

ENTER THE PEACE PROCESS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

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External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's comment that India supports talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban signals a subtle shift in New Delhi's approach towards the Afghan crisis. At the 9th Heart of Asia Conference in Tajikistan, he said India has been supportive of all efforts being made to "accelerate the dialogue" between the Afghan government and the Taliban, in a rare direct reference to the insurgent group. In the 1990s and 2000s, India was steadfastly opposed to any dealings with the Taliban. But its position seems to have evolved over the years. In 2018, when Russia hosted Afghan and Taliban talks, India had sent a diplomatic delegation to Moscow. In September 2020, at the intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, Mr. Jaishankar was present at the inaugural session via a video link, reaffirming the long-held Indian position that any peace process should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled. His latest comments come close on the heels of a new peace push by the Joe Biden administration of the U.S. The Biden plan includes two key proposals — a unity transition government between the warring parties and a UN-led multilateral conference of envoys from India, China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the U.S. India has supported the UN-led process, in an apparent climbdown from its earlier position, and now shown willingness to deal with the Taliban.

The evolution of India's position is in sync with the evolution of the reality in Afghanistan. The Taliban, no longer an untouchable force, control much of the country's rural territories. The U.S. has already signed a deal with the Taliban, wherein American troops are scheduled to pull back from Afghanistan by May 1. China had long ago reached out to the Taliban. Russia has hosted talks between the two sides. European powers have also shown interest in sponsoring talks. So, India has to be more flexible and adapt to the new strategic reality. Since the fall of the Taliban, India has cultivated deep ties with the Afghan people and the government, with investments in multiple projects dealing with education, power generation, irrigation and other infrastructure development. The first batch of vaccines Afghanistan got was from India, in February. Recently, India signed an agreement to build the Shahtoot dam near Kabul. Thus, its economic, strategic and security ties could be disrupted if the Taliban were to take over. The question India faces, like the other stakeholders, is how to help Afghanistan end the violence without a total capitulation to the Taliban. India joining the peace process could strengthen the hands of the Afghan government, which is negotiating from a position of weakness. New Delhi should, using its regional clout as well as its deep ties with both the U.S. and Russia, strive for what Mr. Jaishankar called "double peace", both inside Afghanistan and in the region.

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