

# RUSSIA STEPS INTO AFGHAN PEACE EFFORTS

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The Taliban met with members of Afghanistan's High Peace Council on Friday in a conference organised by the Russian government in Moscow. This is the second such meeting with the insurgent group being organised by international stakeholders in a bid to push peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

The Taliban reportedly met with U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad last month, to start negotiations on the terms of a peace deal. Both meetings, however, did not see the participation of the Afghan government. "President (Ashraf) Ghani is committed to peace and has taken bold steps. However, the Taliban did not reciprocate," a source close to the Afghan President said on condition of anonymity. Mr. Ghani did make several efforts to get the Taliban on the negotiating table, including a three-day Id ceasefire last year.

In a statement issued ahead of the meeting, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed displeasure. It confirmed that the government wasn't sending an official delegation, and that it would be represented by members of the High Peace Council, an independent body of political and religious leaders, assigned to facilitate talks with the insurgents.

"Our agreement with the Russians is that this meeting should lead to direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, only a group of people were invited and that reflects the intention of the Taliban, who are not yet willing to negotiate with the government," Sibghat Ahmadi, a spokesperson at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said.

## 'Not a negotiation'

The Taliban reiterated in two consecutive statements that the meeting would not be a negotiation, but instead a discussion on "finding a peaceful solution to the Afghan quandary and ending the American occupation".

For the Russians, the meeting is the second attempt this year to step into a reconciliatory role between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In September, a similar event organised in Russia fell through after the demands of the Afghan government to co-chair the meeting were disputed by the Taliban, a fact that they emphasised on while accepting the invitation to the November meeting.

However, the fact that the Moscow conference comes close after the Taliban's meeting with the American envoy has raised concerns over the competitive nature of the two countries in facilitating the peace efforts. "Absolutely, it is obvious that there is a competition between Russia and the U.S.," said Hekmatullah Azamy, a political analyst with the Kabul-based Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies.

India, which was also invited to the conference, sent "non-official" representatives — Amar Sinha, a former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, and T.C.A. Raghavan, head of the Indian Council for World Affairs.

"India's consistent policy has been that such efforts should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled and with the participation of the government of Afghanistan," Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar told the media on Thursday.

However, the participation of regional and international stakeholders is being seen by many as providing a much-needed momentum to the peace efforts. Mr. Azamy said collaboration between the U.S. and Russia was crucial to the success of any peace effort in the region. “I have heard that Ambassador Khalilzad has been in touch with Moscow, providing American support to this meeting... It is significant that these countries are coming together to work on peace in the region.”

***The Russian government hosted a conference in Moscow between the Taliban and members of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council, hoping to provide a momentum to the currently stalled peace talks***

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