

DELHI'S KABUL CHALLENGE: FINDING DIPLOMATIC SPACE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

India should prepare for a potential new chapter in today's Great Game in Afghanistan, in which it will be reduced to a footnote. Even now, this is not preordained. That India is not part of the present talks between the United States, Pakistan, China and Russia on the future of Afghanistan is no surprise. India was not part of the original three-nation talks from which these were derived, and has regularly been excluded from most of the Afghan-related talks. There is a strong correlation between Pakistan's presence at the table and India's exclusion. What has made the present talks different from the past several years of fruitless negotiations is the determination of the United States president, Donald Trump, to bring an end to US's military presence in Afghanistan, irrespective of the regional consequences. The present negotiations notably exclude both India and the present Kabul government.

India's interest lies in keeping the Taliban and, therefore, a Pakistan-aligned regime out of Kabul. This has helped keep Islamabad mentally and militarily fearful of a two-front conflict and reduced its capacity to cause mischief to India. India has accomplished this strategic goal vicariously through the US campaign against the Taliban. India has contributed large amounts of aid to Afghanistan and, for a while, deployed paramilitary units. But all this was a derivative of the US posture. Since President Barack Obama promised to pull out of Afghanistan in 2009, the real determinant of the Indian presence in Afghanistan has been the internal debate in the US. The US withdrawal is not yet a done deal. There are many even within the Trump administration who do not support his policy, but its likelihood is greater than it has ever been.

India should begin to work on policy options that presume a much greater Pakistani influence in Afghanistan. New Delhi lacks the finance, the weapons and geographical proximity to sustain the Kabul regime. But it should consider breaking earlier taboos like reaching out to the Taliban, many of whom are wary of Islamabad. It should leverage the fear countries like Iran, the Central Asian republics, and even China have of an unstable Afghanistan. It should also give thought to the security and military fallout of a Pakistan that feels it has achieved it has secured its western flank. The game is not over yet, but the rules are being rewritten and India, despite its many limitations, should seek to influence the process as much as possible.

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