
AN AFGHANISTAN CONFERENCE WITHOUT AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan has expressed concern over a meeting in Moscow between China, Pakistan and Russia over the Afghan conflict. Experts say Pakistan is trying to forge an alliance to counter an Indian-Afghan partnership.

Afghanistan Bagram nach Explosion auf US Stützpunkt (picture-alliance/dpa/H. Yatullah Amid)
Ahmad Shekib Mostaghni, a spokesman for the Afghan Foreign Ministry, said Tuesday that his country had not been invited to a high-level Afghanistan conference in Moscow.

Representatives of Pakistan, China and Russia are meeting in Moscow to discuss the Afghan conflict but they have excluded Afghan officials from the conference.

The Pakistan-Haqqani nexus and Kabul's misgivings

Mostaghni said that regardless of the intentions of the participants, excluding Kabul from the talks would not help the situation in the country.

"Even if such talks are organized with good will, it cannot yield any substantial results because no one from the Afghan side is there to brief the participants about the latest ground realities," Mustaghni said. Afghan authorities have dubbed the Moscow meeting "illegitimate and dubious."

On December 26 the Afghan parliament also expressed concerns over the role of certain countries regarding Afghanistan, warning against "meddling" in the country's internal affairs.

The Moscow talks come 37 years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.

Exclusion of Taliban

The Moscow meeting also excludes Taliban representatives that many experts believe are key to successful Afghan peace negotiations.

"Pakistan, or any other country, did not contact us," Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Afghan Taliban, told Sattar Khan, DW's Islamabad correspondent.

"Russian, China and Iran are worried about the US presence in the region," Mujahid added. "In the past, they had discussed the issue with us, but not recently. It is likely that these countries are discussing the same issue [in Moscow]. We would welcome an anti-US alliance in the region."

Pakistan's 'lack of cooperation'

Afghanistan and India have increased trade and defense cooperation in the past few years

As Afghanistan has drifted closer to India, Pakistan is seeking to forge closer ties with China and Russia to counter New Delhi's growing influence in Kabul. India and Afghanistan have been extremely critical of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. They accuse the Pakistani military and spy agencies of backing Taliban insurgents and destabilizing Afghanistan so that Islamabad can have an upper hand in geopolitics.

Speaking at the sixth Heart of Asia ministerial conference earlier this month, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani urged Pakistani authorities to act against the militants' sanctuaries in their country's northwestern tribal areas. Ghani said the \$500 million (478 million euros) in aid that Islamabad

pledged for the reconstruction of Afghanistan would be better spent on eradicating terrorists that continue to launch attacks in Afghanistan from Pakistani soil.

"We must confront the specter in the room," Ghani said in the Indian city of Amritsar, referring to what he said was a fresh wave of terrorism and political violence affecting the region.

"Responses of states on this have been significant, but some states provide sanctuary and tolerate these networks," Ghani said, adding that a Taliban leader had said recently that if the group did not receive sanctuary in Pakistan, it would not last a month.

Islamabad denies allegations that it is not cooperating in the fight against the Taliban. "Pakistan has suffered a lot in the war on terror but Washington blames us for the turmoil in Afghanistan," Mushahid Ullah Khan, a close aide to Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, told DW. "The US has failed to bring peace to Afghanistan, so now we are trying to engage with other regional countries to work for Afghanistan's stability, which is essential for peace in the entire region."

Geo-strategic relations are rapidly changing in southern Asia. Former Cold War rivals India and the US are bolstering their defense and trade ties amid growing concerns about China's assertiveness in the region, particularly in the disputed South China Sea.

On the other hand, Islamabad and Washington, who were allies against the former Soviet Union and collaborated in the 1980s Afghan War, are drifting apart. Simultaneously, Islamabad and Moscow are reviving their ties, as the two Cold War-era foes held their first-ever joint military drills earlier this year.

The changing geopolitics has also prompted Pakistan to forge closer ties with its long-time ally China. Beijing is expanding trade and military cooperation with Islamabad in view of the New Delhi-Washington maneuvers.

Last year, China announced an economic project in Pakistan worth \$46 billion. With the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Beijing aims to expand its influence in Pakistan and across Central and South Asia in order to counter US and Indian influences. CPEC would link Pakistan's southern Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea to China's western Xinjiang region. It also includes plans to create road, rail and oil pipeline links to improve connectivity between China and the Middle East.

The ties between Russia and India are still friendly. Moscow has remained New Delhi's largest arms supplier over the past three years, and the countries' relations blossomed after Narendra Modi became India's prime minister two years ago.

Pakistan is seeking to forge closer ties with China and Russia to counter New Delhi's growing influence in Kabul

But Russia is skeptical about India's warming ties with the US and has sought to put pressure on New Delhi by reaching out to Islamabad. Over the last 15 months, several high-ranking Pakistani military officials have traveled to Moscow to boost bilateral ties, which resulted in a deal for the sale of four Russian Mi-35 attack helicopters to Islamabad.

Both countries also agreed on a pipeline project intended to transfer liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Karachi to Lahore. It could assist in resolving the Islamic country's protracted energy crisis.

"Improved ties with Russia augurs well for Pakistan," Shukat Qadir, a retired Pakistani military official and defense analyst, told DW. "The US policies have forced Pakistan to look for alternatives. Islamabad is unhappy with the US-India partnership."

The analyst argues that Pakistan has finally come out of the Cold War dynamics, because it does not depend on one global power anymore. At the same time, Qadir said, the "closer ties with Beijing and Moscow do not mean that Pakistan should turn its back on Washington."

"We should engage with all countries," Qadir underlined.

Tug of war

The United States and China want stability in Afghanistan, but both have conflicting interests in the war-torn country. After the Taliban took Afghanistan's fifth-largest city of Kunduz in July 2015, US President Barack Obama revised his decision of complete troop withdrawal by 2017.

More than 5,000 US soldiers will now stay in the country to help the Afghan security forces for an indefinite period of time. But foreign and security affairs analysts say that President-elect Donald Trump could adopt a different policy on Afghanistan when he takes charge in January 2017.

Experts also say the US wants to leave Afghanistan, but it wants its interests to be protected in the country. For that reason, the Obama administration is seeking Islamabad's help. It believes that the Pakistani military enjoys considerable influence on the Taliban leadership.

China, on the other hand, is wary of the Islamists operating in Xinjiang and their alliance with the Taliban and other Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is also seeking Pakistan's assistance - not only to help create peace in Afghanistan, but also to keep regional rival India at bay.

Kaynak/Source: