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# AFGHANISTAN WATCH



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## **Ajit Doval Discusses 'Afghanistan's Situation' With Russian President Vladimir Putin: Key Takeaways**

**<https://www.livemint.com/news/india/ajit-doval-discusses-afghanistan-s-situation-with-russian-president-vladimir-putin-key-takeaways-11676075811334.html>**

"NSA Ajit Doval also called on the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and had wide-ranging discussions on bilateral and regional issues," the MEA said. NSA Doval also met Russian Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov and discussed issues pertaining to bilateral defence. The MEA said that Doval stressed the need to ensure that the territory of Afghanistan does not become a source of radicalization and terrorism, regionally or globally.

Besides, he underlined the significance to intensify intelligence and security cooperation to deal with terror outfits including those designated under the UN Security Council resolution 1267. Putin also made a remark on Afghanistan's situation, and said, "We are also worried about attempts to use the situation in Afghanistan to allow extra-regional forces to expand or build their infrastructure. Obviously, the situation in the country is not improving and we see this. The humanitarian situation is worsening".

India has not yet recognised the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and has been pitching for the formation of a truly inclusive government in Kabul.

### **Comments**

### **Background**

The recently concluded multilateral consultations of the secretaries of the security councils and national security advisors on Afghanistan (with attendance from Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, hosted by Russia with Pakistan abstaining) brings a re-emphasis (to the global actors) on Afghanistan's deplorable humanitarian crisis and chronic domestic insecurity with grave security implications to the region. Now more than a year since Taliban took over, radical factions (ISKP) and Taliban affiliates (TTP) continue to consume more lives, keeping the media honed on to the region.

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Since the Taliban takeover, New Delhi and Moscow has been in regular consultations over the Afghan situation. Both the countries have called for a national unity government with representation from all walks of Afghan lives— political leaders from erstwhile regime, Taliban, civil society—a sustainable approach to peace (through agreement). This means reaching out to multiple actors, prominent local partners and extending influence in the region, even if it means through cooperation in regional dialogues. Regardless to multiple approaches adopted by the two states, the resurgence of the Taliban has major consequences for New Delhi, which begins with Islamabad at the helm.

Moscow, on the contrary believes in engaging with the Taliban in the context of preserving regional peace and security. Though banned in Russia, the two sides continue to engage frequently. The foundation of this engagement is based on assurances that Taliban's actions will not result in any spill over effect that would result in violation of central Asian nations' borders. Additionally, it would focus on eliminating Daesh (ISKP) forces operating in the region and make serious/constructive efforts to limit drug trafficking/production seeping Central Asia. Moscow continues to interact with Pashtuns within the country, and engages with both Uzbeks and Tajiks. One may see this as an effort to preserve its influence 'if one of these forces collapse'.

Through regional forums such as the NSAs multilateral dialogues and Moscow Format (Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and India), all roads point towards Russia's aiming to initiate regional mediation by bringing stakeholders together in multiple platforms. Is Russia aiming to achieve a political settlement premised on regionalist approach? By that hypothesis, is Moscow resurrecting an 'Inter-Afghan Dialogue', on the similar lines as it had inaugurated first round in February 2019 (again in May and September). The dialogue witnessed presence of ex-government figures, ex-Northern Alliance leaders, Taliban and Afghan diaspora with no representatives from regional states. With New Delhi's foot print in Kabul and frequent engagement with Taliban leadership (strong trust within the group's leadership) reinforced by its commitment to assist local Afghans (through humanitarian aid), are we looking at New Delhi-Moscow bilateral engagement on Afghanistan? Through this analysis, the author aims to identify possible Russia-India bilateral approach on Afghanistan while identifying scenarios/possible options if the two key stakeholders decide to cooperate.

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## *Deciphering the Moscow Format*

The Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, was launched in 2017, as a regional platform dedicated to discuss Afghanistan, with special envoys of Russia, Afghanistan, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, in attendance. Functional under the mandate to facilitate political reconciliation between the then-internationally backed Kabul government and the Taliban, the group members engaged on establishing peace and ensuring regional security. Taking domestic concerns into account, Moscow assumed the leadership and broadly framed the group to resolve two key issues:

- The first issue was focussed on identifying potential threats due to the spread of instability, violence, and religious extremism in Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia.
- The second issue was related to growing inflow of Afghan heroin to the Central Asian/Russian market.

Taking India's participation into account, (beside attending all regional dialogues under the Moscow Format) New Delhi hosted the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan (Taliban was not invited) in November 2021 under the leadership of the National Security Advisor Shri Ajit Doval which was skipped by both Pakistan & China. In the recently concluded Regional Security Dialogue held at Moscow, we again witnessed Pakistan skipping the dialogue (because of its continued objections over Indian participation and concerns that its agenda was much wider than just Afghanistan) with Beijing nominating a junior diplomat (from the Embassy) for attendance. Hence, it is safe to conclude that, Moscow Format has two key actors (New Delhi & Moscow) willing to deliberate on the future of Afghanistan. In conjunction, they (taking the benefit of deep ties) have the means to deliberate with



Source: Reuters

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Taliban bilaterally on varying contexts (from human rights violations, politico-ethnic based oppressions) bringing other regional parties without any formal associations, on the discussion table.

From the Taliban's point of view, their expectations from New Delhi and Moscow seems to overlap. For example, they expected Moscow to legitimise their government, with Moscow, expecting Taliban to undertake progressive efforts in countering terrorism and insurgency. On a similar note, Taliban expressed (eagerly) to resume trade relations with India and its desire to take up a long-standing and potentially lucrative gas pipeline project connecting Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, besides seeking development assistance (including the private sector, and invest in infrastructure projects that could generate jobs and boost the local economy).

That said, how effective will this platform prove to be? is a question whose answer lies in the cooperation between the two key actors first (before deliberating with regional economies). Will India and Russia unify their approaches (putting aside their different takeaways on the Afghan issue) and deliberate bilaterally? This would involve both the countries to consult with each other on fundamental issues on regional security before establishing a consensus on a political settlement for Afghanistan.



Source: Reuters

## *A Russia-India approach towards Afghanistan crisis*

Though New Delhi continues to maintain its stance on engaging with a legitimate (democratically elected) government, like other regional stakeholders, it maintains limited foot print (manned presence), taking the liberty to engage with Taliban leadership directly. This further gives them the ability to counter/monitor Islamabad's influence in the region, analyse Taliban's response and reaction to the latter's

influence and keep account of Pakistan backed-terror factions operating in the Taliban-dominated areas, in short giving them perfect leverage for New Delhi to maximise. On the political settlement, New Delhi has means and the necessary

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To protect its interests (economic and social influence) India is in a perfect position to engage with any stakeholder, even if it means back-channelling influential tribal heads within Afghan society.

***India is in a perfect position (with support from regional stakeholders) in bringing a political settlement (bringing political leaders from erstwhile regime, Taliban leadership, civil society on one platform) putting an end to this crisis.***

To that end, Moscow's engagement with tribal heads across Afghan society will greatly benefit New Delhi. Also, like Moscow, the spread of radical jihadist ideology continues to threaten New Delhi and as continuous spread across the borders has resulted in a bolstered Islamic State. Moscow must work with New Delhi by supporting the latter's efforts to provide economic, social and humanitarian support to the local Afghans, followed by a politico-security approach against the Daesh. This will bolster regional stakeholders to engage in frequent dialogues & Taliban leadership much needed breathing room to engage in a political discourse. This will further provide necessary confidence to international institutions, EU agencies and humanitarian aid organizations to undertake development initiatives through regional stakeholders, with an intent to bring positive impact on the lives of local Afghans. This will provide Moscow and New Delhi to further cooperate in establishing hard power initiatives such as installation of physical infrastructure such as strengthening regional connectivity and medical/health care centres.

Within regional groupings such as the SCO, Moscow and New Delhi must voice for reviving the Afghanistan Contact Group, making it a platform for regional stakeholders to frequently engage and share resources not only with regional actors but with local civil society institutions currently operational in Afghanistan. To that end, Moscow must voice support to New Delhi for taking a leadership role in the group. This will not only encourage UN institutions and Financial aid agencies to engage directly but also EU/NATO led security institutions in employing innovative initiatives within the group (by creating sub groupings or observer status to partnered institutions) giving it an image of a functional body under the leadership of a legitimate reliable stakeholder working jointly for the benefit of local Afghans. To that note, the spread of Islamist fundamentalism is a threat not only to regional stakeholders but the world as a whole, India's ethnic and religious diversity makes it a responsible stakeholder to function as a nodal nation monitoring acts of terror (through joint intelligence sharing) under the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).

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## *Russia-India bilateral engagement on Afghanistan crisis: A hypothesis*

If New Delhi and Moscow does agree to formally engage bilaterally on Afghanistan, it is important that their policies and statements remains aligned. To begin with, Russia's abstain on the UNSC vote for the adoption of a resolution calling for Taliban to permit local masses leave the country and not allow it to become a terror state, re-affirmed its image as a valued stakeholder within regional actors. It is vital that it retains this image even during its coordination with New Delhi at all times. This continued coordination should not only limit to humanitarian support or counter-terror legislations but must make a direct impact on the lives of local Afghans. To begin with:

1. Russia is not only the main security guarantor in the Central Asia but engages bilaterally with all the six-post soviet states through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose members are also part of the SCO and the Moscow Format. It will seriously challenge Moscow on keeping a check on regional ambitions in place. With China focusing on its borders and until recently engaging with Taliban for economic gains, Moscow needs to decide how to engage with China in regional groupings, while engaging with India bilaterally. Although China and Russia did unanimously agree on taking a multilateral approach, Moscow must keep a check on Chinese future engagements, while working towards a pragmatic approach on how to coordinate with India. It is imperative for both Moscow and New Delhi to find common grounds of engagement and for Moscow to curtail regional ambitions arising from stakeholders. Any stakeholder's engagement with Taliban makes the situation more volatile especially if it shares the borders with both India & Afghanistan.

2. Moscow and New Delhi must find ways to engage in the politico-economic front. Even if the two nations express strongest political will, Moscow does not have the necessary economic will to sustain large scale development initiatives in the region, especially by itself. Indo-Russian joint economic partnership is the key which not only protects the two nations from an economic risk, instead provides them the opportunity to jointly assist in economic integration and stabilisation of Afghanistan under the gambit of physical infrastructure support, outside a regional framework.

3. Moscow and New Delhi must retain their focus on jointly investing in Afghanistan economically. Initiatives based on economic investment will largely target Taliban's

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inclination towards Chinese investment which on a longer run, may make Afghanistan dependent on Chinese finances as witnessed in Sri Lanka. This joint investment model, will develop confidence in western institutions in particular the EU and financial institutions such as the IMF to get involved– which can be used as a leverage against the Taliban leadership in Kabul. This will further pave in US and allied institutions, inspite being at war with Russia in the Eastern Europe. This may create a new shift in the existing geopolitical order with EU, US and their allies working in consensus with Indo-Russian engagements (India led) in Afghanistan, while going throat to throat in Eastern Europe. But to achieve this mammoth task, Moscow must forfeit its stance of solving a problem created by the west rhetoric's, to begin with. Even if this cooperation does materialise, we are looking at a global unified response towards a regional crisis with every stakeholder eyeing for leverage – and directly impacting the lives of local Afghans with varied perceptions (memories of Russian occupation to US-led allies' withdrawal)– and much more.

4. Moscow and New Delhi must undertake vivid approaches to development initiatives that too under a unified response. This is not limited to infrastructure or health care initiatives but also security centric platform involving response against terrorism and drugs, opening doors for cooperation with interested institutions/organizations civil society groups. This further implies an altercation in Russia's traditional policy of military engagement to politico-economic support aligning with New Delhi's policy. Such a change in stance will result in western institutions such as the EU to re-initiate humanitarian initiatives such as providing aid to civil run hospitals, state owned institutions, critical infrastructure support, and monetary allowances through development assistance. This will be possible when EU led institutions do not engage with the Taliban leadership directly instead provide assistance through Indo-Russia bilateral but New Delhi led joint development programs. Taking the note of regional rivalries, conflicts and stalemates, this hypothesis does not promote overtly positive synergies. The success factor lies in great power cooperation than competition, with key actors engaging in the region to relieve economic stress on local Afghan lives. That said, it is equally important for Western institutions to not to interpret Indo-Russian joint development initiative as a geopolitical ploy, to influence the global order. The EU is an equal interest in strengthening regional security as local stakeholders, hence it must engage with New Delhi more actively – if it really intends to give some respite to the Afghans currently experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe. India and Russia are the two principal players in this regard and hence their coordination and cooperation within vivid initiatives could lead to a slow improvement of the situation in Afghanistan – which may potentially ease relations between the EU, US & Russia.



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## Conclusion

Through bilateral engagement, both Russia and India have the ability to present itself as a responsible stakeholder determined to work towards regional peace and stability not only in Afghanistan but legitimate responsible stabilising power in the region. For months, analysts and military theorists have predicted possible engagements with Taliban without commenting/considering a scope for political settlement, especially after Taliban in power. To address this, India and Russia are the two key nations with necessary means and resources to bring regional stakeholders, including Afghan civil society groups, political factions, tribal heads, on a unified platform using their engagement as the key instrument. For this, Moscow needs to weigh India's approaches for engagement, evaluate options especially the role of Islamabad in its foreign policy, its long-term interest in the Eurasian region to name a few.

That said, it will not be incorrect to say that New Delhi is in a difficult position, and needs to engage with multiple regional stakeholders (including political parties from erstwhile regime, tribal heads, civil society groups, other ethnic communities) and seek Moscow's influence to curtail regional ambitions. This is not an easy undertaking, especially when actors like Iran shares similar confidence with Russia.

This is only possible with multiple bilateral engagement Russia, and the two sides finding common grounds to work together, the only key that opens the door for Indo-Russia strategic partnership. This will enable New Delhi not only to provide constant support in the interest of local Afghans but also retain larger influence in the region by keeping a check on regional ambitions in play. Moscow on the other hand, through this engagement will not only establish as a responsible key Eurasian power but also the only one, with a strategic partnership with India.

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