

Former Afghan President Sees Russia as Key to Peace With Taliban

March 01, 2018



Sumit Dayal **Bloomberg**

(Bloomberg) — Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai believes Russia can play a decisive role in ending America’s longest war.

With the war against the Taliban at a stalemate and U.S. President Donald Trump backing a more aggressive strategy against the militant group, Karzai said in an interview the U.S. can’t win without all major powers — including Russia — on board. The former Afghan leader ran the country for 13 years until 2014 and continues to wield influence.

“We need to have good relations with the Russia,” Karzai said on Feb. 19 at his heavily-guarded house next to the presidential palace in the capital, Kabul, where he continues to regularly meet Afghan lawmakers and foreign diplomats.

“Russia can contribute massively to peace in Afghanistan.”

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Any enlarged role for Russia may cause concern for the U.S. Last year Moscow was accused of aiding the Taliban in a bid to bog down American efforts to bring an end to the conflict.

While the Kremlin denies arming the group, Russia wants to deny the U.S. another permanent base near its borders and supports the Taliban's demand for foreign troops to withdraw from Afghanistan.

'Greater Leverage'

The head of U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Votel, told a congressional committee in Washington on Tuesday that Russia is attempting to limit the U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan and is causing "friction among NATO partners." Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special envoy on Afghanistan, said last month that Moscow may take active measures strengthen the Afghan government's combat capabilities and help establish.

"Russia appears to have stepped up engagement with the Taliban, adopting the stance that the Taliban is preferable to other violent extremist groups in the region," said Emily Winterbotham, a senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in London.

"However, Moscow's influence over and engagement with the Taliban is often overstated — other efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table through Pakistan or even China have failed; there is no reason to think that Russia should have greater leverage."

Karzai's comments may also raise eyebrows in a country that was invaded by the Soviet Union in 1979 before its retreat a decade later left the nation mired in civil war and conflicts between rival warlords.

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That vacuum led to the rise of the Taliban, which took power in the mid-1990s with support from Pakistan's main military intelligence agency.

The U.S. "should recognize that they cannot achieve anything by force anymore, that peace has to be in their agenda and peace can only come with all the major powers and neighbors on board," said Karzai. "We should see cooperation in Afghanistan between big powers and that's what I am trying to do."

Power Bid

Speculation has mounted that Karzai, who came to power after the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban and is now a critic of the U.S. and President Ashraf Ghani's government, is readying himself for another bid for power. He denied that he wanted to run for the presidency again in national elections scheduled for 2019. Karzai's administration was accused of ineptitude and corruption involving his family members while he was in power, charges that he has refuted.

He reiterated his call on the Taliban to contact Afghanistan's government for peace talks in order to end the 17-year conflict. Last month Ghani's administration rejected a surprise Taliban overture for peace talks with the U.S., insisting the insurgent group that controls or contests nearly half the country needs to cease fighting first and speak to the Afghan government.

Trump also ruled out direct talks with the Taliban after the group's bloody attacks in January killed and wounded hundreds. The U.S. president last year announced the deployment of more troops and an increase in air strikes in an attempt to push back the Taliban and Islamic State's gains across the war-torn nation.

"As a country we are not sovereign — the Taliban want to talk to the U.S. and the Taliban are taking instructions from Pakistan and here we are taking instructions from the Americans," said Karzai. "We are being used by different powers for their own purposes."

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