



Pakistan's Eurasian Solution for Afghanistan

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Report Authors

“Pakistan's Eurasian Solution for Afghanistan” was researched, compiled and written by **Andrew Korybko**, a political analyst, journalist and a regular contributor to several online journals, as well as a member of the expert council for the Institute of Strategic Studies and Predictions at the People's Friendship University of Russia. He specializes in Russian affairs and geopolitics, specifically the US strategy in Eurasia. He is a regular contributing analyst to **CommandEleven**.

About CommandEleven

CommandEleven is a research organization focused on Pakistan's national security aspects and enhancing global understanding and collaboration opportunities for the nation.

Founded in 2015, **CommandEleven** provides situational awareness to facilitate a better understanding of the key dynamics that effect Pakistan from a national security perspective, especially in relation to terrorism, insurgencies and extremism.

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Preface

Moscow will host¹ six-party talks about Afghanistan on 15 February, with Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Iran, India, and naturally Russia expected to be represented. Moreover, Zamir Kabulov – thought of as being the leader² of the “Islamophile”³ South Asian faction in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – extended⁴ an invitation to the US as well, though stipulating that it should first be “ready to work constructively with regional powers” and “determine what they are planning to do in Afghanistan.” Given these conditions and the fact that the Trump Administration has yet to articulate its strategy on Afghanistan, Kabulov was probably just being diplomatic in inviting his American counterparts, and if they show up at all, they might be represented by low-level token dignitaries like they were for Astana.

Multilateral Syrian And Afghan Talks: Same Format, Similar Hope

Speaking of which, there’s an interesting parallel between the Astana process for Syria and the developing Eurasian framework for Afghanistan. At the end of December, Moscow hosted two very high-profile summits⁵ dealing with both of these conflicts, with the outcome of the Syrian-related one being the Moscow Declaration⁶ and subsequent Astana gathering, while the Afghan one seems to have produced the forthcoming meeting in Moscow next week. Both prior events importantly emphasized the trilateral cooperation between Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria, and Russia, Pakistan, and China in Afghanistan, and it’s no surprise that both of their follow-up summits expanded the format to include additional players.

For example, the Astana gathering involved a motley crew of “moderate opposition rebels” alongside Damascus’ legitimate representatives, and Russia also spoke about its future intention⁷ to involve Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Iraq. Furthermore, a

¹ “Moscow to host international meeting on Afghanistan on Feb. 15.” TASS, Russian News Agency, Feb 8, 2017, <http://tass.com/world/929675>

² “Kadakin’s Surprise Death: Tectonic Shock to Indo-Russian Ties,” Andrew Korybko, Regional Rapport, Jan 26, 2017, <http://regionalrapport.com/2017/01/26/ambassador-kadakin-just-died-will-russian-indian-partnership-follow/>

³ “Is Russia’s “Deep State” divided over India?” Andrew Korybko, Katehon Think Tank, Jun 10, 2016, <http://katehon.com/article/russias-deep-state-divided-over-india>

⁴ “Why Not? Russia Ready to Invite US to Six-Party Afghanistan Talks,” Sputnik News, Feb 07, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201702071050425105-russia-us-afghanistan-six-party/>

⁵ “Moscow’s Syrian-Afghan Summits are Geostrategic Masterstrokes,” Andrew Korybko, Sputnik News Agency, Dec 19, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201612191048749033-moscow-syria-afghanistan-summits/>

⁶ “Russia, Turkey & Iran ready to be guarantors in resolving Syrian crisis – Russian defense minister,” Russia Today, Dec 20, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/370959-russia-turkey-iran-resolving-syria/>

⁷ “Lavroc says Egypt could join Syria talks in Astana,” TASS News Agency, Dec 29, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/370959-russia-turkey-iran-resolving-syria/>

Russian-written "draft constitution"⁸ for Syria was unveiled at the talks, and Moscow stated that it envisions this document laying the foundation⁹ for an eventual political settlement to the war. Pursuant to that, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov said that he hopes¹⁰ that it will be part of the upcoming intra-Syrian Geneva discussions which are expected to resume later this month. All in all, however, the most consequential outcome reached at the Astana talks was the 'normalization/legitimization' of the "moderate opposition rebels" and their formalized separation from the terrorist groups that some of them were only just recently a part of.

As for next week's six-party Moscow talks on Afghanistan, it's clear to see that the trilateral format between Russia, Pakistan, and China is obviously being expanded to twice its size through the inclusion of Iran, India, and Afghanistan, and potentially even the US to some capacity. It's doubtful that a similar foreign-written "draft constitution" will be announced at the event, but what can instead be expected to come out of the meeting are similar efforts to formally divide the "good/moderate" Taliban from the "bad/terrorist" ones which have since gone on to become part of Daesh's franchise in the country. There's no indication that India will yield in its unwavering¹¹ and obstinate stance that all Taliban are "terrorists", but the American-backed Kabul government has belatedly and only just recently recognized¹² that they must eventually enter into dialogue with the Taliban in order to end the war, and herein lays the opportunity for a future breakthrough.

Separating The "Good" From The "Bad"

If any progress is made during the upcoming Moscow talks in regards to the Tripartite of Russia-Pakistan-China convincing Kabul of the need to sincerely commit to and then fast-track its desire to engage in dialogue with the Taliban, then it could possibly provide a 'face-saving' opening for Trump to begin wrapping up the US' War on Afghanistan in order to more fully focus on his "containment" efforts against Iran¹³ and China.¹⁴ Neither Trump, his Defense Secretary "Mad Dog" Mattis, nor his National Security Advisor Michael Flynn – all three of whom have staked their reputations on eradicating "radical Islamic

⁸ "Syria: Digging Into the Details of the Russian-written "Draft Constitution," Andrew Korybko, 21st Century Wire, <http://21stcenturywire.com/2017/02/03/syria-digging-into-the-details-of-the-russian-written-draft-constitution/>

⁹ "Lavrov calls Russia-proposed Syrian draft constitution invitation for conversation," TASS News Agency, Feb 03, 2017, <http://tass.com/politics/928992>

¹⁰ "Lavrov, Syrian Opposition Discuss Draft Constitution, UN's Passivity in Moscow," Sputnik News Agency, Jan 27, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201701271050063633-lavrov-syrian-opposition-russia/>

¹¹ "Russia, China and Pakistan for flexible ties with Taliban, India ignored," Indrani Bagchil, Times of India, Dec 29, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/russia-china-and-pakistan-for-flexible-ties-with-taliban-india-ignored/articleshow/56228906.cms>

¹² "Afghan government adopts new strategy to reach reconciliation with Taliban," Sputnik News Agency, Feb 06, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/asia/201702061050378068-afghanistan-taliban-new-strategy/>

¹³ "Iranians should be thankful for Trump," Andrew Korybko, Katehon Think Tank, Dec 05, 2016, <http://katehon.com/article/iranians-should-be-thankful-trump>

¹⁴ "Calming the Mainstream Media's Trump-China Hysteria," Andrew Korybko, Oriental Review, Dec 07, 2016, <http://orientalreview.org/2016/12/07/calming-the-mainstream-medias-trump-china-hysteria/>

terrorism” – can afford to strike a deal with the “terrorist” Taliban, let alone draw down from Afghanistan in a similarly disastrous manner as Obama did from Iraq in 2011 and thus leave the door tantalizingly open for Daesh. This can only happen if Kabul recognizes the “good/moderate” Taliban as being separate from the “bad/terrorist” ones and comes to appreciate their valuable anti-Daesh functions.

India will predictably object to this and do everything in its power to stop any Kabul-Taliban rapprochement, but Iran will likely be much quieter and simply go along with the flow of events in the neighboring country. Russia and China already have an idea about how their counterparts will react, which is why the Moscow meeting is likely intended as a ‘polite/diplomatic’ introduction to India about the changing reality in Afghanistan (out of respect to the enduring Russian-Indian Strategic Partnership) and a way to formally get Iran on board with this initiative. New Delhi might not change its position towards the Taliban unless Washington does, so it’s possible that both India and the US will continue to remain obstacles to the peace process for the coming future, though they’ll now be aware that the momentum has shifted against their existing interests if Russia, Pakistan, China, Iran, and Afghanistan reach a consensual decision on “normalizing/legitimizing” the “good/moderate” Taliban.

The longer that the US and India take to accept this convincingly imminent change of events, the less influence that they’ll be able to command in the country or over a forthcoming round of revived and inclusive talks (in the sense that the “good/moderate” Taliban play their rightful and equal role). Given the Trump Administration’s stated positions regarding “radical Islamic terrorism”, they can’t even begin to contemplate redeploying their Afghan-based forces elsewhere unless the opening develops whereby its Kabul proxy comes to realize that there is indeed such a thing as “good/moderate” Taliban which play an irreplaceable role in countering their “bad/terrorist” offshoots which founded the country’s Daesh franchise. Pakistan is the brains behind this strategy and already persuaded Russia and China of the urgent necessity in arriving at this game-changing conclusion and throwing their full support behind it.

Internationalization And The Inclusion Of India

Islamabad knew that it couldn’t succeed in convincing Kabul or Washington of this alone given how both of these actors distrust Pakistan’s motives and view it as a partisan player in the country, but now that Pakistan helped Russia, China, and soon even Iran to unite in their understanding that the “good/moderate” Taliban must be included in the conflict reconciliation process and nationwide anti-terrorist operations, it’ll be difficult for both of these aforementioned players and their Indian ally to ignore this decisive political-diplomatic shift. Clearly, Pakistan’s strategists and decision makers obviously understood that the key to making progress in resolving the War on Afghanistan was to internationalize the peace talks through the inclusion of key Eurasian players such as Russia, China, and Iran.

Islamabad would likely prefer for New Delhi to not be involved in this framework, but Moscow sees its participation as being a necessary component in order for improving the odds that a deal can eventually be made. Although Pakistan might object to this, most of the anticipated participants in the talks have some form of high-level strategic relations with India and might refuse to take the talks seriously unless their partner – which also has

an interest in the country – was invited to attend. The US is engaged in a newfound military-strategic partnership with India, while Russia has a long-standing history of loyalties to it in spite of the just-mentioned fact of New Delhi's surprising pivot to Washington. Iran plans to cooperate with India on the North-South Corridor stretching from Saint Petersburg to Mumbai, while Afghanistan envisions a crucial extension of this project injecting the landlocked country and the rest of Central Asia with Indian influence.

Under these conditions, there's no way that India could be excluded from this framework, even if it doesn't ever attain any position of influence over the process and its participation is merely symbolic for diplomacy's sake.

Interpreting Iran's Imperatives

Other than the role of India, which was just discussed, some additional words need to be said about Iran's inclusion in the talks and the influence that it's expected to wield over this issue. Tehran has mostly stayed on the sidelines throughout the past 16 years, turning a blind eye to what's happening in Afghanistan and hoping that its American rival will remain indefinitely entrapped in this quagmire. Aside from being cynical, this unstated policy is also pragmatic. Iran does not want the US to succeed in its Afghan plans because Washington could then use the country as a launching pad for waging Hybrid War on it through the sheltering of anti-government terrorist groups such as Daesh, Jundallah, and others. The same logic also applies to Pakistan, which thus gives the two countries a significant overlap of strategic understanding towards the American occupation forces in their neighboring country. Unlike Pakistan, however, Iran, hasn't been too active of a player in Afghanistan over the years, but that could easily change if it was convinced to come on board with the new proposal in encouraging Kabul to team up with the "good/moderate" Taliban against their "bad/terrorist" counterparts which broke away to form Daesh.

Tehran is keen enough to understand what this development would mean for its own security, which is why it's likely to politically support it. It's enough to remind the reader that Iran has agreed to much more than this when it came to Astana, since its leadership threw its weight behind what amounted to the de-facto "normalization/legitimization" of Jaysh Islam, an organization which is now regarded as being part of the "moderate rebel opposition" but had previously been decried by both Tehran and Moscow just a few months ago for being terrorists. If Iran could shift its position on one of the major non-state adversaries fighting against its Syrian ally, then it shouldn't have too much of a problem doing the same as it relates to the Taliban and thus boosting the prospects for more pragmatically bringing an end to the much-longer War on Afghanistan. Whereas Iran and even Russia's changed stance towards Jaysh Islam in Syria may have been interpreted by some as being a 'concession' to the anti-Damascus coalition in the pragmatic interests of accelerating a solution to the War on Syria, it would instead be seen as a strategic gain for them if applied towards the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In the context of comparing the multipolar-brokered Syrian and Afghan peace talks, it can't be left out that Iran is the only country besides Russia to take part in both Astana and the upcoming six-party Moscow meeting, which attests to its trans-regional influence in West and Central-South Asia by virtue of its geography. The US is currently ramping up

asymmetrical hostilities against Iran and is highly displeased whenever Tehran is given a seat at the table for important functions, just as Iran has reciprocally felt¹⁵ about the US especially as it relates to Astana. Nevertheless, it's possible for progress to be made in line with the stated objectives of both diplomatic functions even if Iranian and American dignitaries have no contact with one another throughout the course of diplomatic events. As was expressed earlier in the research, Trump is much more interested in refocusing the Pentagon's conventional and unconventional efforts on "containing" Iran and China, and the Taliban quagmire is an unnecessary distraction in this equation which detracts from the viability of his grand strategic ambitions.

Accepting that it's impossible for the US to accomplish its initial task of "nation-building" and "democracy promotion" in Afghanistan, the best recourse that it can hope for at this time is to be allowed a 'face-saving' exit from the scene, ergo why Washington might be receptive to the timing of the multipolar initiative to separate the "good/moderate" Taliban from the "bad/terrorist" ones which 'defected' to Daesh and use the former as the best fighting force for combatting the latter. In exchange, the "international community" (or at least the Eurasian Great Powers) would promise the "good/moderate" Taliban full recognition as legitimate political players in their country's conflict resolution process, thereby 'killing two birds with one stone' and accomplishing what the Chinese typically term as a "win-win" result.

The Moscow Agenda

Considering all of the aforementioned factors elaborated on in this research, the following points should constitute the agenda for the upcoming Moscow talks:

- Attain unambiguous Iranian support for Russian-Pakistani-Chinese initiative to differentiate between the "good/moderate" Taliban and their "bad/terrorist" offshoots that formed Daesh;
- Leverage the expanded quadrilateral (Russian, Pakistan, Chinese, Iranian) backing for this proposal to convince Kabul of the necessity to seriously engage with the Taliban as equals for the sake of anti-terrorist cooperation and political reconciliation;
- Encourage Kabul and the Taliban to set a timetable for intra-Afghan talks brokered by Russia, Pakistan, and China, potentially even being expanded to include Iran, India, and the US with time;
- Convey discrete suggestions to the US that this incipient yet promising development is the 'face-saving' justification that they need for contemplating an eventual drawdown or outright withdrawal from Afghanistan;
- and respectfully hint to India that it won't be able to stop the progress that's being made, let alone if the US also comes onboard, and that now is the best time for it to change its position and become 'flexible' on the issue.

¹⁵ "Iran's position complicating Astana talks on Syria – Kremlin spokesman," Sputnik News Agency, Jan 21, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201701211049853457-iran-us-syria-astana-talks/>

Concluding Thoughts

Just like the War on Syria is approaching its final stages, so too is the War on Afghanistan, albeit at a much slower pace and with a lot more progress still left to be desired. After years of political-diplomatic stalemate, however, Pakistan has finally breathed new life into the conflict resolution process in the landlocked country through its clever internationalization of the issue via its newfound Eurasian pivot. Islamabad worked for years to cultivate Beijing's strategists and decision makers into recognizing the genius of separating the "good/moderate" Taliban from their "bad/terrorist" defectors, and the understanding that the two sides finally reached over this important issue was enough to eventually convince Russia of its undeniable pragmatism.¹⁶ Altogether, these three Eurasian Great Powers symbolically took the lead in guiding the stillborn Afghan peace process after their late-December meeting in Moscow, and less than two months following their summit, they're now expanding this successful format to the level of six-party talks which will once again be held in the Russian capital.

The success of the upcoming gathering is important for Pakistan for reasons beyond the seemingly obvious. Nobody seriously argues that peace in Afghanistan wouldn't be beneficial for Pakistan's immediate security interests, but what's mostly unnoticed by many observers is just how important this would also be for Pakistani-American ties in the tumultuous Trump Era.¹⁷ The new US president is primed to release a wave of unconventional warfare as part of his much-publicized rivalry against Iran and China, and with Pakistan being geographically in between both and potentially uniting them through CPEC one day, it's predictable that it might get caught up in this geopolitical competition and possibly even become a target itself. Therefore, Islamabad is impelled to take proactive measures in proving the utility of its worth to Washington in order to remain outside the US' crosshairs. So long as positive relations with Pakistan are of high-level strategic importance to the present American administration, Islamabad will have less to worry about when it comes to Washington and could thus focus more intently on confronting terrorism, balancing against Indian aggression, and dedicating itself to socio-economic development through CPEC.

The key to ensuring Pakistan's security across the next four-to-eight years of the Trump Era is to balance between a variety of global powers in maximizing its position as a the "Zipper of Pan-Eurasian Integration" and the "Convergence of Civilizations". While these two historic roles might make Pakistan a tempting target for the US' Hybrid War destabilizations, whether carried out alone or in conjunction with its new Indian ally, Islamabad could powerfully counteract this possibility by highlighting its function as the crucial actor which facilitated Washington's 'face-saving' drawdown and/or eventual retreat from Afghanistan. Since fighting "radical Islamic terrorism" is at the top of Trump's agenda, Pakistan should remind the US and the rest of the world how it's been the largest and longest-running victim of this scourge until Syria recently surpassed it in suffering, and that this is why Islamabad is so inspired to break through

¹⁶ "Pakistan critical to defeating ISIS, says Russian Special Rep to Afghanistan," Devirupa Mitra, The Wire, Dec 05, 2016, <https://thewire.in/84672/pakistan-isis-afghanistan-russia/>

¹⁷ "The global Trumpquakes that are shaking the world," Andrew Korybko, The Duran, Feb 05, 2017, <http://theduran.com/global-trumpquakes-shaking-world/>

the Kabul-Taliban deadlock in spearheading a sustainable political and anti-terrorist solution to Afghanistan's globally notorious woes.

Daesh can't be defeated without the indispensable help of the "good/moderate" Taliban, which themselves can't be "normalized/legitimized" into the Afghan political-military system without Pakistan's assistance, so if the US and the rest of the world truly want to defeat terrorism in South-Central Asia and safeguard the security of all of the countries in this trans-regional pivot space, then they absolutely need to work with Pakistan and understand that its stability and prosperity are fundamental prerequisites for sustaining political and anti-terrorist gains in Afghanistan.

About the Author

Andrew Korybko is a political analyst, journalist and a regular contributor to several online journals, as well as a member of the expert council for the Institute of Strategic Studies and Predictions at the People's Friendship University of Russia. He specializes in Russian affairs and geopolitics, specifically the US strategy in Eurasia. His other areas of focus include tactics of regime change, color revolutions and unconventional warfare used across the world. His book, "Hybrid Wars: The Indirect Adaptive Approach To Regime Change", extensively analyzes the situations in Syria and Ukraine and claims to prove that they represent a new model of strategic warfare being waged by the US.

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