



# RUSSIA IN THE CHANGING AFGHAN SCENARIO

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# **RUSSIA IN THE CHANGING AFGHAN SCENARIO**

**Jason Wahlang**

## **Introduction**

Afghanistan, positioned between three regions (South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia), is a focal point of various major powers across the global sphere. Continuous foreign interventions and war has not only devastated a massive part of Afghanistan, but this has also led to the rise of insurgency and converted Afghanistan to a breeding ground of extremist elements (Gul, 2006). These various situations have led to increased insecurity in an already conflict prone country.

Major powers such as the United States of America, India and China are openly involved in the Afghan region with issues of counter terrorism and rehabilitation, being the focal point of involvement. One such country which has been involved in this region across the annals of history is Russia. Russia has been involved in the Great Game in the past with relation to Afghanistan, from the historical war in Afghanistan in the 1970's to finding a solution of peace during the present era. One of the major reasons for its involvement in the region has been the counter terrorism aspects with Afghanistan sharing a border with the Central Asian states and the involvement of various organisation in Chechen secessionist movements related to Afghanistan. Russia is also involved in the peace process of the nation which could lead to a period of peace and stability of many years of conflict, extremism and instability. The current changing scenario in Afghanistan means that it acts as a potential springboard in the security cooperation between the West and Russia.

## **Historical Background**

Historically, the Russians during the period of the Czars were a colonial power who wanted to initiate their power by investing in regions located within their own territorial range. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the British taking advantage of the political decay in Asia began a defensive policy, Russia had also advanced around the corridors of the caravan routes of the ancient conquerors threatening to establish its monarchical rule (K. E. Meyer, 2009). The Czars first established relations with the Afghans in 1837 during a time when the relations were tense with the British , and one of the reasons being the desire to trade with India (Spector, 1961).

The main focus during this period with regard to Afghanistan was the two Afghan wars of 1840 and 1870, with Russia and Britain being involved in Afghanistan. The creation of the borders of Afghanistan came up from these two wars with the two colonising powers creating a buffer between their respective dependencies similar to a barrier to prevent direct contact between the two colonisers (Aziz, 2014). After the two Afghan wars, the two nations decided to form a buffer zone in Central Asia but the suspicions never stopped between the British and the Russians.

As long as the colonial influence of Britain was present in the South Asian region particularly in India, Russia both Czarist and Soviet Union was restricted from involvement in Afghanistan as it was a part of the area under the British sphere of influence.

### **Soviet Union and Afghanistan**

After the Second World War, the United States of America and the Soviet Union began a race of ideology, political and economic, called the Cold War. The Soviets advocating the ideology of communism and socialism were in stark contrast to the ideology of Democracy and the Capitalism followed the United States of America. Both the nations began to impose their ideology and thought process across the world ranging from Korea to Northern America and to the region of South Asia. One such country was Afghanistan; Soviet Union and Afghanistan shared good terms with each other but the country had good terms with the United States of America since it followed the idea of neutrality (H.L, 1932).

During this period before the independence of India, the British rule had kept a track of what was happening in the neighbouring countries, and through a report had found out of Russian influence in the Afghan air force (Lancaster, 1944). A change in the leadership in Afghanistan further improved the relations with the Soviet Union and the Soviets in return provided a strong economic boost to the Afghans in the 1950's (Payind, 2009).

One more important aspect in the increased relations during this period was Pakistan. After the formation of Pakistan in 1947, Afghanistan developed strained relations with it over issues regarding the Pashuntunistan and the

alleged support for Pakistan by the United States of America further led to Afghanistan closeness to the Soviets (Bajoria, 2008). One major cog of the Afghan-Soviet relations was the military assistance which helped develop the Afghan military for the first time since the Second World War. Along with which the Afghans received an aid of approximately one billion from the Soviets (Oliker, 2011).

Over time, the relations took a negative turn which was due to the feeling of the Afghan leaders that the Soviets were trying to establish their own rule in the country and it was even told during an official visit that the Soviets would not dictate the Afghans and that they would govern on their own (Payind, 2009). The relations changed significantly and became more positive after the coming of a similar communist ideological government in Afghanistan under the leadership of Najibullah. The government upon coming into the leadership signed a treaty of friendship for 20 years (Whitney, 1978).

The relationship took a turn for the worse when the Soviets began the invasion of Afghanistan which not only ruined relationships between the two nations but also became one of the major reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Soviet Own Vietnam, as it is popularly called, was one of the last battles for the Cold war with the Soviets storming into the country in 1979 (Jazeera, The Soviet Union's Vietnam, 2003). Some of the allies in the war for the United States against the Soviets in Afghanistan were the mujahedeen rebels who later on would become part of the Al Qaeda (Baker, 2019).

### **Post- Soviet Russia and Afghanistan**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and its division into 15 countries popularly known as the Commonwealth of Independent states, there was a change in the Russian strategy towards the Afghan region. The Russian sees Afghanistan as an important strategic point with its connections to Central Asia. An unstable internal situation coupled with extremism and strong drugs connection to the region poses a threat to Central Asia where Russia had established a strong influence (Śmigielski, 2010).

The fear of extremism ranges from the absence of an effective border in Central Asia due to which Russia becomes directly exposed to extremism from

Afghanistan. One more example is the connection of various extremist groups of Central Asia like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Islamic Jihadi Union which further bring about a stress of extremism towards Russia (Jeremy Binnie, 2009).

Another fear for Russia comes from the Chechen separatists fighting for an independent Chechnya from 1991. In 1999, there was news coming in from South Asian outlets of the extremist groups of Afghan, Pakistan and Arab origin were being trained in Afghanistan and one leader of the First Chechen war Shamil Basayev along with Jordanian Afghan fighter Khattab were also involved (Anand, 2008).

The involvement of Khattab was a major reason for the shift of the Chechen conflict from a conflict of separatism to one of radicalism (Wilhelmsen, 2005). Another important leader of the Chechen was Movladi Udugov who wanted to seek the help of extremist groups from Afghanistan in the bid to separate Chechnya from Russia.

Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin in 2001, Russia supported the initiative led by the United States of America called 'Operation Enduring Freedom'; this step included Afghanistan in the Russian foreign policy. For this cooperation with the United States of America made Russia to encourage the Central Asian states to provide the United States of America with military bases and they were expected to share intelligence with regard to Afghanistan and providing military equipment to the Northern Alliance (Tsyppkin, 2002). One of the reasons for taking up this initiative was to maintain counter terrorism operations and to keep a check on any involvement of the Afghan extremists in the Chechen movements.

After 2004, there has been a minuscule demand for independence from the North Caucasus particularly Chechnya, however small, extremist groups still operate in the region which makes Russia involvement in the changing Afghanistan more relevant in the present era.

Another fear which Russia has with regard to Afghanistan is the drug trade which has been connected to the country from the Central Asian region. One of the major discussions between the Russian and its Afghan counterparts has been the narcotics business in Afghanistan. One of the main reasons for Russian involvement in the discussion on drug trafficking has been to further consolidate

its influence in the Central Asian states that have expressed their discomfort over the drug trafficking from Afghanistan (Ramani, *Russia's AntiDrug Crusade in Afghanistan*, 2017).

The northern route of the Afghan drug trafficking supplies opiates mainly in the form of heroin to the Russian Federation while small markets are also found in the Central Asian region. From 2012-2015 data shows that there has been an estimate of 42.5 to 74.5 tons of heroin entering the northern route towards Russia (Affairs, 2018).

Russia's Federal Drug Control Service is actively involved in the fight against drug production in Afghanistan, and with the support of the Afghani counterparts they have managed to conduct various joint operations to tackle the drug problem (Schwartz, 2010).

### **Russia in Afghan Scenario post US Troops Withdrawal**

After the decision by the United States of America to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan post 2014, there has been a new change in the scenario of the Afghan region. There has now developed a new discussion of new political powers being able to put their stamp in the region ranging from India to Russia to China. The hegemonic influence of the United States of America in Afghanistan had come to a standstill would only provide more space for other powers and regional actors to play a more important role in the region. Alongside Russia, India and China, regional powers such as Iran, Central Asia and the Gulf have also come to the picture.

Russia's main goals in relation to Afghanistan have remained the stabilization of the region and the confinement of extremism to its own country ; one such initiative has been the inclusion of Afghanistan as an observer member country of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2012 (Lang, 2014). Russia's policy towards Afghanistan is one of mixed complications of regional and global ambitions which are sometimes mutually exclusive.

Russia however fears the United States' involvement and influence in the region post troops withdrawal would spread to Central Asia which is under strong Russian influence. Russian hardliners have always been sceptical of increasing influence of the west in the Central Asian region both militarily and



economically. There is a consensus that Chinese influence is not as risky as is the western influence in the region with both the Chinese and the Russians sharing a common ground through the SCO.

The decline in the relations between the United States of America and Russia over the years ranging from issues on Georgia, Crimea or Syria or the pull-out of the United States from the INF treaty shows that there has been a decay in the relationship. Afghanistan maybe the link to restore the relations between the two nations.

Despite the fears harboured by the Russians with regard to the Americans, in Afghanistan is a common ground where they can work out differences with both nations having suffered and fearing the rise of extremism in the region and the extremists acting as a potential threat to the national interests (Hassan, 2019).

The threat of the rise of extremism in the Afghan belt after the troops withdrawal is one such fear of domestic instability which the Russians have but it was not only the fear of the Russians but also the Central Asian states who felt the need to ensure no rise of extremist elements from the region (Katz, 2014). India and Iran, both the major players in the Afghan territory also have second thoughts with both opposed to the emergence of the Taliban.

Another threat which the Taliban's poses to the Russians is the drug trade post the troop withdrawal, with the main focus on the poppy production being established in the south of the country. The influence of the Afghan government in the southern part of the country is limited and with the troop withdrawal, this will further deteriorate and the influence of the Taliban would further increase (Stepanova, 2013).

Another risk of the troop withdrawal would be the increase in opium in the northern side of the region with the majority of the heroin supply from the south the remaining has been produced by the north which for a long time had declined (UNODC, 2012). Over the years, the reduced attempts to drug seizures from Central Asia has further led to tensions in Russia with the Northern Route being the main line of supply which passes through Central Asia. Given the amount of threat which occurs from the drug trade in Afghanistan, Russia over time has taken various steps including a more comprehensive and counter narcotics strategy with a long development strategy beyond the idea of crop

substitution- a strategy to act as an alternative to the opium economy (Today, 2012).

The change of the leadership just before the troop's withdrawal from Hamid Karzai to Ashraf Ghani further changed the situation for Russia as well as the other countries involved in the region. Moscow doesn't have any vital stakes in the any of the Afghan regimes, therefore it chooses to work with any of the regimes and with the various ethnic groups located in the country as long as it doesn't impact any activities related to Russia (Dmitri Trenin, 2014).

In this change in the Afghan scenario, Russia has a history of intervention in the Afghan history and history will have a strong say on how things shape up in Afghanistan in the future (Kulhanek, 2010).

The 2014 withdrawal of troops not only changed the scenario of the United States of America's involvement in the country but it also highlighted a change in the peace process and the need for a peaceful solution for the ongoing conflict in the country. The peace talks were a space where many nations could assert their own influence ranging from the United States of America, China, Pakistan to Russia (Line, 2019). Though the initiative for peace has been there since 2001 there has been concrete steps taken only after 2018, with one of the major partners into the talks being the Taliban with an expected troops withdrawal happening once an agreement is found between the Taliban and the United States of America (Kakar, 2019).

Russia is also involved in the peace process and with the Russians being openly involved in the Astana Process (Syrian Peace Talks) this has given a chance for Russia to consolidate itself as an important player in the global arena. The involvement of Russia in two major conflicts tends to show that the Russians have gained a sense of importance and it is still an important member of the global arena.

One initiative taken by Russia in the changing Afghan scenario has been to be involved in the peace process. Another step taken by Russia has been holding talks with the Taliban. The recent engagement with the Taliban was not the first instance of contact but in the year 1995 the group tried to establish relations with Russia when it got control of the region of Kandahar (Dubnov, 2018). These steps taken during this time led to relations between the two concerned parties which eventually deteriorated due to the increased radicalism of the

Taliban. The restart of these talks between the two parties only occurred after the troops decided to withdraw in 2014 and Russia aimed to further influence in the region.

With talks between the Taliban and the United States of America not being stable, Russia takes initiative and has even offered to act as a guarantor for future peace talks between the two concerned parties (Reuters, 2019). This scenario can play in to the benefits of the Russians similar to the peace process in Israel-Palestine, where Hamas is adamant in its refusal to communicate with the United States of America, they however view Russia as an actor they can hold discussions with. The same is the case with the Taliban with them allowing the United States of America for dialogue, they however trend cautiously. Russia is another case however the fear or animosity is not as strong as for the United States of America.

In 2018, Russia tried to moderate peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government with the government sending a group of senior politicians for peace talks which would also have a delegation from the Taliban, this was the first time a delegation from the Taliban would attend a high level peace talk (Jazeera, Russia to host talks with Afghan leaders, Taliban delegation, 2018). This was a strong step taken by Russia to bring about a peaceful solution in the Afghan conflict, the inclusion of the Taliban to take part in a peace talk shows the seriousness of the Russians towards peace.

Russian concept of good and bad Taliban may not portray a good image for Russia, even though Russia considers the Taliban as a terrorist organisation it feels that discussions with moderate members can be help in peace talks. Russia along with Pakistan and China feel it can use the Taliban to counter the growth of another extremist terror group the Islamic State (Bagchi, 2018). One such issue of discussions with the Taliban is that it may impact Russia with its most important ally in South Asia India (Unnikrishnan, 2017). India however is not supportive of talks with the Taliban. It had sent a delegation to Moscow to attend the talks and promises to strive for peace in Afghanistan which it feels is important for overall peace in the region (Qazi, 2018).

In 2019, when the deal was off the table, Russian special envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov felt that talks between the two concerned parties were in a standstill but it is not over and had even announced for Russia to discuss with

the Americans on the future of the negotiations of the peace process (Rumani, 2019).

The suspended talks between the United States of America and the Taliban in 2019, did act as a beneficial situation for Russia with it trying to reform its diplomatic presence in the region and gain further importance. A few days later the Taliban ended up with a delegation in Russia in order to hold discussions with Russian special envoy to Afghanistan. The main focus of the talks was the resumption of the peace talks between the two concerned parties with an agreement reached before the cancellation of talks by United States President Donald Trump (Jazeera, Taliban delegation visits Russia, 2019).

This failure in the talks between the Taliban and the United States of America would only hurt American influence in the region as it would bring about alternative diplomatic processes and this only brings about a benefit for Russia who is seen as the next best option for the peace talks.

Recently before the rise of the corona pandemic in the global arena in February 2020, the United States of America and the Taliban had finally found a break to the deadlock of the peace talks. The agreement meant that the United States of America would withdraw all troops from Afghanistan and in return expect the Taliban to not be involved in extremist activities (Doucet, 2020). Though the deal with the external partner has been settled it now to see how the Taliban would deal with the domestic partner to handle the Afghan government.

The deal in 2020 may be short lived as the Taliban is unhappy with the talks with the government as the government had deemed it to be fruitless (BBC, 2020). It has to do with the prisoner swap deal which was included in the deal struck between the Taliban and the United States of America just few months ago (Wires, 2020).

This collapse in the deal along with the Afghan Government's unhappiness with the deal struck between the United States of America and the Taliban, Russia can take advantage of the deal and create its own space with the Afghan government. The Russians taking advantage of the deal can broker a deal with the Afghan government which has been an important cog of the peace process. It would also mean that Russia can use it to further its own ambitions within the region as well as try to improve the relations with the Afghans which had been impacted due to its constant contact with the Taliban for the peace process.

## **Conclusion**

The Russians for a long period of time have not been able to consolidate a significant policy with regard to Afghanistan. Though the Russians have been involved in the region indirectly with respect to the security and checks on the extremist and drug lords with regard to Central Asia, there was no confidence to be openly involved in the region.

The open involvement in the affairs and the rise to assert its dominance in the Middle East particularly Syria has given Russia the confidence to be involved and assert itself in the South Asian region particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan. With the support and the help of its all-weather friend India, Russia may be able to advance its influence in Afghanistan.

The borders of Afghanistan towards the Central Asian states of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also provide Russia with a reason for involvement in the region. The existence of the Northern drug route and the presence of extremists in the area ensure that Russia can expand its military presence in the region. Thus, Afghanistan not only helps bring about an influence for Russia in its own region but also helps further establish Russian dominance in the Central Asia region. In regard to the changing scenario in Afghanistan, Russia is one of the major powers involved in the peace process and wants to stamp itself as the second-best alternative for an external power for the peace process after the United States of America.

The efforts taken by Russia in discussing and debating the peace process with the Taliban who is one of the major reasons for conflict with the Afghan government and who supports the United States involvement in the peace talks, Russia seeks to become an important player in the conflict resolution in Afghanistan. Afghanistan known as a region where most of the world and regional powers' involvement is found, Russian involvement solidifies its importance as a member of the global arena.

The importance of the United States of America towards the peace process is understood by the Russians and therefore they tend to extract their own political dividends during the talks with the Taliban and try to convince the Taliban to re-negotiate with the United States of America on the peace process as it refuses to discuss with the Afghan Government until the United States of America commits to the troop withdrawal. The breakdown of talks in the recent Taliban

and Afghan government summit further provide Russia with a space to involve itself and ensure that it improves its impression with all the concerned parties involved.

Therefore, it can be seen that Russia in its reactions towards the changing Afghan scenario is simplistic and based purely on its own national interests. The Russians' only aim to establish a peaceful Afghanistan where it would gain on the basis of the lack of extremism and drug trade and as well bring about a regain in the influence of Russia in the South Asia region with the leadership and main aim being to establish itself back to the days of the Soviet Union.

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