

FAIL-SAFE EXIT FOR AMERICA, BUT A WORRY FOR INDIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The recently negotiated peace deal between the United States and the Taliban is unlikely to bring peace to Afghanistan, is geopolitically disadvantageous for India, and has serious implications for our national security. The terms of the deal, the manner in which it was negotiated as well as the geopolitical context in which it was stitched up indicate that it was more about providing an honourable exit route for the U.S.'s Trump administration from its military campaign in Afghanistan than about ending violence in the country. Within 24 hours of the much-publicised deal, violence and major disagreements about the deal began erupting in Afghanistan. Given that the Taliban negotiated from a position of strength, the Trump administration from weakness and little political will, and that the Ashraf Ghani administration in Afghanistan was by and large a clueless bystander in all of this, means that the country is perhaps on the verge of yet another long-drawn out and internecine battle.

When the Taliban came to power in the mid-1990s in Kabul, it had few backers in the world, nor was it seen as a useful commodity by the great powers or the states in the region, except for Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. And the international community was almost united in offering a normative pushback against the violent outfit. As a result, the Taliban was at best reluctantly tolerated until it messed up towards the end of its regime in Kabul. The Northern Alliance, supported by countries such as Russia and India, kept up its military pressure against the Taliban while it was in power. The situation today, at least for the moment, is perhaps the exact opposite of what was the case then. The Taliban today is also more worldly-wise and might have learned, during its exile, to deal with the international system and play the game of balance of power. More so, it may not necessarily be a puppet of the Pakistani deep state once it returns to power.

Given the war fatigue and the geopolitical stakes in Afghanistan, most of the key players in the region and otherwise have been in negotiations with the Taliban one way or another, and for one reason or another, lending the terror group certain legitimacy in the process. Today, the Taliban is the flavour of the season — anyone desirous of a stake in Afghanistan or does not want its domestic turmoil to spill over into their country would want to keep the Taliban in good humour. There is another reason why the Taliban has many suitors — because the U.S. withdrawal by and large suits everyone, be it China, Pakistan, Iran, or Russia. Suddenly, the Taliban appears to have been forgiven for its sordid past and unforgivable sins because for most of these countries, the U.S. is the bigger challenge than the Taliban.

The only state that seems to be on the losing end, unfortunately, of this unfolding game of chess and patience in Afghanistan is India. It did not have to be this way: if the earlier Taliban regime was anti-India, it was also because India had militarily supported the Northern Alliance that kept up the military pressure against the Taliban. Today's Taliban does not share the same animus for New Delhi. New Delhi, therefore, could have rejigged its approach to Taliban this time around. However, it put all its eggs in the Ashraf Ghani basket, even on the eve of the signing of the peace deal in Doha. New Delhi also, for most intents and objectives, adopted a puritanical approach to the Taliban, neither reaching out to the Taliban nor exploiting the fissures within it; one, because it did not want to irk the elected government in Kabul and two, because it adopts a

moralistic approach to dealing with extremist groups in general — not a smart diplomatic strategy. This moralistic attitude, also a diplomatically lazy one, I would say, that be it Pakistan or Afghanistan, India would only talk to the legitimate government in that country, is a self-defeating position. The world is not that perfect, nor are states all that uniform, created in the shape and image of the Westphalian forefather. Smart statecraft, therefore, is dealing with what you have and making the best of it.

As a result, India's relations with Afghanistan will take a hit in the immediate aftermath of the deal. Here is why. With China, India's strategic adversary, deeply involved in the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the region, including in Afghanistan, India's traditional ability to influence the region's political and security outcomes will be severely limited. This will be further exacerbated by the withdrawal of the U.S., India's closest friend, from the region. Other regional actors in Afghanistan are also less friendly towards India than ever before: Iran feels let down by India given how the latter has behaved towards it at the behest of the Americans; for Russia, India is only one of the many friends in the region — the exclusivity of Russia-India relations is a thing of the past — and Pakistan would consider targeting India a fair game.

Unless New Delhi carefully envisages a counter strategy, these factors will increasingly push India into a geopolitical tough spot in the region. It should worry us that our political class is focused on domestic politics while the region is becoming ever more uncertain and evidently unfavourable to us.

While the direct physical impact of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on Kashmir will be negligible, this will not be without serious implications for the unfolding situation in Kashmir's restive regions. The most important impact is going to be psychological. Disenchanted Kashmiri youngsters, and there are a lot of them, will interpret the events in Afghanistan as follows: "If the mighty superpower USA could be defeated by the Taliban in Afghanistan with help from the Pakistan army, defeating Indian forces in Kashmir won't be impossible after all." This enthusiasm is completely misplaced, but that is not the point. That the Kashmiri youth might pick up guns drawing inspiration from the situation in Afghanistan is indeed the point.

Second, the U.S.-Taliban deal cannot survive without Pakistan's assistance towards ensuring its success, and the U.S. and its allies recognise that. Such a recognition of Pakistan's utility provides the country with an ability, as and when it wishes to, to up the ante in Kashmir.

Third, New Delhi's official statement which describes Afghanistan as a "contiguous neighbour" — meaning that India considers Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) a part of its sovereign territory — will make Pakistan and China sit up and take notice. Recall that India also made a similar claim about Aksai Chin in the wake of its August decision on Kashmir. Erstwhile rhetorical claims on PoK and Aksai Chin have suddenly assumed lot more geopolitical significance today making conciliatory approaches to conflict resolution ever more difficult.

The return of the Taliban, however unavoidable that may be, signals a victory of religious fundamentalism in the region and it will have serious implications for the region as a whole. Not only is the Taliban's return a victory for a puritanical religious outfit, it is also an act in legitimising it. More so, given that a new Taliban-led dispensation in Afghanistan will be far more accepted by the international community than the last time around (1996 to 2001) also means increased acceptability for such regimes in general, either out of necessity or as a function of geopolitical calculations. That the Taliban mass-murdered its opponents into statehood in the 21st century and that this might provide potential inspiration to other outfits in the region and outside should indeed worry us.

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