

THE PASHTUN QUESTION

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Delhi needs to look beyond the question of engaging with the Taliban and focus on the larger Pashtun question that once again promises to shape the geopolitics of the north-western Subcontinent. The question of a direct dialogue with the Taliban was beginning to gain some relevance as the group's effective control of territory in Afghanistan expanded in recent years. It has acquired some immediacy after the Donald Trump Administration announced plans for a significant drawdown of its forces from Afghanistan and signed a peace deal with the Taliban earlier this year.

Renewed public interest in the question was triggered earlier this month when the US Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, called on India to open a political conversation with the Taliban. The interest was further amplified by a signal from the Taliban that it is eager for a productive relationship with India.

Those calling for direct engagement with the Taliban say that Delhi can't ignore such an important force in Afghan politics. Opponents say there is no reason for Delhi to join the international stampede to embrace the Taliban. If and when the Taliban becomes a peaceful entity and joins the quest for a political settlement with Kabul, they argue, Delhi should have no objection to direct talks.

For all the interest it has generated, the question of Delhi opening a dialogue with the Taliban is a tactical issue focused on when, how and on what terms.

But the Taliban remains an important sub-set of the larger and more strategic Pashtun question that holds the key to India's enduring interest in Afghanistan: Promoting a peaceful, independent and a sovereign Afghanistan that is not a subaltern to the Pakistan army.

Two basic issues define the Pashtun question and will have a huge bearing on Afghanistan's political evolution after the impending drawdown of the US forces from the country.

One is the problem of reconciling the interests of multiple ethnic groups in Afghanistan — the Pashtuns who constitute nearly 42 per cent of the population. The sizeable Afghan minorities include 27 per cent Tajiks, 9 per cent each of Hazaras and Uzbeks.

Irrespective of the nature of the regimes in Kabul over the last four decades — the communist government in the 1980s, the mujahideen and Taliban rule that followed in the 1990s and the post-Taliban coalition that took charge in 2002 — constructing a stable internal balance has been hard.

That problem will acquire a new intensity as the Taliban stakes claim for a dominant role in Kabul. But has the Taliban learnt to live in peace with the minorities? The Taliban, an essentially Pashtun formation, had brutally crushed the minorities during its brief rule in the late 1990s. There are some indications that the Taliban is now reaching out to the minorities but it is some distance away from winning their trust.

The problem of constructing internal balance in Afghanistan has been complicated by Pakistan's meddling, which is driven by unrealisable ambition and unreasonable fear. Pakistan would like to have the kind of hegemony that the British Raj exercised over Afghanistan. Neither can Pakistan replicate that dominance nor are the Afghans willing concede it to the Pakistan army.

Pakistan's ambitious talk of strategic depth is accompanied by worries about its Pashtun minority. There are more than twice as many Pashtuns living in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. The Pashtun population is estimated to be around 15 million in Afghanistan and 35 million in Pakistan.

Although Pashtun separatism has long ceased to be a force in Pakistan, Islamabad finds the Pashtun question re-emerge in a different form. Pakistan can't really bet that the Taliban will not put Pashtun nationalism above the interests of the Pakistani state. The Taliban, for example, has never endorsed the Durand Line as the legitimate border with Pakistan. It is by no means clear if Pakistan's construction of the Taliban as a conservative religious force has obliterated the group's ethnic character.

Meanwhile, Islamabad's quest for control over Afghanistan over the last four decades has heaped extraordinary suffering on the Pashtun people on Pakistan's side of the Durand Line. As the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement seeks a peaceful redressal of its demands for basic human rights, Pakistan has unleashed massive repression.

Pakistan's expansive military and political investments in Afghanistan have not really resolved Islamabad's security challenges on its western frontier. If an Afghan triumph eludes Pakistan, Delhi can't escape the complex geopolitics of the Pashtun lands. That the Taliban wants to talk to India and Pakistan brands Pashtun leaders as Indian agents only underlines Delhi's enduring salience in Afghanistan.

The writer is Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for [The Indian Express](#)

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