

Saving Afghanistan

Even before the [Taliban announced its new “spring offensive”](#), violence in Afghanistan had escalated dangerously this year. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the number of casualties in the first three months of 2018 was already 2,258 (763 killed, 1,495 injured). Last year, the U.S. announced a new ‘South Asia policy’ for Afghanistan, which was officially welcomed by both New Delhi and Kabul and hailed as a game-changer for the region. Just eight months later, the policy itself seems uncertain. And although the U.S. administration has taken some steps on Pakistani funding of terrorism across the Durand Line, it has clearly not yielded calm on the ground, as wave upon wave of terrorist violence has lashed Kabul and other cities. Sunday’s bomb attack in Kabul at a voter registration centre, where more than 57 were killed, carried a doubly diabolical message from the Islamic State. Not only did the group attack Afghanistan’s fragile democratic process, making it clear that elections next year could face more violence, but a majority of the victims were Shias, highlighting the sectarian turn in the conflict. In addition, the statement from the Taliban rejecting Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s offer of talks “without preconditions” and calling for the targeting of American forces in Afghanistan as part of a “spring offensive” signals the security challenge. According to the U.S., Afghan forces control just a little over half the territory today, down from nearly three-fourths in 2015. There seems little to suggest then that the U.S. policies guiding Afghanistan, and Kabul’s efforts to protect its people, are making any headway. It is necessary for both to take a more hard-headed, realistic view of the road ahead.

The new great game as it unfolds

There is a need to stop the ‘Great Game’ for influence in Afghanistan. Growing U.S.-Russia tensions are creating space for proxies for both on Afghan soil, and the attacks by al-Qaeda and IS-related terror groups have their roots in the larger war between Iran and the Arab world. Tensions between India and Pakistan cast a shadow over Afghanistan, with India’s development assistance under attack. In turn, driven by the desire to secure itself from Islamist groups, China is trying to build a rival military base in Afghanistan. Ironically, in the wake of 9/11 and the Taliban’s defeat in 2001, for a while all these countries were actually on the same page on helping Afghanistan. It is not as if efforts have not been made for bilateral and multilateral peace talks in recent months, but each one has amounted to too piecemeal an effort. Defeating terrorism in Afghanistan needs every stakeholder to put aside differences, and acknowledge that the current situation is a danger to all.

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