

# AFGHANISTAN AND THE TALIBAN: NEXT STAGE IN THE GREAT GAME

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

As international talks with the Taliban leadership gain momentum, India's foreign policy establishment has gone through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. After the initial denial that several countries, including the U.S., Russia, U.A.E., Qatar and Saudi Arabia, were engaging with Pakistan in order to bring senior Taliban leaders to the table in late 2017, India protested against being cut out of the talks. It then negotiated to join them, followed by expressions of deep misgiving over where the talks would lead. And finally this has given way to acceptance today that the talks have not only progressed, but are being given priority over every other process in Afghanistan.

The misgivings are well placed, and confirmed by the results of the last round of talks between U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leaders in Doha (February 25-March 12). The talks appeared to be held on the Taliban's terms, and at a venue of its choice. Therefore, while clear agreements have been forged on the withdrawal of foreign forces and on not allowing Afghan soil for use by foreign terror groups, agreements on a comprehensive ceasefire and an intra-Afghan dialogue, once considered the minimum "redlines" or starting point of engaging with the Taliban, have now been made the last priority.

These talks have also broken the most important redline, that of being led by, or at least held with the full backing and knowledge of, the democratically-led government in Kabul. This became evident a few days ago. During a visit to Washington on March 14, Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib lashed out at Mr. Khalilzad for "delegitimising" the Ashraf Ghani government by carrying out talks in the dark.

Another reason for New Delhi's disquiet is that these talks continue without acknowledging a role for India, despite this being an expressly stated goal of Mr. Trump's South Asia policy. This week, Mr. Khalilzad's conference at the U.S. State Department to discuss "international support for the Afghan peace process, the role each party can play in bringing an end to the war, and progress to date in peace talks" included only special envoys from Russia, China and the European Union.

Finally, there is the uncertainty for Afghanistan's future that these talks have wrought that worries India. When talks with the Taliban began, the objective was to try to mainstream the insurgents into the political process, and at least have a working ceasefire by the time presidential elections, scheduled for April 2019, were held. The reality is far from that. The Taliban continues to carry out terror attacks in Afghanistan even as its leadership talks with the U.S. Despite the Ministry of External Affairs issuing a statement on the importance of holding the presidential elections, the Afghan vote has been further postponed to September 28. This makes Mr. Ghani's continuance more tenuous under the constitution, which could mean an interim government will be installed, something India has been opposed to as well.

New Delhi is worried about the prospect of chaos and civil war, akin to the scene after the previous U.S. pullout in the early 1990s that cut India out and brought the Taliban to power in Kabul with Pakistan's support. Despite the restricted room for manoeuvre, however, there are several steps New Delhi can and must take in the present scenario to ensure both its own relevance in Afghanistan and stability in the region.

To begin with, there is the question of talks with the Taliban, which India has thus far refused. In the recent past, the Modi government has shown some flexibility on the issue, by sending a “non-official” representation to the Moscow talks with the Taliban. After a visit to Delhi in January by Mr. Khalilzad, Army Chief General Bipin Rawat even suggested that India should “jump on the bandwagon” of engaging the Taliban.

However, direct, open talks between India and the Taliban at this point would serve little purpose for either side. For India, it would mean casting aside a consistently held moral principle and speaking to a non-state actor that espouses terrorism. While backchannel talks between intelligence agencies and the Taliban have been conducted for years, recognising the Taliban as a legitimate interlocutor for India at this point would be a betrayal of India’s values without any visible gains. India’s policy for the past two decades is to deal with the government in Kabul, and this will hold it in good stead if the Taliban were to eventually be a part of the government there.

The truth is, 2019 is not 1989, and much has changed inside Afghanistan as it has in the world outside. While Afghan security forces have suffered many losses in the past year, it is unlikely that the Taliban would today be able to overrun and hold Kabul or any other big Afghan city as it did before. It also seems inconceivable that a “full withdrawal” of U.S. troops will include giving up all the bases they hold at present. Given technology, social media and the progress in education in Afghanistan since 2001 (the number of secondary graduates rose from 10,000 to more than 300,000 in 2015), it is also unlikely that the Taliban will be able to control the hearts and minds of Afghans if it were to revert to its brutal ways. Nor could it run policies that endanger Indian interests in the country, given the special place India enjoys, amongst thousands of Afghans who have studied in India, youth and women supported by Indian development projects, and hundreds of military officers trained in the country.

Every one of the 17 presidential tickets announced also has an “India-friendly” face on it, and India must leverage its influence across the spectrum. With presidential elections put off for the moment, India could work with these Afghan leaders to support a ‘Grand Jirga’ that ensures that the maximum number of representatives from across Afghanistan articulate their post-reconciliation vision.

India is also host to a sizeable population of Afghans who live, work and study in the country, and an outreach is important. After all, when the Vladimir Putin government brought Taliban representatives and Afghan leaders to the table for the ‘Moscow process’, it was under the aegis of an association of Afghans resident in Russia. It was public support for talks with the Taliban that gave the reconciliation process legitimacy, and it is necessary that public opinion on issues like democracy, women’s rights, education and the media also be allowed to hold sway. The world must see Afghans as they see themselves, and not according to the often-skewed ideas generated at conferences on Afghanistan’s future that sometimes don’t even include an Afghan representation.

Finally, both India and Pakistan have a shared responsibility in building a dialogue over Afghanistan post-reconciliation. It is necessary that officials on both sides find a way to sit across the table on Afghanistan some day.

Despite all the many reasons for despondency, it is necessary that Indian strategists don’t lose sight of the bigger picture — India’s longstanding relationship with the people of Afghanistan. This is a relationship nurtured by every government in New Delhi, with more than \$3 billion invested by India since 2001, which has reaped manifold returns in terms of goodwill and friendship across Afghanistan. Defeatism or a lack of ambition for the India-Afghanistan relationship at this juncture would be much more detrimental to India’s interests than anything the Taliban’s return to Afghanistan’s political centrestage can do.

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