

U.S. PLAN FOR AFGHANISTAN RAISES CONCERNS

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

The inclusion of India in the United States's latest strategy of regional talks on Afghanistan was welcome but it did not remove several misgivings New Delhi had about Washington's policy over the conflict that was revealed over the weekend during U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad's talks with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and a letter written by U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani, sources said.

Mr. Khalilzad is understood to have apprised Mr. Jaishankar of Mr. Blinken's missive, after which he travelled to Islamabad for meetings with Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa. He "thanked Pakistani counterparts for their assistance and asked for Pakistan's continued commitment to the peace process," U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

According to the letter to Mr. Ghani, which was published by Afghan agency Tolo News, and has not been denied by the U.S. or Afghan governments, Mr. Blinken's plan is to ask the United Nations to convene a meeting of "Foreign Ministers and Special Envoys from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the U.S." to discuss a "unified approach" on Afghanistan.

For New Delhi, which has protested being left out of regional formulations in the past both in the original Moscow process, and in the United Nation's April 2020 "6+2+1" that included Afghanistan's "immediate neighbours" only, the U.S.'s suggestion is a relief. Even so, experts question what such a group would achieve.

"It seems the U.S. just wants to accelerate its exit from the conflict by proposing this grouping at the U.N. It is a mystery what the U.S. expects to discuss around a table with China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, all of which it is otherwise at odds with, and is seeking to contain or sanction. How will it help India?" asked Kabir Taneja, Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation.

Equally puzzling is the U.S.'s plan to ask the government of Turkey to host a senior-level meeting of "both sides in the coming weeks to finalise a peace agreement."

Role for Turkey

Officials said the new emphasis for an Istanbul process over the current process in Doha, might indicate a greater role for Turkey, as well as Turkish troops as a part of a proposed "NATO stabilisation force", something that New Delhi might have concerns about, given close ties between Turkey and Pakistan.

Other parts of the Blinken letter and the Afghan policy proposals that have been outlined in Mr. Khalilzad's conversations could also be a source of concerns, some of which would be raised during the coming visit of U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin to Delhi next week, although it is unclear whether the first Quad summit, including U.S. President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, expected to be held on March 12, will cover the U.S.'s latest moves in Afghanistan.

For example, the U.S. has pushed for a road map to a "new, inclusive government" in Kabul, which indicates its desire to replace Mr. Ghani's government with an interim one that would include the Taliban's nominees. "There seems to be a certain inevitability in these proposals for Afghanistan, which suggests that the U.S. has already decided that the Taliban has a legitimate

place in Kabul,” an official told *The Hindu* .

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