



SIXTH MOSCOW FORMAT: RUSSIA'S GROWING TIES WITH THE TALIBAN

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In recent months, Russia has made significant overtures toward Afghanistan, such as considering delisting the Taliban from its list of proscribed entities, sending a high-level delegation to Kabul to explore potential collaboration, and even suggesting that India join the 'Afghan Quad'. Of these, a key vehicle through which Russia is emerging as a key player in Afghanistan - as the West appears to have deprioritised the country following the events of August 2021 - is the "Moscow Format of Consultations on Afghanistan", whose latest iteration was held in Moscow on October 05, 2024. In light of that, this brief seeks to analyse the rationale behind the Moscow Format, review its previous iterations, and highlight key outcomes of the latest round of talks while examining broader developments in Russia-Taliban ties and how they accord Russia an elevated role in Afghanistan.

What is the Moscow Format?

Launched in 2017 by Russia, India, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) joining soon thereafter, the Moscow Format has evolved into a regular platform for regional countries to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and the promotion of peace and stability therein. Initially, the format's mandate was to facilitate political reconciliation between the then-Afghan government and the Taliban to ensure peace and security in the region.¹ On that account, the format's first iteration was held in April 2017 with the participation of the above-mentioned countries, though

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the Taliban were notably absent.

The Taliban were in attendance at the second dialogue in 2018. While the Kabul government did not officially send its delegation, members of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, which did not represent the government but oversaw peace efforts, participated, with the United States too, maintaining an observer status.² The 2018 iteration was hence hailed as a big win for Russian diplomacy, as Russia, for the first time, had officially invited the Afghan Taliban to an international forum, bringing them onto the same platform as the Afghan delegates.³ Although this was Russia's first formal invitation to the Afghan Taliban, Moscow had established prior contact with the group, reportedly providing financial and arms support to them under the pretext of countering the perceived Islamic State threat.⁴

The third round of consultations, held in 2021 after a hiatus of two years, carried a twofold significance.⁵ One, it marked the first meeting since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Two, there was a collective acknowledgement of the Taliban's new rulership sans formal recognition, with such an official investiture being made contingent on the Taliban's ability to truly form an inclusive government since it was viewed as a fundamental prerequisite for completing Afghanistan's national reconciliation process. More significantly, the Taliban expressed contentment with the meeting, lauding it as an "initiative of the Russian side".⁶

In the fourth round of talks held in November 2022, Russia, interestingly, chose not to invite the Taliban. Although the Taliban bemoaned that this move rendered the meeting "incomplete" and could have "an adverse effect on engagement",⁷ they nevertheless welcomed the discussion. This changed with the fifth iteration in 2023, convened in the Russian city of Kazan. This time around, the Taliban participated, and apart from the format's permanent members, representatives of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates attended as guests of honour.⁸ Known as the "Kazan Declaration", the meeting acknowledged the reduction in poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, emphasised on the continued implementation of anti-drug policies, and underlined the oft-quoted counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban.⁹ Most participants of the declaration further observed that cooperation with "non-regional players" on Afghanistan-related matters is feasible, only if the US-led Western coalition shoulders responsibility for Afghanistan's current predicament, unfreezes Afghan assets, and lifts unilateral sanctions.¹⁰ In hindsight, a thorough analysis of the Moscow Format's latest iteration is essential, considering it serves as a microcosm of the regional countries' evolving Afghanistan outlook.

Key Takeaways from the Sixth Iteration

A significant chunk of the Joint Statement revolved around terrorism, noting that “all terrorist and separatist groups, based in Afghanistan, continue to pose a serious threat to global and regional security”.¹¹ Accordingly, the statement called upon all parties to bolster counterterrorism cooperation with Afghanistan at both bilateral and multilateral levels, and also urged the de facto authorities (Taliban) to fulfil their international commitments in dismantling and eliminating all terrorist groups “equally and non-discriminatory”. Later, Pakistan’s former special envoy for Afghanistan, Asif Durrani, characterised the inclusion of the terrorism dimension in the joint statement as an “important development”, hoping the Taliban would heed the given counsel.¹²

A second feature is that, despite the prevailing uncertainty in Afghanistan, all parties wished to “actively integrate” Afghanistan into the regional connectivity and recognised the “promising development of economic and trade exchanges, investment cooperation of Afghanistan with regional countries”.¹³ For the first time, they also laid out four crucial sectors to support Afghanistan in achieving independent and sustainable development: medical care, poverty alleviation, agriculture, and disaster prevention. This is beneficial as it establishes a framework for countries looking to invest in Afghanistan to alleviate the plight of its citizenry.

Third, the statement, as a thinly veiled reference to the hitherto US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military presence in Afghanistan, also deemed the deployment of military infrastructure by third-party states in Afghanistan and neighbouring states as “unacceptable”, viewing such actions as antithetical to regional peace and security.

Fourth, the cause of inclusive governance was not lost on the involved parties, as they once again called upon the Taliban “to protect the basic rights and interests of all Afghan people, including women, girls, and all ethnic groups”.¹⁴ While the continuing presence of this theme in previous iterations highlights the enduring importance placed on this issue in the Moscow Format, it has not yielded any discernible change in the Taliban’s way of administering. Additionally, the Taliban were urged to create a conducive environment necessary for the welfare of Afghans, avert their further migration, and establish conditions that would facilitate the return of refugees.

Lastly, considering the declining rate of humanitarian aid since 2021,¹⁵ the statement urged the international community to accelerate the flow of emergency humanitarian assistance and opposed any attempts to politicise such a provision. Furthermore, it called on those nations responsible for Afghanistan’s current crisis (implicitly alluding to the West once again) to assume accountability for the post-conflict reconstruction of

its economy.

From Intervention to Consultation: Russia's Evolving Role

The format is unique in the sense that it is Russia spearheading the consultations, a clear break from Western-led initiatives focused on Afghanistan. It is also an indication of Russia's sustained interest in the region amid geopolitical ebbs and flows, especially in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Russia is back at the diplomatic forefront in Afghan affairs, trying to fill the geopolitical vacuum proactively —but cautiously— alongside China after the hasty US withdrawal. This is a stark departure from Russia's posture in the distant past, as it once supported the Northern Alliance, a loose assemblage of militias opposed to the Taliban. Today, it sees the Taliban as a legitimate partner in its counterterrorism efforts, particularly after the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) was implicated in the Moscow Crocus City Hall attack in March 2024.

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Besides Russia's strategic interests, the format also brings to the fore the gulf that exists between the West and regional countries regarding how best to engage with the Taliban. Regional countries have little choice but to engage, principally to safeguard themselves against any spillover emanating from the instability in Afghanistan, since they are geographically proximate to such threats than the West and, consequently, cannot afford to bury their heads in the sand or engage in frequent virtue signalling like the West. The West, by contrast, fatigued by two decades of physical presence, lacks the appetite to constructively involve itself in the overall upliftment of Afghanistan, especially as it is consumed by the ongoing crises in the Middle East and Russia-Ukraine.

Russia, then, is uniquely positioned to act in Afghanistan. In August 2021, as the Taliban's blitzkrieg unfolded, most countries rushed to shutter their embassies and evacuate their diplomatic personnel, but Russia kept its Embassy open, with the Russian Ambassador Dmitry Zhirnov becoming the first foreign diplomat to meet with Taliban representatives.¹⁶ Russia's readiness to engage Afghanistan and its new power-holders was even explicitly outlined in its Foreign Policy Doctrine, released in March 2023. It stated that "comprehensive settlement in Afghanistan, assistance in building it as a sovereign, peaceful and neutral State with stable economy and political system which meets the interests of all the ethnic groups living there and opens up prospects for integrating Afghanistan into the Eurasian

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space for cooperation.”¹⁷

Symbolically, Russia has a professed interest in removing the Taliban from its list of proscribed organisations, where they were placed in 2003 along with al-Qaeda, for providing support to separatists in the North Caucasus at the time.¹⁸ To that end, the lower house of Russia’s parliament, State Duma, passed a bill in December 2024 that would pave the way for courts to lift the Taliban’s designation as a terrorist group.¹⁹ For the bill to translate into law, it needs to be approved by the Upper House and subsequently signed by President Vladimir Putin. Although the plan to unban the Taliban is driven by potential economic and security cooperation with them, it is fraught with several challenges. For example, notwithstanding the Taliban’s efforts, Moscow pinning hopes on the Taliban to counter ISKP appears rather optimistic, considering many ISKP members were once part of the Taliban movement, and many current Taliban members share ideological affinities with ISKP.²⁰ Tajikistan, a member of the Moscow Format, likely shares a similar pessimism, which led to its refusal to sign the Kazan Declaration in 2023, as it objected to the acknowledgement of Taliban’s successes in combating ISKP, and its effective anti-drug measures, thereby being omitted from the Russian press release.²¹

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However, given the shared anti-Western convictions between the Taliban and the Kremlin, Moscow’s search for new trade routes to bypass Western sanctions, and its desire to increasingly align with the Global South, the two can, indeed, forge a strong partnership. This seems to be partly vindicated by a high-level gathering in Kabul in November 2024, when Secretary of Russia’s Security Council, Sergei Shoigu, emphasised increasing bilateral cooperation with the Taliban through engagement in various avenues while also stressing that one of Russia’s chief goals would be to provide an “impulse for the process of a settlement among Afghans”.²² But, there is a palpable risk that Russia might only prioritise security, political and economic cooperation with Afghanistan without wielding its leverage over the Taliban to exact concessions on human rights, particularly for women. The leverage in this case is the Taliban’s reliance on Russia to “neutralise the pressure” of Western-imposed asset freezes and travel bans on their leaders, as Baradar sanguinely told Shoigu during the latter’s visit.²³ This risk, however, remains equally real for all participating actors of the Moscow Format.

For the people of Afghanistan, particularly women and girls, each photo-op with the Taliban and the red carpets laid out for their leaders by foreign governments symbolise a tacit acceptance and normalisation of the group’s regressive regime. Moreover, if decades

of instability and interventions in Afghanistan have made one thing clear, it is that, as much as countries ought to engage with the powers that be, no strategy, especially one anchored in vested interests, can succeed in the long-term without focusing on “winning the hearts and minds” of the Afghan people.

Moscow Format thus must take stock of the past shortcomings and present lacunae and, subsequently, strive to meaningfully utilise the platform, lest the significance of regional frameworks, which was explicitly appreciated in the latest iteration’s Joint Statement, diminishes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the success of any critical mechanism, regardless of which country is at the helm, hinges on achieving a clear consensus among all parties - an element abidingly lacking in all Afghanistan-focused platforms. The Moscow Format presents an opportunity to alter this provided the participating nations overcome their individual differences with each other on how best to proceed with the ever-present Afghanistan dilemma. History is instructive and replete with frameworks that failed to bring forth the desired change in Afghanistan. The Moscow Format thus must take stock of the past shortcomings and present lacunae and, subsequently, strive to meaningfully utilise the platform, lest the significance of regional frameworks, which was explicitly appreciated in the latest iteration’s Joint Statement, diminishes.

Notes:

- ¹ Nilofar Sakhi, “Reflections on the 2022 Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan and regional security,” Atlantic Council, November 17, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/reflections-on-the-2022-moscow-format-consultations-on-afghanistan-and-regional-security/>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.
- ² “Afghanistan war: Taliban attend landmark peace talks in Russia,” *BBC*, November 10, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46155189>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.
- ³ Zahid Hussain, “The ‘Moscow Format’,” *Dawn*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1445504>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.
- ⁴ Justin Rowlett, “Russia ‘arming the Afghan Taliban’, says US,” *BBC*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43500299>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.
- ⁵ Elena Teslova, “Moscow format meeting on Afghanistan adopts joint statement,” *Anadolu Ajansi*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/moscow-format-meeting-on-afghanistan-adopts-joint-statement/2398172>. Accessed on October 11, 2024.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Saqalain Eqbal, “Russia’s Multilateral Talks on Afghanistan Opens without Taliban,” *Khaama Press*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.khaama.com/russias-multilateral-talks-on-afghanistan-opens-without-taliban-36564/>. Accessed on October 12, 2024.
- ⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Kazan Declaration of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, Kazan, September 29, 2023”, September 29, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1906997/?TSPD_101. Accessed on October 10, 2024.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement by Participants of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan”, October 04, 2024, <https://mid.ru/upload/medialibrary/2d8/jzxsoa4womesor1bkbanjf3too8sko1/%D0%A1%D0%97%20%D0%9C%D0%A4%202024%20-%20ENG%2004%2010%202024%20FINAL.pdf>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.
- ¹² “Ex Pakistani envoy urges Taliban to heed Moscow Format’s joint statement,” *Amu TV*, October 06, 2024, <https://amu.tv/128385/>. Accessed on October 15, 2024.
- ¹³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, n. 11.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Daniel F. Runde et al., “The Future of Assistance for Afghanistan: A Dilemma,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 13, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/future-assistance-afghanistan-dilemma>. Accessed on October 12, 2024.
- ¹⁶ Ruslam Suleymanov, “Russia’s Growing Ties With Afghanistan Are More Symbolism Than Substance,” *Carnegie Politika*, September 19, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/09/russias-growing-ties-with-afghanistan-are-more-symbolism-than-substance?lang=en>. Accessed on October 14, 2024.

¹⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, March 31, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/. Accessed on October 14, 2024.

¹⁸ Kirill Krivosheev, “Why is Russia Legalizing the Taliban?,” Carnegie Politika, June 13, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/06/taliban-russia-terrorism?lang=en>. Accessed on October 14, 2024.

¹⁹ “Russian Lawmakers Pass Bill Paving Way for Taliban’s Removal From Terrorist List,” *The Moscow Times*, December 17, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/12/17/russian-lawmakers-pass-bill-paving-way-for-talibans-removal-from-terrorist-list-a87369>. Accessed on January 10, 2025.

²⁰ Mikhail Bushuev, “Russia rebuilding ties with the Taliban,” *DW*, June 06, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-rebuilding-ties-with-the-taliban/a-69277920>. Accessed on October 14, 2024.

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²³ Ibid.



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