

RUSSIA HOSTS AFGHAN PEACE MEET

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Time for talks: Ex-President Hamid Karzai, left, and Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar, second from right, in Moscow. AP/Alexander Zemlianichenko

Russia hosted a peace conference for Afghanistan on Thursday, bringing together government representatives and their Taliban adversaries along with international observers in a bid to help jump-start the country's stalled peace process.

The one-day gathering is the first of three planned international conferences ahead of a May 1 deadline for the final withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from the country, a date fixed under a year-old agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban.

Call for ceasefire

Moscow's attempt at mediation comes as talks in Doha between the Afghan government and the Taliban, still waging an insurgency, have stalled. Washington and Kabul have been pressing for a ceasefire while the Taliban say they will negotiate it as part of peace talks with the Afghan government.

"We hope that today's talks will help achieve progress in the inter-Afghan talks," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said at the start of the meeting.

The Moscow conference is attended by U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, Abdullah Abdullah, head of Afghanistan's National Reconciliation Council, and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Representatives of Pakistan, Iran, and China are also participating.

Moscow, which fought a 10-year war in Afghanistan that ended with Soviet troops' withdrawal in 1989, has made a diplomatic comeback as a mediator in Afghanistan, reaching out to feuding factions as it jockey with the U.S. for influence in the country.

Mr. Lavrov on Thursday urged the Afghan government and the Taliban to take a constructive stance and make compromises, adding that international participants should help create the necessary conditions for reaching a deal.

"The Afghan parties interested in the national reconciliation can reach peace only through negotiations and compromises," Mr. Lavrov said.

"It's important to sign an agreement that would serve the interests of all key ethnic and political forces of the country and determine the vector of its development."

He emphasised that it was important to quickly reach a peace deal "amid the deteriorating military-political situation" before the summer, when an upsurge in fighting is likely.

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