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Growing Russian Involvement in Afghanistan

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

After Syria, Afghanistan is emerging as a new theatre of Russian-American power struggle, with growing Russian involvement in the war-torn country. The Western drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014 has allowed Moscow to flex its muscle in its backyard. This will lead to new geopolitical rivalries in South Asia.

Commentary

THE UNITED States under President Donald Trump has snubbed a Russian invitation to attend its initiative on Afghanistan on 14 April 2017. This development has taken place as Afghanistan is emerging as a new theatre of Russian-American power rivalry with Moscow's return to the conflict-ridden country after an aloofness of almost three decades. Buoyed by its strategic incursion in Crimea and the success of its military diplomacy in Syria, Russia is now overtly asserting itself in Afghanistan.

Taking advantage of the geopolitical opening created by an uncertain US foreign policy and the drawdown of Western forces from Afghanistan in 2014, Moscow is trying to outflank Washington in Afghanistan. This marks a significant shift in Moscow's traditional Afghan policy of neutrality.

Russia's Afghan Initiative

Russia held the third meeting of its Afghan initiative in Moscow on 14 April 2017. The stage for these talks was set in December 2016 when Moscow hosted a trilateral dialogue with Islamabad and Beijing. Another round of consultations, comprising six nations -- Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran and Afghanistan -- was held in Moscow on 15 February 2017. In both meetings, the NATO and United States were not invited. When Russia invited the US for the April talks, Washington refused.

The US refusal to participate in the 14 April meeting indicates its growing discomfort with Russia's Afghan overtures. The Trump administration considers it as direct interference in Afghanistan.

This will potentially give birth to new geopolitical rivalries while further complicating the existing ones. Broadly, this will split the region into two rival political blocs of local and global powers: Russia-China-Iran-Pakistan-Central Asian States versus the US-India-NATO-Afghanistan.

US-Russian Divergences on Afghanistan

Russia and the US have divergent outlooks about the situation in Afghanistan. Moscow views the Islamic state of Khurasan (ISK), a regional affiliate of the self-styled Islamic State (IS) in the Af-Pak region—as the major regional security threat. On the contrary, America and its NATO allies view the Afghan Taliban as the major source of instability in Afghanistan.

Moscow maintains that its ties with the Taliban are limited to peace negotiations and countering ISK's influence. On the contrary, Washington believes Russia-Taliban contacts are to undermine the US and NATO mission in Afghanistan. The former advocates a flexible approach towards the Taliban, while the latter considers renunciation of violence, delinking of Taliban's ties with Al-Qaeda and the recognition of the Afghan constitution and government as pre-conditions for peace talks.

Moreover, Russia views the American proposal of moderate troop surge and increased military spending in Afghanistan as a recipe for more war and destabilisation. On the other hand, the US considers support of the Afghan Taliban by Russia, Iran and Pakistan as the major source of instability in the country.

In addition, Russia alleges that the US forces have not done enough to check the rise and expansion of ISK in Afghanistan. Moscow views the growing presence of ISK fighters in Afghanistan's northern provinces near the Central Asian states with suspicion. It alleges that the US is using ISK as a proxy in Afghanistan.

However, the US rejects such allegations, pointing out that 15 top commanders of ISK, including its emir Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai, have been killed in US drone strikes and the territorial footprint of the terror group has been reduced from nine to three districts in Afghanistan.

New and Old Geopolitical Rivalries

Such divergent and opposing outlooks of the Afghan conflict, even before the start of a formal dialogue process, is ominous. It will complicate the regional geopolitics turning Afghanistan into a battleground for proxy wars. The inclusion of Russian competition with the US and NATO, in addition to ongoing power games between India and Pakistan, as well as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, will work to the advantage of the militant groups in Afghanistan.

US and NATO's financial assistance bankroll the Afghan economy while their military

presence in Afghanistan has ensured the survival of the Afghan National Unity Government (NUG). Without the US inclusion, a durable and realistic solution of the Afghan conflict looks difficult.

At the same time, continued US military presence without exploring a realistic and flexible political solution will further destabilise Afghanistan. Arguably, when 150,000 US and NATO troops in Afghanistan could not break the deadlock of the Afghan conflict, a meagre increase of 3,000 to 4,000 troops will not make any difference.

The failure of the US and Russia to reconcile their differences on Afghanistan can potentially turn Afghanistan into another Syria which will negatively affect the regional and global peace. The Russian and American concerns respectively over ISK's presence and Al-Qaeda and Taliban links are best addressed if the two sides cooperate instead of compete for regional influence.

Old Peace Initiatives and Way Forward

If history is any guide, all major initiatives so far to broker a ceasefire agreement between Kabul and the Taliban have failed. The fate of the Russian peace initiative does not seem to be an exception to this rule. In 2013, the US-led initiatives known as the "Qatar process" crashed after the Taliban hoisted their official flag and plaque ahead of the talks in Doha. The then US administration and the former Afghan President Hamid Karzai rejected the move and pulled out of negotiations.

After a gap of two years, another effort was made to revive the peace talks in 2015, under the Quadrilateral Coordination Group comprising the US, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The QCG talks came to a halt in mid-2015 with the disclosure of the death of Taliban's founding leader Mullah Umar. In early 2016, another effort was underway to rekindle the QCG dialogue, when the US killed the new Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in a drone attack in Pakistan's Balochistan province and dashed hopes of restarting the peace talks.

Notwithstanding the divergent US and Russian perspectives of the Afghan war, the core dispute remains the discord between the Taliban and the NUG. The US presence in Afghanistan, regional states' interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs and the rise of opportunistic groups like ISK are irritants and by-products of the lingering conflict. If a political compromise between Kabul and the Taliban is reached, it will be easy to tackle the irritants.

Pakistan, which has suffered the most because of the unrest in Afghanistan, along with China, should play a bridging role instead of taking sides in this emerging geopolitical situation. The regional and global powers need to take a bipartisan view of the situation in Afghanistan. Reviving the QCG process and expanding it to include Russia and India offers the most viable diplomatic framework to end the war in Afghanistan.

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