

## Russia And Reconciliation In Afghanistan

Ahmed Rashid, 14th November 2014.

By Ahmed Rashid

### Every country in the world believes that a military victory against the Taliban is now impossible.

Russia has scuttled a Chinese proposal to create a peace and reconciliation committee in Afghanistan that would commit regional countries to helping newly elected Afghan President Ashraf Ghani bring the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table.

Russia is acting in much the same way it has acted in Ukraine, rejecting international calls for peace and end to war, insisting that its own policies go unquestioned, criticizing its neighbors and the West and disallowing any reconciliation process between adversaries by clamping down on democratic aspirations

Russia's negative attitude in the case of Afghanistan may well lead to adverse consequences throughout the region as multiple groups of extremists are trying to target Russia and the Central Asian republics. Russia should be reminded how quickly militant Uighurs in China's Xinjiang province have been able to turn around a nationalist-autonomy-seeking struggle into one supporting militant Islam.

At the end of October, [China hosted the Fourth Annual Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process for Afghanistan](#), an annual meeting of the Istanbul process - in which all Central and South Asian countries take part as well as Iran, Russia and China. Its aim called the "Heart of Asia" is to help stabilize Afghanistan, create peace and help economic aid to that war-torn country.

#### China's kick start

China alone announced the start of 64 programs to give the newly elected government a kick start, as western forces withdraw from the country, even though Afghanistan is experiencing the worst bout of Taliban attacks for years. In Kabul alone since Ghani took office on September 29, there have been nearly 20 Taliban attacks that have killed dozens of people. The military situation in the provinces is even direr.

#### Afghans see economic opportunities with China

At the conference, China pledged \$327m as a grant to Afghanistan over three years and fully backed Ghani's plea, "to invite the Taliban to join and enter an Afghan dialogue, and ask all of our international partners to support an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process". He went on to say that "peace is our highest priority". The remarks were Ghani's first in holding out an olive branch to the Taliban.

Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang echoed Ghani's call, urging groups to, "lay aside former enmity and join the political reconciliation process". Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed the hope that the Istanbul Process and all political parties in Afghanistan would work towards reconciliation through dialogue and negotiations.

More significant was that China - which normally avoids all kind of peace making initiatives - immediately, embraced the idea of talks and proposed setting up a committee of regional countries to help Ghani talk to the Taliban. This, according to western diplomats in Beijing who attended the conference, was immediately shot down by the hardline Russian representative who cited inherent dangers in talking to terrorists. It is still quite possible that China can form a joint committee with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran to talk to the Taliban but Russia's absence will create a big vacuum.

#### Dire threat

Yet Russia faces a dire threat from Afghanistan which it is fully aware of. The presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have both recently expressed concern about the threat posed by militants belonging to several groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) now gathering on Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

These Central Asian groups assisted by Taliban and Pakistan militants are fighting Afghan government forces in the three provinces of Kunar, Nuristan and Kunduz in order to create a corridor from their bases in Pakistan through Afghanistan into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and eventually Russia. They are attempting to capture the strategic border town of Kunduz in northeastern Afghanistan. Recent fighting in the northeastern corridor has never been so fierce.

The most potent group, the IMU, which includes Russian converts to Islam, is determined to build a Caliphate on former Soviet territory much as ISIL has already done in Iraq. The IMU has been joined by Chechen and Daghestani militants who are still at war with Russia and pose a direct threat to Russia itself, just as the Uighur Muslim militants from Xinjiang province in China, who are now fighting with the Taliban, pose a threat to China.

Russia has outlined no strategic options of its own or adequate explanations for all the negative aspirations that it espouses. Every country in the world believes that a military victory against the Taliban is now impossible, and only by bringing the Taliban to the table can their support to the IMU and other groups be stopped.

Russia persists on ignoring reality and the facts on the ground in favour of a policy of *niet* (no) - a policy which few understand. Increasingly, the global community is having to find ways to work around Russia rather than through it, but that may not be sustainable - either for Russia or for the West or for Central Asia.

The entire region is fully combustible and if it erupts, it could well cause the kind of upheaval and violence we are seeing in the Middle East today - even as experts still assess the extent to which the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant has actually penetrated South and Central Asia.

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***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.***