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## **PARTICIPATING IN RUSSIA SPONSORED AFGHAN PEACE TALKS**

**BY**

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When the request came from Russia for India to participate in its sponsored Afghan peace talks, alongside eleven other nations, India was in a quandary. Russia is an ally whom India would find hard to refuse. When Russia, China and Pakistan met as a trilateral to discuss Afghanistan and the future role of the Taliban, India and Kabul were missing. Post the meeting, Ajit Doval, the National Security Advisor visited Moscow to ally India's concerns. It was after the visit that India and Afghanistan were invited on board the trilateral.

For India to attend the peace talks implies multiple changes to its existing viewpoint. It considers the Taliban an evil and a Pak sponsored and supported agency. It has regularly announced that there is 'no good or bad' Taliban, hence negotiating with them would be against its existing statements. Further, the Taliban has been targeting Indian workers and projects in Afghanistan.

The attacks on the Indian consulate and embassy have also been owned by them. India has always supported the concept that the talks should be 'Afghan owned, Afghan led' implying that they should be only between the Afghan government and the Taliban, without others participating. However, the reality is that US and Russia are leading their own talks with the Taliban.

India is in the US camp as far as Afghanistan is concerned, hence participating in Russia led talks would be contrary to its alignment. The US and Afghanistan also sent observers for the talks, who like India remained silent spectators. The US observer was a representative from its Moscow Embassy, while Afghanistan was represented by members of its High peace Council. Indian observers were retired diplomats, who were present but did not participate in the discussions. Post the talks Russia stated, that the Indian should officially participate.

Pak has no desire to permit India a role in the ongoing peace talks. It desires that Indian influence in Afghanistan be curtailed as it considers the country, its backyard. Hence, if India participates as an active member, it would offset Pak plans.

Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan have for long been maintaining contacts with the Taliban. Pakistan has been the base from there the Taliban has operated. It has faced US anger, drone strikes and accusations for the same. Afghanistan continues to blame it as being the location where all attacks on the country are planned. The Taliban is also termed the Quetta Shura, implying the location where it is based. The ex-Pak foreign affairs advisor, Sartaj Aziz had stated in the US that since the Taliban is based within their country, they do have some hold over it.

With the growing presence of the IS in Afghanistan, Russia, China and Pak were concerned about its influence spreading beyond Afghanistan and them being the next affected. They therefore needed to keep the IS under check. The Taliban had already declared the IS as its enemy. Hence what better ally than the Taliban to handle the IS expansion, rather than permitting it to grow and engulf other nations.

The Iranians had other reasons. They were keen to maintain ties with both, the Afghan government and the Taliban, mainly to handle religious differences. Hence, funded the Kabul government and the Taliban. Further, with the US, an avowed adversary stuck in Afghanistan, could prompt the Iranians into doing anything to support those challenging them. Mullah Mansour, the Taliban leader killed in a drone strike, was on his return from Iran when he was struck.

Russia and China were perceiving that the US strategy was not to resolve the Afghan tangle. In their opinion, the US was enabling the IS to grow and were possibly even supporting its growth. This would enable it to remain in Afghanistan as also result in increased pressure on Russia and China. Their version is the elimination of Mullah Mansour was done when he was contemplating peace talks with the US. In Pak's opinion, increased instability in Afghanistan would hamper its own security and development.

In their earlier discussions, these nations sought to selectively remove members of the Taliban from the UN sanctions list, currying favour with them. The US refused, only enhancing the existing doubts on true US intent. The US also contends that Russia, Pakistan and Iran are supplying arms to the Taliban.

The US, realizing that the Taliban now controls almost 50% of the country and the chances of regaining control is bleak has also begun seeking talks. The present government desires an honourable exit. It has appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, an ex-Ambassador, to lead Afghan reconciliation efforts. He has over the past month met Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar and visited Pak.

The Taliban head of the Doha office responsible for conducting talks with various powers is Sher Mohamad Abaas Stanikzai, who is a product of the Indian Military Academy's 71<sup>st</sup> course. Hence, his respect for India would be based on his experience at the academy. Based on Zalmay's request, two major Taliban leaders in Pak custody have been freed. The US seeks talks under their aegis, not sponsored or controlled by Russia.

For the present, the Taliban continue to insist on foreign troops leaving their soil. They are unwilling for direct talks with the Afghan government as in their opinion, it is a proxy government of the US. They have stated that they would act to ensure that the forthcoming elections are stalled. To appease the Taliban, the US is contemplating delaying elections. Hence, no immediate solution appears to be forthcoming.

'There are no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests', is a well-known statement by Lord Palmerston. For India, to send retired diplomats only as show pieces, for the talks in Moscow, is illogical. India is presently seeking to be a major player in the region. It seeks to enhance its role and hold in Afghanistan. For this, it needs to engage with anyone in power in the country or even likely to come to power either alone or in conjunction with the present government. If the US, Russia and China are already engaging with the Taliban, there is no reason for India to stay away.

India should seek to be a part of all groups which engage with the Taliban, whether it be the US or Russia. It must begin to expand its footprint and be a nation which can influence the region. It must seek to override the control of Pak over the Taliban.

Actively participating in talks would in no way imply any changed stance by India. In fact, it could open doors for India to enhance ties with the Taliban and continue to play a major role in the country. Russia has given

India this opportunity, which it cannot let go. By playing a non-active role, it is undermining its own international standing and playing into the hands of Pak.

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