

Putin to send special representative

Close on the heels of U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis, who will hold talks in Delhi on Tuesday, and the arrival of Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah on Wednesday, Russia is sending President Putin's special representative for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov to Delhi in October, senior Russian officials confirmed to *The Hindu*.

Mr. Kabulov's visit, when he is also expected to discuss Moscow's new position on talks with Taliban, will come amid growing concerns in India over Russia's ties with Pakistan.

"Russia is not supplying arms to the Taliban, but we think it is necessary to talk to those in Taliban willing to give up violence, and we hope India will join in the effort," a senior Russian diplomat said, adding that in their assessment the "Taliban cannot be defeated militarily by the government in Kabul."

More U.S. troops

The tough predictions are in sharp contrast to the U.S.'s new Afghanistan policy, that will see at least 3,000 more troops sent to fight in Afghanistan, and offers India an increased role in development projects while pushing Pakistan to act against terrorist "safe havens".

Moscow has already criticised the U.S. plan as a "dead-end policy", and warned against "putting pressure" on Pakistan. Another sign of the growing shift in Russian policy came on Monday, as Russian and Pakistani special forces began military exercises in the Mineralnye Vody region. The exercises will be a precursor to a visit by Pakistan's Army Chief General Bajwa to Moscow in October.

"Regular high-level exchanges between the two sides in the past few years have set the stage for translating political goodwill into a substantial partnership in particular, in the field of defence," Pakistan's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nafees Zakaria said on Friday while announcing General Bajwa's visit.

'Moscow format'

During the visit to Delhi, Mr. Kabulov would also talk about the "Moscow format" for talks on Afghanistan, which was started last year with only Russia, China and Pakistan, and then expanded to include Afghanistan, Iran and India.

However, after the U.S. rejected an invitation to join, the talks have been shelved "temporarily" according to officials, as the Ghani government now wants all such processes to be held in Kabul and led by the Afghan government.

Russian officials told *The Hindu* that they are already in discussions with India about the possibility of security cooperation for Afghanistan. This would include facilitating an ongoing proposal to refurbish Soviet-era planes and repair Russian Mi-25 helicopters donated by India, along with talks on providing spare parts and ammunition to Afghan forces, but conceded that the talks had not yet been concluded.

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