghanistan and the 2001 Bonn process for a post-Taliban Afghanistan. In contrast, this time, peace efforts have been based upon a lasting, mutually painful stalemate inside Afghanistan, with no conflict party emerging as either victorious or defeated. This condition is conducive of more genuine and inclusive negotiations and, therefore, a more equitable and lasting power-sharing solution—even though it may be partly offset by the more complex and fragmented nature of the contemporary phase of the conflict. Also, no regional or extraregional actor emerged as a big winner or loser—on the contrary, a critical mass of external stakeholders developed, for their own reasons, an interest in genuine stabilization in Afghanistan. As a result, a previously unseen degree of international consensus in favor of a negotiated solution has formed at the regional and extra-regional levels.

Russia has hardly been the lead player on Afghanistan in general and in the peace process in particular, especially vis-à-vis the US-Taliban talks. It is precisely Russia's role as a power adjacent to the region, with its security concerns about and limited leverage on Afghanistan, which shaped the evolution of Moscow's Afghan policy. By retaining interest in but keeping a certain distance from Afghanistan, Russia became well suited to holding a rather neutral mediating role, making Moscow a comfortable venue for regional and inter-Afghan peace consultations.

Finally, had it not been for Russia's diplomatic activity on Afghanistan, Moscow would have been fully sidelined by Washington and others on Afghan issues. Instead, Russia's

active mediation helped revive dialogue with the United States on Afghanistan, despite the continuing crisis in Russian-U.S. relations. Such dialogue could have only become active since 2018 when the Trump administration de facto revised its earlier Afghan/South Asian strategy to prioritize a phased exit strategy, preferably accompanied by and synchronized with tangible progress toward a negotiated solution. Washington stopped ignoring Moscow's regional format and Russia backed the US-Taliban bilateral talks. The U.S. and Russian special envoys on Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad and Zamir Kabulov, began to meet on a regular basis, which is quite untypical for the miserable state of bilateral relations. They soon decided to expand the dialogue to a US-Russia-China triologue that first met in Moscow in April 2019. However, it is the complementarity of the U.S. and Russian peace efforts on Afghanistan that retains special importance for Moscow, even as its impact on the U.S.-Russian broader bilateral relationship has been limited. With China, Russia has plenty of ways and venues to interact both bilaterally and multilaterally regarding Afghanistan—and beyond; the two states were the main powers behind the Shanghai Cooperation Organization-Afghanistan road map that was adopted in June 2019. In contrast, for Moscow's dialogue with Washington, Afghanistan remains one of the very few issues about which the two can have a meaningful dialogue.

More generally, in view of the profound regionalization of the Afghan conflict, prospects for the success of any "Grand Power" solution (such as the United States-Russia-China scheme) are limited—unless it engages and accounts for the legitimate interests of the main regional actors. While such engagement may be [gradually working](#) out with Pakistan, it is hardly materializing in the case of Iran, especially in view of the sharp U.S.-Iranian tensions that escalated in 2019. Russia is one of the few actors that can try to do something to soften the U.S.-Iranian divide, at least when it comes to their disagreements on Afghanistan. This provides an additional reason for Moscow to keep its main format on Afghanistan—inter-governmental peace consultations involving all states of the region including Iran—alive and ongoing. Shortly after Trump's decision to cancel talks in Washington, the Taliban's visit to Moscow in mid-September 2019 to discuss the current stage of the peace process and potential to revive dialogue with the United States further underscores Russia's role as a mediator. Moscow keeps contacts with the main conflict parties in Afghanistan going even during temporary setbacks or pauses in the mainstream negotiations.