

GETTING INDIA BACK TO THE AFGHAN HIGH TABLE

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If India's foreign and security policy planners had anticipated developments in Afghanistan they would have pursued nimble approaches, seeking to establish open connections with all its political groups, including with those perceived to be in Pakistan's pocket. Instead, they continued to rigidly cling to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani even as his equities diminished with each passing month. This, despite his becoming the winner of the presidential elections held in September last year but whose contested results were declared five months later.

Inexplicably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Mr. Ghani for winning the elections, in December 2019. At that stage, the Afghanistan election commission had only announced the preliminary results and most countries maintained a discreet silence. It took the commission two months more to declare Mr. Ghani as President-elect, a result that was rejected by Mr. Ghani's main rival, Abdullah Abdullah. It led to two simultaneous swearing-ins; both Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah took oath as President. It is true that the international community ultimately supported Mr. Ghani but qualified it with an insistence that he enters into a real power-sharing agreement with Mr. Abdullah. That agreement has just been reached. It will inevitably further weaken Mr. Ghani.

India welcomes Ghani-Abdullah pact

How has Mr. Ghani reciprocated India's such unqualified backing? His clear and public response came last month in a manner. It could only have been disappointing to Indian decision makers. The United Nations Secretariat organised a meeting on Afghanistan where it invited the six current physical neighbours of Afghanistan—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In addition, invitations were extended to the United States, Russia and the Ghani government. Obviously, Mr. Ghani did not condition his participation on India's inclusion. He should have done so if only for the constructive role New Delhi has played in Afghanistan's reconstruction since the Taliban were ousted from the country in 2001-2002 after 9/11. Also, for consistently supporting him.

If Indian policymakers had adequately pondered on Mr. Ghani's stance they would have recalled his position on India in the immediate aftermath of assuming the leadership of the National Unity Government brokered by the Americans in September 2014. He had then relegated India to the fourth concentric circle of five in importance to Afghan interests. Hence, it is not surprising that he did not bat adequately for India to become part of the meeting called by the UN. Indeed, if all his fine words of India's importance to Afghanistan were actually true, he would have lobbied and ensured India's participation.

So much for Mr. Ghani. What truly cut India more to the quick was the U.S. going along with India's absence. So much for the personal chemistry of the leaders of the two countries. The day after the meeting, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. point man on Afghanistan and the architect of the Taliban deal, spoke to India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to assuage hurt sentiments. But the balm of good words cannot obscure the basic fact that the U.S. acts to promote its interests in Afghanistan. It obviously expects that if in doing so Indian interests are exposed, India will protect them as best as it can.

India must not give Taliban legitimacy until it joins intra-Afghan talks, says former envoy Amar Sinha

The fine diplomatese of the Ministry of External Affairs statement of the conversation between Mr. Khalilzad and Mr. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval in Delhi on May 7 cannot override the blunt message conveyed by the U.S. official in his interview to this newspaper, “‘India should talk directly to Taliban, discuss terror concerns directly’,” (*The Hindu*, Inside pages, ‘Interview, Zalmay Khalilzad’, May 9, 2020). He noted that despite India’s contributions to Afghanistan’s economic development — and these are undeniably significant covering large parts of the country, and are popular — as well as its long history of contacts with that country, it does not have a place in international diplomacy on Afghanistan. As Mr. Khalilzad put it: “But when it comes to international efforts, India yet does not have a role that it could.” He patronisingly added that the U.S. wants India to have a more active role in the peace process.

Clearly, as the most significant power in the region, India should have ensured that it had a place on the table and should have devised ways to achieve that end. This is especially so because Afghanistan impacts on India’s interests, especially its security concerns. The question that India’s security and foreign policy decision makers should therefore ask themselves is this: why did the powers not consider India’s participation vital to the present peace-making efforts, especially when the U.S.-Taliban deal was concluded leading to a possible new stage in Afghanistan’s evolution?

India may have to open dialogue with Taliban, say observers

Mr. Khalilzad offered first a clue. He followed it up with what is the obvious reason. He said, “I do think engagement between India and all the key players in Afghanistan, not only in terms of the government but also in terms of the political forces, society and the Afghan body politic is appropriate....” Responding to a question of groups in Afghanistan targeting India he said, “I believe that dialogue between India and the Taliban are important, and it would be important that issues of concerns like this [terrorism] are raised directly.” Taking Mr. Khalilzad’s views in their entirety, it is clear that he feels that by avoiding open contacts with the Taliban, India has reduced its role in international diplomatic efforts.

That the U.S. is currently crucially dependent on Pakistan for the successful implementation of its Taliban deal aimed at securing as orderly a withdrawal as possible from what is a major strategic reverse for the world’s pre-eminent power is not in doubt. Mr. Khalilzad’s positive words for Pakistan make it clear. More significant is his comment, “Our strong position is that there shouldn’t be [terror] sanctuaries on either side of the Afghan-Pakistan border....” This is in sharp contrast to U.S. President Donald Trump’s earlier focus only on Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan.

In such a situation, it was essential for India to have maintained its strong links with the Afghan government, built and supported its traditional Afghan allies — perhaps this was discreetly resumed — but also establish open lines of communication with the Taliban. This was especially because they were informally conveying that India should not consider them as Pakistan’s puppets and also because they had gained international recognition. Contacts and discussions do not mean acceptance of their ways or that their professions of not being Pakistan’s stooges should not have been tested.

India should talk directly to Taliban, says U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad

It is sad that despite all that India has done in Afghanistan over the past 18 years since the Taliban were ousted from Kabul in 2001, it finds itself on the margins of international diplomacy on Afghanistan. It is reminiscent of the time in the 1990s when, at Pakistan’s insistence, India was considered a problem and kept out of crucial global forums on Afghanistan. It did not matter then because along with Iran and Russia, it kept the resistance to the Taliban going through Ahmed Shah Masood. Mr. Ghani is no Masood and there are no countries on the horizon which

are really opposed to the Taliban acquiring a major place in the Afghanistan's formal power structures.

India needs to take corrective diplomatic action even at this late stage, and even in the time of COVID-19. It must begin openly talking to the Taliban and with all political groups in the country. It must realise that its Afghan policy needs changes.

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