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**Russia's Role in Afghanistan: West is Anxious About
the New Inroads**

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Ever since the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia withdrew itself from the disputes in the Afghanistan region for many years. The Russian invasion of 1979 had instilled hostile memories and imprinted a belligerent facade of Russia in the minds of Afghans. Interestingly, after years of conflict, the

two countries have decided to review their relations. This is marked as the resurgence of Russian influence in the region which has already started engaging itself in the geopolitics of the region. The tripartite meeting between Pakistan, China, and Russia in Moscow over the security issues in Afghanistan is an epitome of Russian involvement in the South Asian country. As of now, the relation between Russia and Afghanistan has improved a lot with the signing of the security agreement between the two countries last year.



The Russia-US relations took a sharp turn in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, which forced Russia to increase its role in the Afghan territory again. Russia hopes to shape the ground events in accordance with its own interests, and its decision to influence the region with its military and economic aid is one such way which has been welcomed. Although Russia or rather the Soviet-Union, had been expelled out of the region decades ago, yet it is eager to make a comeback into this region, due to the changing geopolitical environment.

The Flow of Military Aid to the Afghan Territory

According to the Deutsche Welle (DW), an international broadcaster, Moscow has promised to give ten thousand Kalashnikov rifles to Afghanistan coupled with millions of ammunition rounds so that Afghan Security can strengthen its needs to fight off terrorism. This is just the start, as a gush of aid is anticipated to pour into Kabul in the near future. When the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Russia abstained

from engaging militarily in the country. However, later on, when the rehabilitation process started, Moscow was at the forefront in providing logistical support. Such cooperation by Russia has taken the shape of an institution named as NATO-Russia Council.

Russia tried to establish its contact with the Taliban leadership back in 2007 to subjugate the issue of drug trafficking. At that time the problem of drug infiltration into the Central Asian states, which are in the close proximity of Afghanistan, was a major issue. According to

the recent reports circulating in the media, Russia has again established its contact with Taliban to induce peace in the region.



Analysts are of the opinion that this time the discussions between Russia and the Afghan Taliban are not circumscribed to dialogue over the drug trafficking issue. They argue that since Russia has already sensed that US policies have failed in Afghanistan, therefore, Russia is interested in intervening in the ground matters as they consider the region its backyard and its sphere which holds strategic importance.

Support to the Housing Sector in Afghanistan

Russia had also pledged to support the housing sector in Afghanistan when the Foreign Minister of Russia had a meeting with the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf

Ghani, last year. Furthermore, Russia has also expressed its consent on strengthening and consolidating a government construction company of Afghanistan named as Khana Sazi. Under the plan, latest technology will be incorporated while building new homes, making them more affordable and durable at the same time. Another agreement was signed between the Cardinal Company, a Russian based construction company, and Afghan national construction company, Khana Sazi. According to the progress being made, the Cardinal Company has sworn to provide construction materials of an estimated worth of 25 million U.S dollars. Such an investment would assist in building as much as 1000 apartments in the country each year.

Why is Russia Interested in Afghanistan?

The terrorist activities on-going in the Afghanistan region with the advent of Islamic State (ISIS) militant groups has engendered grave apprehensions in Russia as it fears that these militant groups could easily infringe into Central Asia which in turn would render the borders of Russia vulnerable. It is beyond doubt that if this militancy enters into the Central Asian States bordering with the Afghanistan which includes Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan then it would pose a greater threat to the Russian stability. It should also be kept in mind that these states were previously a part of the USSR which gained independence after the disintegration of USSR. As these states are closely aligned to the Russian Federation, it is a matter of concern for Russia.

With the egress of NATO troops from Afghanistan, it would create a vacuum in the region that Russia desires to fill in order to enhance its friendly influence. It is a well-

established fact that the interests of ISIS and Taliban in the northern Afghanistan are antithetical to one another. Experts posit that these conflict of interests can be further reinforced by providing support to the Taliban, including the military aid. Another possible aspect of maintaining linkages with the Taliban can be the fact that it would exert some pressure on the government of Ashraf Ghani, whom the Russians believe to be a follower of the U.S.

The underlying reason for Russia's involvement in Afghanistan is that Russia suspects that Afghanistan might also end up becoming the hub of ISIS militants just like it happened in Iraq and Syria. It is not willing to allow this to happen in the outskirts of Central Asia which explain the fact that why Russia is so vigilant. The high officials in Russia have declared the very existence of ISIS in Afghanistan as a threat to Russia's welfare. Besides restricting the ISIS movement in the region, Russia also seeks geopolitical benefits by actively engaging in Afghanistan. Although diplomats from Russia have mentioned that dialogue with Taliban is strictly limited to peace talks, however, West has viewed Russian engagement in the region with askance. Analysts say that Russia wishes to counter the Washington by strengthening ties with Taliban.

Way Forward

In the backdrop of the peace negotiations that Russia is attempting to initiate in Afghanistan, and with its military and economic aid pouring into the country, following suggestive measures must be adopted to ensure regional harmony and stability:

- a. After the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) has failed to bring peace in the region, Russia arranged a trilateral meeting to discuss the issue of Afghanistan security. Therefore, the importance of Russia in the peace talk should not be undermined since it lies in proximity to the region and also because it is a major economic partner in this region.
- b. Given the volatility of current circumstances, one of the best way forward for Russia could be to extend friendly ties of cooperation to Kabul, as the National Unity Government (NUG) have gained some concrete results in stopping ISIS militants.
- c. West should allow Russia to proceed with the peace talk and know that Russia is focused on developing a friendly collaboration which will not only benefit itself but also the entire region.
- d. To uproot the incidence of proxy war, the superpowers like the US and Russia must sit together to find a peaceful solution to the issues of Afghanistan and build some degree of trust among the local Afghanis. In this regard, the US must welcome Russia's interest in solving the matter as the US has failed in its war on terrorism.

Conclusion

The dwindling relation between Russia and US by the end of the first decade of 21st century has led to the strife between the two super powers. This is because of the allegations made by the West on Russia for conducting secret negotiations with the Islamic Taliban. Russia's interest in holding talks with Taliban where on the one hand holds the capability to eliminate the ISIS militant group, at the same time it holds

the ability to exacerbate the security issues if these Taliban later join with the ISIS. Therefore, Russia must be wary of any such implication. Irrespective of the fact that whether it is Russia or US, no such measures should be taken that could further jeopardize the peace and stability of the region.

