

A WAY OUT OF THE MORASS: ON THE US' PLAN TO PULL OUT OF AFGHANISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

In an article published in *The Hindu* (Editorial page, "[Another approach to Afghanistan](#)", December 24, 2003), we had suggested that the only way out of the morass in Afghanistan would be to re-place Afghanistan in its traditional mode of neutrality. For that, two things were essential. The Afghans themselves must declare unequivocally that they would follow strict neutrality in their relations with external powers, and the outside powers must commit themselves to respect Afghanistan's neutrality. In other words, external powers must subscribe to a multilateral declaration not to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan together with an obligation on Afghanistan not to seek outside intervention in its internal situation.

We further put forward the idea that the agreement on the Neutrality of Laos, concluded in 1962, could provide a model for the neutralisation of Afghanistan. The present might be an appropriate time to revisit that proposal.

U.S. President Donald Trump has announced his decision to reduce American troop strength in Afghanistan, 14,000 at present, by half. Though Mr. Trump has not laid down a deadline for this reduction, it is safe to assume that he will make this happen well in time before the next U.S. presidential election in 2020.

This development has energised the principal stakeholders in Afghanistan to make calculated efforts to place themselves in as favourable a position as possible in an Afghanistan post-American withdrawal. India should also be thinking of what steps it should take to protect its interests in that situation.

One thing that should already have been done and must be done is to engage in dialogue with the Taliban. There is no doubt that the Taliban will be a major player in the politics of Afghanistan in the coming months and years. They already control more than 50% of the country and are getting stronger and bolder by the day. They are also engaged in direct talks with China, Russia, the Central Asian states and others. The Americans, represented by former diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, have begun sustained dialogue with the Taliban. The Taliban have refused to talk to the Kabul government so far, but as and when the Americans pull out, as they are justified in doing for reasons of their own national interest, they might agree to engage with the Ashraf Ghani government. In any future scenario, the Taliban are guaranteed to play an important, perhaps even a decisive role in the governing structures of the country.

New Delhi has so far refrained from establishing formal contacts with the Taliban out of sensitivity for the Kabul government not wanting to talk directly to the Taliban as long as the Taliban refuse to acknowledge its legitimacy. However, India must look after its own interests. Will a Taliban-dominated government in Kabul necessarily pose a serious security threat to us? While we are in no position to prevent such an eventuality, we would have alienated the Taliban by refusing to talk to them during the present phase. Even Iran, a Shia regime, has established official dialogue with the Taliban, a staunchly Sunni movement. It would not be difficult for our agencies to establish contacts that would facilitate initiating an official dialogue with Taliban; if needed, Iran could help in this even if it might displease the Americans. After all, the Americans have not always been sensitive to our concerns, in Afghanistan or elsewhere and Mr. Trump has publicly shown unawareness of our substantial development assistance to it.

The international community ought to, at the same time, think of how to establish a mechanism which might offer a reasonable opportunity to the Afghan people to live in peace, free from external interference. And perhaps the only way in which this could be done is to promote a regional compact among all the neighbouring countries as well as relevant external powers, and with the endorsement of the UN Security Council, to commit themselves not to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The most important country in this regard is Pakistan. Pakistan is highly suspicious, perhaps without any basis, of India's role in Afghanistan. A multilateral pact, with India subscribing to it, ought to allay, to some extent at least, Pakistan's apprehensions. India will need to talk to China about cooperating in Afghanistan; Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi already agreed in Wuhan, in April 2018, on working on joint projects there.

Pakistan should have no objection to formally agreeing to Afghanistan's neutrality. There is the most relevant precedent of the Bilateral Agreement on the Principles of Mutual Relations, in particular on Non-interference and Non-intervention, signed in Geneva in 1988 between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In that agreement, the parties undertook, inter alia, to respect the right of the other side to determine its political, social and culture system without interference in any form; to refrain from over throwing or changing the political system of the other side; to ensure that its territory was not used to violate the sovereignty, etc of the other side, to prevent within its territory the training, etc of mercenaries from whatever origin for the purpose of hostile activities against the other side.

As a document on non-interference, it could hardly be improved upon. Pakistan probably would agree to a document with Afghanistan in whose governance its protégé, the Taliban, will play an important role, which would broadly be similar to the one it had concluded with an Afghan regime which it did not approve of.

The Bonn Agreement of 2001, which made Hamid Karzai the interim chief of Afghan government, contains a request to the United Nations and the international community to 'guarantee' non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, a request not acted upon so far.

A regional pact on non-interference and non-intervention ought to be welcomed by all the regional states. Russia has reason to worry about a lack of stability in Afghanistan because of its concerns regarding a spread of radicalism as well as the drug menace. China has even stronger concerns, given the situation in its western-most region. The U.S. might have apprehensions about China entrenching itself in strategically important Afghanistan, but there is little it can do about it; a regional agreement on non-interference might give the U.S. at least some comfort.

It is early days to conclude whether the situation in Afghanistan has entered its end game. In any case, it would be prudent to assume that the U.S. will definitely leave Afghanistan in the next two years, likely to be followed by other western countries. No other country will offer to put boots on the ground, nor should they; certainly not India. The only alternative is to think of some arrangement along the lines we have suggested. May be, there are other ideas; we would welcome them.

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