

# UNDEFINED ROLE: ON INDIA-AFGHANISTAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

By holding the [Third Regional Security Dialogue](#) on Afghanistan, [chaired by NSA Ajit Doval](#) this week, New Delhi has sent out three strong messages: one, that it wishes to remain an important and engaged player in the future of Afghanistan; second, that with the exit of U.S.-NATO troops, the ideal solution to the situation is through consensus in Afghanistan's extended neighbourhood including Russia; and third, that the Afghan humanitarian crisis should be the region's immediate priority and political differences can be set aside to help. It is the last message that spurred New Delhi to invite the NSAs from China and Pakistan, despite the LAC standoff and deep differences with the Imran Khan government over Kashmir and cross-border terrorism. By declining the invitation, Beijing and Islamabad have made it clear that they do not intend to assist India in its Afghan engagement, further demonstrated by the Khan government's churlishness in refusing India road access to send wheat and medicines to Kabul. To that end, the Delhi Declaration issued by the eight participating nations, including Iran and Russia, is a milestone in keeping India inside the discussion on Afghanistan. The declaration goes farther than the previous such regional discussion of SCO countries in Dushanbe in September, in its strong language on terrorism, terror financing and radicalisation. It also expands on the need for an inclusive government in Kabul that will replace the Interim Taliban regime, and promotes a national reconciliation process.

While the consensus over the Delhi Declaration is a creditable feat, it does not paper over all the differences between India and the other countries over their far stronger engagement with Kabul. For instance, Turkmenistan sent a Ministerial delegation to discuss connectivity with the Taliban, while Uzbekistan accorded the visiting Taliban Deputy PM full protocol and discussed trade, transit and the construction of a railway line. Russia and Iran still maintain their embassies in Kabul, and a "Troika-plus" U.S.-China-Russia-Pakistan engagement is taking place with the Taliban Foreign Minister, in Islamabad this week. With the "normalisation" of ties with the Taliban regime growing, New Delhi must now consider how far it wishes to go in its engagement with Afghanistan. On the one hand, India has publicly held talks with Taliban officials twice and expressed solidarity with Afghans, but on the other has refused practically all visa seekers, made no monetary contribution to the humanitarian crisis there, and has made no bid to continue with plans for trade and connectivity with Afghanistan. India's desire to lead the discussion on Afghanistan's destiny, as demonstrated by the NSA dialogue, is a worthy goal for a regional leader, but can only be fulfilled once the Government defines more clearly what it wants its Afghan role to be, despite all its differences with the regime now in power.

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