

Moscow Format; Formed in Step with U.S. Policies and Moving Forward to Contain the Taliban and Political Islam

(Translated)

News:

The eighth meeting of the Moscow Format was held in Moscow on October 5, 2026. Representatives of Afghanistan, Russia, China, Iran, India, Pakistan, and the Central Asian countries discussed Afghanistan's political and economic situation, "counterterrorism", narcotics, and regional cooperation. Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan were also prominent, and Amir Khan Muttaqi emphasized resolving disputes through dialogue. Sergey Lavrov also opposed the return of foreign military infrastructure to Afghanistan and neighboring countries.

Comment:

The Moscow Format took shape in 2017 under circumstances in which major actors, including the U.S, had changed their grand strategy. Instead of focusing primarily on the Islamic world and the war on "terror", the Indo-Pacific and containing China had become a higher priority. On the other hand, the U.S. had faced failure in the Islamic world and wanted to withdraw from it in an honorable manner. Therefore, they had reached the conclusion that the Taliban should be brought into political dialogue. The April 2017 meeting likewise called on the Taliban to enter direct negotiations with the Afghan government. Therefore, Moscow's initial objective overlapped with Washington's objective at the time-bringing the Taliban into the negotiation track-even though Russia was also seeking to consolidate its own diplomatic initiative and independent role.

This overlap became clearer at the second meeting in November 2018. The U.S. sent a working-level representative from its embassy in Moscow as an observer, and the U.S. Department of State announced that it was prepared to cooperate with interested parties to facilitate the peace process. Therefore, it is difficult to view the Moscow Format from the outset as an entirely anti-American project. At the same time, Russia had its own particular interests: reducing the U.S. military presence around its sphere of influence, preventing instability from spreading into Central Asia, containing Islamic groups, and preserving its position in the region's security arrangements.

After the Taliban's takeover, the function of the Format changed. The issue was no longer bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table; the Taliban themselves held power in Kabul. From then on, the focus of discussion shifted to engagement with the new government, border security, containing Islamism, narcotics, and economic relations. The U.S. did not participate in the Format's meetings at this stage, but the

available evidence does not show that Washington regarded this framework as inherently hostile to itself.

In recent years, Russia and China have openly opposed the return of Western military bases and infrastructure to Afghanistan. However, this does not turn the Moscow Format into an anti-American bloc. The composition of its members is heterogeneous, and some of its rulers are subordinate to American policies; India, Pakistan, and the Central Asian countries each have different relationships with the U.S, Russia, and China. Therefore, complete unity against U.S. policy is difficult in such a grouping.

One of the constant focuses of these meetings has been the fight against “terrorism.” In official discourse, the objective is to prevent Afghan territory from being used against other countries and to contain political Islam so that Muslims do not once again come to power on the basis of Islam and restore their Caliphate. For this reason, the concept of “counterterrorism” can operate beyond merely confronting ISIS and can become a tool for containing political Islam and Islamic movements that challenge the nation-state order and the existing regional balance and seek to change the status quo in favor of Islam.

From this perspective, bringing the Taliban into regional mechanisms serves two functions: regional powers seek, through economic incentives, political engagement, and security pressure, to integrate the Taliban into the existing order; in return, they want the Taliban themselves to prevent the activities of Islamic groups and political Islam in the region. The Afghanistan-Pakistan tension at the latest meeting is a clear example of this very struggle.

For the Taliban, the Moscow Format appears to be an opportunity to break political isolation, expand trade, attract investment, and consolidate their position in regional interactions. But these same benefits carry a cost: the more the Taliban become integrated into these frameworks, the greater the pressure becomes to accept the intellectual, security, and political rules of the existing order.

Afghanistan’s problem will not be solved by greater participation in formats designed by regional powers for their own interests. If such frameworks merely integrate Muslims and their governments into the logic of the nation-state and into the major powers’ definition of security, they can distance them from an independent Islamic political mission. On this basis, the desired alternative is not dependence on the Moscow Format or similar frameworks, but the establishment of Khilafah Rashidah (the Rightly Guided Caliphate); a system that defines its legitimacy, security, and foreign policy on the basis of Islamic principles and mission.

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