

Russian peace talks raise specter of shifting influence in Afghanistan

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Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul, Afghanistan. (AP Photo/Rahmat Gul/File)

Islamabad: Vladimir Putin's Russia appears to have emerged as a player in Afghanistan after 17 years of Western involvement that has left the country no closer to peace than before.

To some, Russia's offer to host talks next month might contain at least the seeds of a positive pivot if the Taliban are coaxed to the table at a time when they have been more aggressive on the battlefield than in recent years, causing much mayhem in Kabul and other cities.

But the move may be stuck before it even begins. The Afghan government has said it will not attend, unable to agree on a coherent strategy because of divisions within the government that many see as a function of personal and ethnic rivalries, and calling for the Taliban to first agree to direct talks with Kabul. The insurgents have consistently refused, instead demanding direct talks with the United States.

The US, for its part, seems displeased by the maneuver, even though Washington has been trying to find a reasonable exit strategy for years in vain. On the ground in Afghanistan, the situation has given rise to boundless cynicism about the various players and almost no hope for a quick improvement in the violent, corruption-plagued nature of daily life.

Analysts say the wrangling over a meeting to talk peace offers a window into the enormity of the task of actually reaching a peace pact in a region of competing influences. Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China have a growing influence even as the United States spends billions of dollars covering much of the \$6.5 billion spent annually to support the Afghan National Security Forces who are struggling to contain an energized Taliban.

Specialists who have tracked Afghanistan's four decades of war say navigating the road to peace in this poor nation of 32 million people is like walking through a minefield. Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the US-based Wilson Center, said the situation is explosive.

"In Afghanistan you have not just the US and Russia in competition, but also China, Iran, and Pakistan," said Kugelman. "And none of these countries have warm relations with the US. It's a real powder keg, to say the least."

Pakistan, considered key to a lasting peace in Afghanistan, has a new prime minister who says he is ready to be a partner in peace with Washington, but will no longer partner in war. There has been no indication that the Afghan Taliban, who are known to move between Pakistan and Afghanistan with an ease that varies often depending on Islamabad's relationship with Washington, will be asked to leave. Yet Prime Minister Imran Khan was quick to condemn last Tuesday's rocket attack in Kabul, accusing the perpetrators of "cowardly thinking."

Still, relations between Pakistan and the United States are prickly and even a simple phone call from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Khan on Thursday turned into a confrontation as the two countries disagreed over its content. Pakistan is now demanding an apology, saying Pompeo said nothing of terrorists in Pakistan, contrary to the State Department's reading of the call, which said: "Pompeo raised the importance of Pakistan taking decisive action

against all terrorists operating in Pakistan and its vital role in promoting the Afghan peace process.â€•

But Afghanistanâ€™s neighbors and competing world powers are only part of the problem of bringing peace to Afghanistan, say analysts, who point to a deeply corrupt and fractious Afghan government and deepening ethnic divisions within the US-crafted Unity government.

Last year, Transparency International ranked Afghanistan 177 out of 180 countries, only slightly better than the worldâ€™s worst â€” Syria, South Sudan and Somalia. Since the US-crafted Unity Government took power four years ago, ethnic divisions that have always troubled Afghanistan have deepened.

During a recent interview in the Afghan capital Kabul, political analyst Haroon Mir said international pressure is all that holds Afghanistanâ€™s squabbling politicians together. He said the government is deeply divided along ethnic lines and warned that a withdrawal of international forces would set one ethnic group against another, led by the warlords-cum-politicians, who dominate Afghanistanâ€™s government and whose militias are heavily armed.

â€œKabul will be destroyed because every different faction in the government wants to get control,â€• he said. â€œThis time it would be ethnic fighting that destroys Kabul.â€•

Internal rivalries within the Afghan government have made it impossible to develop a counterinsurgency strategy, said Kugelman.

â€œSo long as the Afghan government remains consumed by personality, disputes and other internal dysfunction, Kabul wonâ€™t be in any shape to craft an effective counterinsurgency strategy, no matter how much help it may get from the US and other key partners,â€• he said.

But perhaps even worse for the US, which has lost hundreds of lives in Afghanistan and spent billions of dollars on the conflict, Western countries have come to be seen in very jaded ways, with a variety of outlandish theories enjoying surprising currency. One widely spread theory is that Washington is secretly aiding the Taliban to foment violence as an excuse to keep its troops in Afghanistan to counter Iran, Russia and China.

The Taliban, meanwhile, have ramped up their diplomatic forays, having traveled to Uzbekistan and Indonesia to meet the foreign ministers there. They also said they would travel to China and Pakistan before next monthâ€™s Moscow meeting.

On the battlefield this month they have carried out spectacular attacks in central Ghazni, where they resisted Afghan security forces backed by US military advisers and aerial support for nearly five days, and in northern Faryab province, where more than 100 Afghan soldiers who ran out of ammunition and food eventually surrendered to the insurgents.

But analysts say the Talibanâ€™s control and influence _ while far-reaching _ is limited to rural areas and they do not have the capacity to take control and keep a city in Afghanistan. They also face divisions within their ranks and need to show their foot soldiers they are strong militarily before they enter peace talks.

Still, Brian Glyn Williams, professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, called the September meeting in Moscow a â€œfascinating and potentially important/historic development.â€•

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