

## Moscow moves into the Afghanistan vacuum

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After the Soviet Union was defeated by the Afghan mujahideen and its 10-year occupation ended in a humiliating retreat by the Red Army in 1989, Russia pulled back from the region. Now it is rebuilding its position as a battle for influence heats up.

With US policy in Afghanistan locked in a military and political stalemate, Moscow has made belligerent statements about the remaining 12,000 US and Nato forces there. Russian diplomats are cultivating Afghan politicians and wooing neighboring states such as China, Iran and Pakistan. Most significantly, Moscow is talking to the Taliban.

The aim seems to be to undermine US policy in Afghanistan, usurp its influence in the region and even possibly foster a peace process between the Kabul regime and the Taliban – where attempts by the US have failed.

In December, Russia held a conference with Pakistan and China to discuss the terrorist threat to Central Asia coming from Afghanistan, how the Taliban could be used to combat Islamic State and how to end the country's long-running war. The Americans were marked by their absence – excluded, as they were at recent Moscow-backed meetings on Syria.

The Afghan government erupted in fury that it had also not been invited. Kabul feels vulnerable, fearing Donald Trump will ignore Afghanistan – although one of the US president-elect's key foreign policy advisers is Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghan-born former US ambassador to Kabul. But while Afghanistan criticized the tripartite meeting it was welcomed by the Taliban, who claimed they were now recognized as a military and political force. Reported on Tolo News in Kabul, the group's statement clearly reflected cozying up between Russia and the militants.

American special forces continue to help the Afghan army fight the Taliban and the US is still the main donor to the state and army. But, over the past year, President Barack Obama has shown little interest in the country nor has he thrown his weight behind attempts by his Department of State to foster peace talks.

Afghanistan is in chaos, with the Taliban making big military gains, paralyzing political infighting gripping the capital and a worsening economic crisis. There is no guarantee that the government can survive for long even if Mr Trump maintains US aid. Meanwhile, Iran, Pakistan and Central Asian neighbors are stepping up their secret dialogues with the Taliban as if the militants are about to win the war.

And into the vacuum left by the US moves Russia. Moscow already has many friends in the region: China, India and Iran are close allies and it is wooing Pakistan – once pro-US but now a sharp critic of Washington and anxious to strengthen ties with China and Russia to resist pressure from India. The willingness to befriend the Taliban while taking on Isis will be welcomed by Islamabad, which has long backed the militants, and Iran, which hosts some Taliban factions. China would also like to see accommodation made with the Taliban as it wants peace in the region to protect its huge investment in the New Silk Road project. If anyone can stage a conference to foster peace talks, Russia is now in the strongest position to do so.

Moscow is also dabbling in Afghan politics. Central Asian diplomats say it has never been a fan of President Ashraf Ghani, whom it sees as too pro-American. It would prefer a return of the now vehemently anti-US former president Hamid Karzai, who has said Russia can play a positive role in Afghanistan.

Most recently, Russia this month blocked Afghanistan's attempts to have the warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar removed from the UN terrorist black list, as part of a peace deal Kabul brokered with Mr Hekmatyar.

Zamir Kabulov, President Vladimir Putin's envoy to Afghanistan, describes the Taliban as "predominately a local force", which contains radical and mainstream elements. Such a mild view has deeply upset Kabul. But Moscow today sees Isis as its main enemy – one that could penetrate into Russian-influenced Central Asia.

The chaos in Afghanistan and the moves by Russia have the potential to shift the balance of power across Central and South Asia. For now, Moscow's ambitions in the region appear unstoppable. Ahmed Rashid is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, including 'Pakistan on the Brink'

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