

'MUST ENSURE DEMOCRACY PREVAILS IN AFGHANISTAN'

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S. Jaishankar MOORTHY RV

The U.S. decision to pull out all forces from Afghanistan is a “big step” that will have deep consequences, said External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, who called for a “responsible drawdown” of American and NATO forces. Along with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Afghanistan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib, Mr. Jaishankar said it was necessary that Afghanistan’s constitution, democratic processes and the rights accorded to women and minorities were ensured under any circumstances, and that the “endgame” in Afghanistan be “united, democratic and sovereign”.

“What all of us see in [U.S.] President Biden’s announcement is a big step that is going to take Afghanistan in a certain direction and it is important that we all work together to ensure that the direction is right and the outcomes are good for Afghanistan,” Mr. Jaishankar said while speaking at the Ministry of External Affairs’ annual Raisina Dialogue on a panel with Mr. Zarif and Mr. Mohib during a virtual session.

India’s concerns

Mr. Jaishankar’s comment indicated India’s concerns about a hasty withdrawal of the U.S. and allied forces from Afghanistan, which could bring the Taliban into a powerful role in Kabul.

On Thursday, the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Bipin Rawat, had said India’s concern was that “the vacuum that was going to be created should not create space for disruptors to step in, and, therefore, the violence continues in Afghanistan”.

Mr. Mohib, who said he had called National Security Adviser Ajit Doval on Friday and spoke to him about the transition plan as well as the upcoming intra-Afghan and regional talks in Turkey, added that much would depend on the troops withdrawal plan and what kind of assistance they would continue to provide the Afghan National Security and Defence Forces (ANSDF).

“We are in uncharted territory, and the devil is in the details of what we negotiate with NATO forces,” he said, referring to the continuing threat of violence from foreign fighters as well as the Taliban. In particular, referring to Islamic State (IS) fighters present in Afghanistan, Mr. Zarif said it was necessary to see that Afghanistan and all its neighbours faced “common threats, common challenges”.

Development assistance

Enumerating India’s development assistance to Afghanistan since 2001, Mr. Jaishankar said it was an “absolute fantasy” that India’s actions in Afghanistan were aimed at Pakistan, and a cause of bilateral differences and regional instability.

He said India’s role, including in the construction of the Afghan parliament, the Salma Dam and road networks, was a “positive” one unlike other neighbours, in a pointed reference to Pakistan’s support to the Taliban and terror groups operating there.

However, Mr. Jaishankar refused to answer questions about whether India was engaging with Pakistan or the Taliban.

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