**Moscow Format**

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A clever thing the United States did post the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan was to outrightly take its hands off the country – except for humanitarian considerations. Doing so, Washington, on the one hand, deprived its regional rivals of an enemy to struggle against, and, on the other, rendered Afghanistan a headache for the neighbouring countries, particularly Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran.

The first victim of the Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan was India, which was virtually ejected from the country’s geopolitics as the Taliban were widely believed to be enjoying Pakistan’s support. India has ever since been wary of its involvement or implementation of its development projects in Afghanistan, though the Taliban have convinced New Delhi of their intention to have good relations with it.

For its part, Pakistan is nurturing concern about Afghanistan’s territory being used by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and Baloch militants for subversive activities on its soil.

The first two neighbouring countries to develop mutual suspicions about Afghanistan were Iran and Pakistan. As soon as the Taliban took power in Kabul, resentment was transmitted by Iran concerning the victimisation of the Hazara Shiite community of Afghanistan.

The fall of Panjsher to the Taliban and the rumours that Pakistani forces and planes had practically supported the Taliban there caused anger both in Iran and Tajikistan. Tehran even announced to investigate the involvement of Pakistani troops in the Panjsher offensive.

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Pakistan and Iran also have an impending tension over China’s BRI (Built and Road Initiative) both of which are its beneficiaries.

Right now, the Taliban-governed Afghanistan and Tajikistan are at loggerheads with each other. Both have deployed forces on their common border.

In fact, Tajikistan does not have any conflict with Afghanistan. It was the defeat of Amrullah Saleh, the ethnic Tajik former Vice President of Afghanistan and Ahmad Masoud, the son of late Tajik commander, Ahmad Shah Masoud, in Panjsher province, which enraged Tajikistan.

Since then, Tajik President Imomali Rahman has been spearheading active hostility against the Taliban while the latter are warning him not to interfere in Afghanistan’s internal affairs. Dushanbe is also accusing the Taliban of abetting the Jama’at Ansaarullah militant group.

Tajikistan, which is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and hosts a base of Russian forces on its soil, is trying to mobilise the other Central Asian states and Russia on the issue of the presence of Islamic extremist groups in northern Afghanistan.

Bordering Uzbekistan also shares the concern as it has, in past, experienced serious trouble at the hand of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) insurgents operating from inside Afghanistan. Alive to the threat and trying to bolster its borders and internal security, Tashkent is, however, pursuing a policy of appeasement towards the Taliban.

The latest suicide bomb explosion in the northern Kunduz province of Afghanistan, which killed about 60 worshippers in a mosque, has, rather, rung alarm bells across China, Central Asia, Russia, and Iran. It was the first major operation of the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) in northern Afghanistan.

Earlier, the group had carried out a big bomb explosion in Kabul in which 20 people were killed. But IS-K’s capability to strike so massively in northern Afghanistan has put questions upon the Taliban’s capability to check activities of militant groups from inside Afghanistan.

The IS-K or Daesh has hit four birds with this single attack: First, it targeted the Shiite community, thus annoying Iran. Second, it carried out the attack close to the Central Asian border, causing alarm in Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Third, it used a suicide attacker from the Xinjiang region of China, Mohammad al-Uyguri, unnerving Beijing. Four, it created a law and order problem for its rival Taliban.

In the past, China had been raising concern about the use of Afghanistan’s soil by the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a militant organisation of Muslims from its northwestern Xinjiang autonomous region. However, the Taliban had convinced Beijing that the group will not be allowed to operate from Afghanistan. The Kunduz attack has altered that balance.

Russia equally shares Tajikistan’s concern about the threat posed by Islamic militancy and drug and arms smuggling from Afghanistan. However, it has been evading direct conflict with the Taliban. Moscow has since long been trying to have cordial relations with the Taliban.

Moscow has been making attempts to diplomatically resolve all matters with the Taliban to secure the Central Asian borders from terror and drug flow. It is also trying to bring Afghanistan into its Eurasian corridor to accelerate economic and trade activities in the region and extend the corridor up to Pakistan and South Asia.

All these dreams of the neighbouring countries now appear to have turned sour. Afghanistan is no more a matter of concern for the United States. Rather, it has, by all means, altered into a headache for the regional powers and surrounding countries.

“We are concerned about the growing activity of ISIS (IS-K) terrorist group in Afghanistan,” Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, told reporters in Moscow last week.

It is in this background that Russia has convened a meeting of the Moscow Comfort platform in Moscow on October 20. The question arises that why Moscow has not opted for the Troika Plus, which is a rather more powerful platform than Moscow Comfort as it also includes the US as a central player.

Moscow Comfort, which includes Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India, is a regional platform set up for solution of Afghanistan issue in 2017. It was the first group, which invited the Taliban to its meetings in Moscow in 2017. The United States has been participating in its meeting but only as an observer.

While mobilisation of the platform by Russia gives a regional dimension to the Afghan issue, it also tries to involve India with the affairs of Afghanistan, which will naturally discomfort Pakistan, the most influential player in the matter of Afghanistan.

Now it is to see whether Taliban-led Afghanistan proves a comfort for Moscow or a collective tension for all the regional countries. Washington’s comfort is sure for the moment at least.

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