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A LOOK AT THE SEVENTH ROUND OF THE MOSCOW FORMAT TALKS



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A LOOK AT THE SEVENTH ROUND OF THE MOSCOW FORMAT TALKS

Introduction

The series of Moscow Format meetings was initiated by the Government of the Russian Federation in 2017. The primary objective of these meetings has been to provide a constructive platform for dialogue between Afghanistan and regional countries, with the aim of fostering a regional consensus in support of peace, stability, and development in Afghanistan. The seventh round of the Moscow Format was convened on October 7, 2025, in Moscow, with the participation of representatives from ten countries, including Afghanistan, Russia, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, India, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and a representative from the Republic of Belarus as a special guest.

This paper seeks to analytically examine the seventh round of the Moscow Format, assessing its major themes and implications, particularly for Afghanistan.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEETING FOR AFGHANISTAN

A key point of consideration regarding the seventh round of the Moscow Format is its particular significance for Afghanistan. Since the return of the Islamic Emirate to power, its representatives have been invited to several international gatherings; however, their participation has largely been symbolic, informal, and ceremonial. The participation of the Islamic Emirate in this latest round of the Moscow Format at the level of the Minister of Foreign Affairs marks the first official engagement of its representative in an international conference.

In this session, Amir Khan Muttaqi, Afghanistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, participated on an equal footing with other country representatives and delivered a formal address. Notably, the flag of the Islamic Emirate was displayed alongside those of other participating countries. Although the Islamic Emirate remains unrecognized by the international community, this gesture was significant—signaling that, from the perspective of certain participating states, the Emirate holds de facto authority over Afghanistan. The visual representation of this parity, disseminated through global media coverage, contributes to shaping international perceptions of the Islamic Emirate as a governing entity rather than merely a political group. In other words, as international audiences view reports and images from the event, the impression that the Islamic Emirate functions as Afghanistan's legitimate government becomes increasingly normalized, gradually softening its previous image as a non-state actor.

Another important aspect of this meeting for Afghanistan was the opportunity afforded to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to speak as the country's official representative on an international stage. In his address, Amir Khan Muttaqi outlined Afghanistan's security and economic achievements over the past four years and articulated the Islamic Emirate's broader regional



perspectives—particularly on the issue of terrorism. A key highlight of his remarks was his reference to the primary bases and sources of recruitment for the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), which he asserted are located outside Afghan territory. Without directly naming a specific country, Muttaqi alluded—through carefully chosen language—to Pakistan’s alleged role in nurturing and supporting this group.

Previously, the dominant international narrative placed the core of ISIS activity within Afghanistan. However, the Islamic Emirate now claims that, over the past four years, it has successfully eradicated ISIS presence from Afghan territory, and that the group has since relocated its operational and command centers to Pakistan. Crucially, the Emirate contends that ISIS operates with the backing of Pakistan’s military institutions, launching cross-border operations into Afghanistan and beyond—a claim indirectly echoed in the Minister’s remarks during the Moscow session.

It is worth noting that, on the sidelines of the conference, a verbal exchange reportedly occurred between Afghanistan’s Foreign Minister and the Pakistani representative. In response to statements made by Muhammad Sadiq Khan, Pakistan’s envoy, alleging the presence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Muttaqi retorted:

“In our region, there exists a country that shelters Daesh and has failed to manage its own security challenges, yet it places the blame on others.”

This exchange underscored the persistent tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, as well as the growing assertiveness of the Islamic Emirate in articulating its foreign policy positions within regional diplomatic forums.

EMPHASIS ON AFGHANISTAN’S RESPONSIBILITY

Another key theme highlighted during the seventh round of the Moscow Format was the acknowledgment and emphasis on the Islamic Emirate’s responsibility in maintaining internal security and preventing the use of Afghan territory against the interests of other countries. In this regard, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated:

“We emphasize that over the past four years, the government of the Islamic Emirate has become stronger and is now governing the country with greater confidence and stability. It must be recognized that, despite challenging circumstances, the leadership in Kabul has largely demonstrated effective governance.”

Such remarks, coming from the foreign minister of a major global power, not only reflect the realities on the ground in Afghanistan but also serve as a form of implicit endorsement and positive publicity for the Islamic Emirate through one of the most prominent regional



platforms. Lavrov further justified Russia's move toward recognizing the Islamic Emirate by explaining that this decision had removed international obstacles to continued cooperation with Afghanistan.

These supportive statements carry three key implications for Afghanistan:

1. **Image Rehabilitation:** Amid extensive negative media portrayals, such expressions of support contribute to projecting a more favorable image of the Islamic Emirate on the international stage.
2. **Affirmation of Governance Capacity:** Contrary to the perception held by some countries that the Islamic Emirate lacks governmental responsibility, Lavrov's remarks suggest that it is, in fact, performing its state duties in a manner comparable to other governments.
3. **Encouragement of Recognition:** Such positions could motivate other nations to follow Russia's lead and take steps toward the formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate.

THE NEED TO STAND WITH AFGHANISTAN

Another major theme reflected throughout the Moscow Format discussions—particularly in the speeches of participating representatives, including the Russian Foreign Minister, and in the final communiqué—was the call for collective support of the Islamic Emirate and for regional alignment and cooperation with Afghanistan. This marked the first instance in which all participating states in an international forum demonstrated such a high level of coordination and consensus in expressing support for the Islamic Emirate.

Broadly speaking, the shared positions of the countries represented at the meeting coalesced around several key principles:

1. **Support for Afghanistan Regardless of Political Considerations:** The main audience for this message was the Western countries, especially the United States, that have politicized humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and used it as a tool of pressure.
2. **Integration into Regional Frameworks:** The need to incorporate Afghanistan into regional mechanisms and integrate its economy through joint regional initiatives.
3. **Acceleration of Regional Economic Projects:** A shared call to expedite regional economic and connectivity projects that position Afghanistan as a vital conduit for linking the broader region.

As stated in sections of the final communiqué:



The participating countries expressed their readiness to enhance joint investment partnerships and development projects in Afghanistan, particularly in vital sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, poverty reduction, and disaster prevention. These initiatives were deemed crucial for ensuring sustainable growth and strengthening Afghanistan's regional connectivity."

Furthermore, participants agreed on the importance of strengthening Afghanistan's participation in international economic and infrastructure corridors and facilitating its integration into regional connectivity systems. The communiqué emphasized Afghanistan's potential to become a central hub for cross-border trade and transit projects linking Central, South, and West Asia.

The only areas in which the Islamic Emirate was urged to take more concrete action were the formation of an inclusive government, raised by Russia's foreign minister, and the continued fight against terrorism. Regarding the issue of inclusivity, Lavrov stated that establishing such a government would be a prerequisite for achieving lasting stability in Afghanistan. However, he clarified that this was not a precondition for Russia's engagement with the Islamic Emirate, but rather a recommendation intended to promote greater internal stability.

In addition, while the participants acknowledged the Islamic Emirate's ongoing efforts against terrorist groups, they stressed the need to sustain these efforts to eradicate terrorism both within Afghanistan and across the region. Although Pakistani media outlets attempted to amplify this aspect of the discussion, a noteworthy and unexpected outcome was that, according to the overall tenor of the meeting, Afghanistan was characterized not as a source of terrorism but as a *victim* of it. This perceptual shift represents a significant diplomatic advantage for Afghanistan, countering Pakistan's long-standing narrative in regional and international forums.

EXPLICIT OPPOSITION TO THE PRESENCE OF FOREIGN POWERS IN AFGHANISTAN

The final theme underscored during the seventh round of the Moscow Format—and one that featured prominently in the closing communiqué—was the collective expression of disapproval by participating countries regarding the potential reintroduction of foreign military forces into Afghanistan. Although Zamir Kabulov, the Russian President's Special Representative for Afghanistan, had earlier denied that the so-called "Trump Plan" was on the meeting's agenda, the issue nonetheless surfaced repeatedly in speeches and was explicitly addressed in the final statement.

As stated in the concluding section of the communiqué:

"The participants firmly rejected any attempts by foreign states to establish military infrastructure in Afghanistan or in neighboring countries. They affirmed that such actions



would undermine regional peace and stability and reiterated their consensus that the improvement of Afghanistan's situation must be achieved without any external military intervention."

In this context, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov delivered a pointed yet indirect warning to the United States, stating:

"The military presence of extra-regional forces in Afghanistan will only lead to renewed instability and fresh conflicts."

The implications of this statement are unambiguous: Russia and the other participating nations view any prospective return of U.S. military forces to Afghanistan as a potential catalyst for renewed conflict and disorder. In other words, should any external power—particularly the United States—reestablish a military foothold in Afghanistan under any pretext, Russia and the regional states would not remain passive. Rather, they would likely respond in a manner comparable to their reactions during previous foreign military interventions, first by the Soviet Union and later by the United States.

This warning may also be interpreted as indirectly directed at the Islamic Emirate itself. Although the Emirate has officially rejected former President Trump's reported request for the reintroduction of U.S. forces into Afghanistan, Russia's remarks appear designed to underscore the gravity of the issue and to caution Kabul against any form of military cooperation that could involve the establishment of American bases on Afghan soil. The message was clear: any decision by the Islamic Emirate to allow foreign military presence would not only provoke strong regional opposition but also jeopardize the delicate balance of trust and cooperation that has begun to form between Afghanistan and its neighboring states.

CONCLUSION

The seventh round of the Moscow Format represents both a diplomatic achievement and a political maneuver for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at the regional and international levels. The official participation of the Emirate in this meeting, symbolized by the display of its flag alongside those of other regional countries and the formal address delivered by its Minister of Foreign Affairs, demonstrated that the Islamic Emirate is gradually consolidating its regional and international standing as a legitimate governing authority.

Among the key outcomes of this meeting for the Islamic Emirate were its ability to showcase its security and economic achievements before an international audience and, more importantly, to distance Afghanistan from the long-standing stigma of terrorism. Through indirect references to Pakistan, the Emirate also sought to reframe the narrative by portraying



Pakistan—often perceived as a victim of terrorism- as one of the principal supporters and incubators of the Islamic State (ISIS).

The discussions revealed that a growing regional consensus has emerged in favor of the Islamic Emirate, with all participating countries emphasizing the need for Afghanistan's integration into regional economic frameworks and for prioritizing connectivity projects through Afghan territory. Moreover, there was a clear and unified stance against any potential return of U.S. military forces to Afghanistan, with participants viewing such a presence as a grave threat to the stability of both Afghanistan and the wider region.

Overall, this meeting can be regarded as a regional diplomatic success for the Islamic Emirate and, by extension, a step toward broader international legitimacy. The proceedings suggested that Afghanistan is increasingly being perceived not as a source of instability or threat, but as a credible partner and an integral component of regional economic development. These outcomes could potentially facilitate Afghanistan's emergence from regional and global isolation, positively influence its internal situation—particularly through the expansion of regional trade—and enable the freer movement of Afghan citizens across borders.

Nevertheless, the primary criticism directed toward the Islamic Emirate—reflected in the remarks of several participating representatives—concerned the lack of domestic reforms, particularly regarding the lifting of restrictions on women and the establishment of an inclusive government. The prevailing view among regional states is that meaningful reforms in these areas would create the necessary foundation for long-term stability within Afghanistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis presented in this paper, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Leverage Enhanced Regional Standing:

The Moscow meeting demonstrated growing regional engagement with the Islamic Emirate, thereby strengthening its bargaining power vis-à-vis other countries, particularly the United States. The Emirate should strategically utilize this emerging regional legitimacy in its diplomatic negotiations with Washington.

2. Expand Verified Counterterrorism Outreach:

The Islamic Emirate should intensify transparent and verifiable counterterrorism communications to eliminate the lingering perception that Afghanistan remains a hub of terrorism.

3. Invest in Domestic Infrastructure to Foster Regional Connectivity:



To transform Afghanistan into a central node of regional integration, the Emirate should focus on expanding domestic infrastructure, thereby encouraging practical cooperation and investment from neighboring states.

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