

STRIDING BACK INTO THE AFGHAN THEATRE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

Amidst the multiple messages that New Delhi wished to send out by convening '[The Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan](#)' on November 10 — a National Security Adviser (NSA)-level meet — one stands out: that despite the current absence of an on-ground presence in the country, India continues to matter in Afghan affairs. To ensure that this thought was acknowledged by the Indian political and strategic classes as well as the region, Indian officials, in their background briefings, emphasised that India's invitation was accepted by countries that have significant stakes in Afghanistan — Russia, Iran and all the five Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). They correctly downplayed Pakistan's outright refusal to join the meeting and China's lame excuse for its absence. Indeed, in the context of the present state of Sino-Indian ties and Pakistan's obsession of keeping India away from Afghanistan, neither country's decision was surprising.

There is little doubt that the initiative succeeded in demonstrating that many regional countries accept that India has legitimate concerns relating to Afghanistan. The Delhi Declaration that emerged from the deliberations of the National Security Advisers/Secretaries of the National Security Councils of the participating states shows that all these countries share similar concerns which are also widely held in the international community. The Delhi Declaration demanded that Afghan soil is not used to spread terrorism or extremist ideologies. It called for a control on the production of Afghan opium. It reflected the widely held view that the Taliban have to conform to acceptable standards of behaviour on gender issues and minority rights. The Declaration also called for the formation of "an open and truly inclusive government" that was "representative of the will of the Afghan people" and had the participation of "all sections of society" in its "administrative and political structure". This is a laudable objective, but is it realistic? The hard fact is that the Taliban achieved a military victory and unlike in the 1990s now control all of Afghanistan. Is any neighbour of Afghanistan willing to nurture a long-lasting insurgency to effectively pressure the Taliban?

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All the participants of the Delhi Dialogue except India have open contacts with the Taliban even if some of them consider the Taliban to be a negative political force. It is, therefore, likely that despite this clarion collective call for an inclusive government, these states will ultimately individually settle for a Taliban government that will show a degree of responsiveness on gender issues and minority rights, including of ethnic minorities. Even more they will look for how the Taliban are addressing their individual concerns on specific terrorist groups that target them. The Russian press statement after the Delhi Declaration itself reveals that each country will act not on the basis of common positions in this document but in keeping with its interests.

It is here that Indian policymakers are still struggling to accept the consequences and realities of the great change that took place in Afghanistan on August 15, when Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani fled from Kabul and the Taliban rolled in. This far-reaching development eroded the very basis of India's Afghan policy. It required an immediate re-assessment of the regional situation and nimble, quick and comprehensive action with salience given to strategic considerations. It needed a ruthlessly cold 'all of political and strategic classes' approach unaffected by political considerations of any nature. Almost three months later this is still not discernible. And, the Delhi meeting, while serving a small diplomatic purpose, will not contribute to addressing the vast challenges that India now faces in its entire western neighbourhood, especially Afghanistan.

Pakistan has avoided its mistake of the 1990s, of giving formal diplomatic recognition to the Taliban. It is however acting in a manner with the group's government, which it helped put together, as it would have with a 'recognised' administration. It is no coincidence that the day the Delhi Dialogue was convened, the acting Afghan Foreign Minister, Mullah Amir Khan Muttaqi, reached Islamabad leading a high-level delegation. In India's absence in Kabul, Pakistan has a free hand. As it is with its deep and abiding relations with the Taliban it has a unique and enduring advantage. But should that mean that India ignores Afghanistan altogether and confines itself to only covert contacts with the Taliban? There has been no repeat of a Doha-like meeting between the Indian Ambassador and senior Taliban officials.

Afghanistan MP says India turned its back on people of Afghanistan

India will have to play a multi-faceted diplomatic game to safeguard and promote its interests in Afghanistan and the region. It cannot join the game unless it re-establishes a presence in Kabul. All-important regional players and Russia have kept their missions open in Kabul. New Delhi must note that the Taliban spokesperson, taking note of the Dialogue said that India was an important regional country with which it desired good diplomatic relations.

India has to proceed with caution but without inhibitions. That can only be through an understanding of Afghan traditions and culture which has been under strain but which has not disappeared altogether. At no stage in Afghan history has any ruler or group not chafed at foreign dependence howsoever necessary it may have been. They have always looked to alternatives. Taliban signals on India to Pakistan should be taken in this context.

India willing to stand by Afghan people as it did in the past: Jaishankar

Besides, the Taliban are not immune from regional and tribal cleavages. This is not to underrate the difficulties in India's path in Afghanistan but it would be a profound mistake to consider that there is no space for India to operate in Afghanistan; the Taliban public statements are themselves indicating that it does; Muttaqi has publicly said that India-Afghan trade via Wagah should be allowed by Pakistan.

Expressing concern for the "deteriorating socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan" the Delhi Declaration called for "urgent humanitarian assistance" to the Afghan people. It also did well to emphasise that humanitarian assistance should be provided in an "unimpeded, direct and assured manner to Afghanistan". This is directly relevant for India wishes to send 50,000 tonnes of wheat for the Afghan people overland via Pakistan. Obviously, the Taliban have welcomed the Indian offer and asked Pakistan to agree. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan told Muttaqi that he will "favourably" consider the Taliban's request. At this stage, India should be bold and enhance its offer to one million metric tonnes of wheat; that is what it pledged in 2002 at the Tokyo Afghanistan conference. It should also publicly declare, if needed, that it would hand the wheat over to the World Food Programme at the Wagah border. If Pakistan obstructs the additional offer, let it explain its negativity to the Afghan people.

Modi for 'humanitarian help' to Afghanistan

It is not only Pakistan that India will need to confront in Afghanistan but also China. The Chinese have always maintained contacts with the Taliban and their strategic and economic interests have and will continue to make them adopt pragmatic policies. Indian economic interests also demand its presence in Afghanistan. There is no time to lose for this purpose. A heavy and long-term price will have to be paid otherwise. In all this process India must remain grounded in reality but that seems absent in some Indian analysts who believe that it is a Eurasian power too. That should be the objective. But is it so today when it does not have connectivity to the

region and is reluctant to play the Afghan game where it matters — the mountains and valleys of the Hindukush?

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