

AFGHAN PEACE AND INDIA'S ELBOW ROOM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

Earlier this month, the United Nations Secretariat held a meeting of what it calls the “6+2+1” group on regional efforts to support peace in Afghanistan, a group that includes six neighbouring countries: China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; global players the United States and Russia, and Afghanistan itself. India was conspicuous by its absence from the meeting on April 16, given its historical and strategic ties with Afghanistan, but not for the first time.

In December 2001, for example, the Indian team led by special envoy Satinder Lambah arrived in Germany's Petersberg hotel near Bonn, where the famous Bonn agreement was negotiated, to find no reservations had been made for them at the official venue. In January 2010, India was invited to attend the “London Conference” on Afghanistan, but left out of the room during a crucial meeting that decided on opening talks with the Taliban.

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In 2020, the reason given for keeping India out of regional discussions on Afghanistan was ostensibly that it holds no “boundary” with Afghanistan; but in fact it is because New Delhi has never announced its support for the U.S.-Taliban peace process. In both 2001 and 2010, however, India fought back its exclusion successfully. At the Bonn agreement, Ambassador Lambah was widely credited for ensuring that Northern Alliance leaders came to a consensus to accept Hamid Karzai as the Chairman of the interim arrangement that replaced the Taliban regime. After the 2010 conference, New Delhi redoubled its efforts with Kabul, and in 2011, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghanistan President Karzai signed the historic Strategic Partnership Agreement, which was Afghanistan's first such agreement with any country.

As planners in South Block now consider their next steps in Afghanistan, they must fight back against the idea that any lasting solution in Afghanistan can be discussed without India in the room, while also studying the reasons for such exclusions. To begin with, India's resistance to publicly talking to the Taliban has made it an awkward interlocutor at any table. Its position that only an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled process can be allowed is a principled one, but has no takers. Kabul, or the Ashraf Ghani government does not lead, own or control the reconciliation process today, comprising the U.S.-Taliban negotiation for an American troops withdrawal, and intra-Afghan talks on power sharing. The U.S.-Taliban peace deal means that the Taliban, which has not let up on violent attacks on the Afghan Army, will become more potent as the U.S. withdraws soldiers from the country, and will hold more sway in the inter-Afghan process as well, as the U.S. withdraws funding for the government in Kabul.

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New Delhi's decision to put all its eggs in the Ghani basket has had a two-fold effect: its voice in the reconciliation process has been limited, and it has weakened India's position with other leaders of the deeply divided democratic setup in Kabul such as the former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah. Meanwhile, India's presence inside Afghanistan, which has been painstakingly built up since 2001, is being threatened anew by terror groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), believed to be backed by Pakistan's establishment. Intercepts showed that the brutal attack, in March, that killed 25 at a gurudwara in Kabul was meant for the embassy in Kabul, and intelligence agencies had warned of suicide car bomb threats to the consulates in Jalalabad and Herat last December.

While the government has said that the novel coronavirus pandemic prompted its decision to clear out both consulates this month, the truth is that a full security reassessment is under way for them. Either way, India's diplomatic strength in Afghanistan should not appear to be in retreat just when it is needed the most.

The government must also consider the damage done to the vast reservoir of goodwill India enjoys in Afghanistan because of recent events in the country, especially the controversy over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. The building blocks of that goodwill are India's assistance in infrastructure projects, health care, education, trade and food security, and also in the liberal access to Afghans to study, train and work in India. Above all, it is India's example as a pluralistic, inclusive democracy that inspires many. Afghanistan's majority-Muslim citizens, many of whom have treated India as a second home, have felt cut out of the move to offer fast track citizenship to only Afghan minorities, as much as they have by reports of anti-Muslim rhetoric and incidents of violence in India.

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While many of these are problems of perception, New Delhi must move swiftly to regain the upper hand in the narrative in Afghanistan. India's assistance of more than \$3 billion in projects, trade of about \$1 billion, a \$20 billion projected development expenditure of an alternate route through Chabahar, as well as its support to the Afghan National Army, bureaucrats, doctors and other professionals for training in India should assure it a leading position in Afghanistan's regional formulation.

Three major projects: the Afghan Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam (Salma dam), along with hundreds of small development projects (of schools, hospitals and water projects) have cemented that position in Afghan hearts nationwide, regardless of Pakistan's attempts to undermine that position, particularly in the South. As a result, it would be a mistake, at this point, to tie all India's support in only to Kabul or the Ghani government; the government must strive to endure that its aid and assistance is broad-based, particularly during the novel coronavirus pandemic to centres outside the capital, even if some lie in areas held by the Taliban.

India must also pursue opportunities to fulfil its role in the peace efforts in Afghanistan, starting with efforts to bridge the [Ghani-Abdullah divide](#), and bringing together other major leaders with whom India has built ties for decades. It would be an utter tragedy if the Taliban were to enter the government in Kabul as the U.S. deal envisages, to find the opposing front collapse as it did in 1996.

The conversation India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had with the U.S.'s Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad last week, where they [discussed India's "engagement" in the peace process](#), appears to open a window in that direction.

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An understanding between Iran and the U.S. on Afghanistan is necessary for lasting peace as well, and India could play a mediatory part, as it did in order for the Chabahar project.

Finally, New Delhi should use the United Nations's call for a pause in conflicts during the novel coronavirus pandemic, to ensure a hold on hostilities with Pakistan. This will be even more difficult than it sounds, given the abyss that bilateral relations have fallen into in the past year over Kashmir and the rise in firepower exchanged at the Line of Control.

However, if there is one lesson that the the U.S.-Taliban talks have imparted, it is that both have found it necessary to come to the table for talks on Afghanistan's future. For India, given its abiding interest in Afghanistan's success and traditional warmth for its people, making that leap should be a bit easier.

Above all, the government must consider the appointment of a special envoy, as it has been done in the past, to deal with its efforts in Afghanistan, which need both diplomatic agility and a firmness of purpose at a watershed moment in that country's history.

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