

INDIA'S AFGHANISTAN CONUNDRUM

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Less than two months after U.S. President Donald Trump abruptly called off talks with the Taliban, Washington is laying the ground to resume them. That this is happening before Afghanistan has a new government — the results of its September 28 election are yet to be announced — underscores the administration's haste.

U.S. officials are escalating battlefield pressure on the Taliban. This is part of a likely effort to soften up the insurgents and get them to return to the negotiating table and make concessions (read: ceasefire) that they refused to make the last time around.

Meanwhile, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, has resumed his shuttle diplomacy. In recent days, he's held meetings on reconciliation with EU and NATO leaders. He also made a trip to Islamabad, which reportedly included a meeting with a Taliban delegation.

At the same time, Mr. Trump continues to telegraph his desire to pull troops from Afghanistan. Witness his recent decision to remove U.S. forces from Syria and his grumbling about "endless wars". With the 2020 U.S. presidential election fast approaching, a politically embattled Trump wants to be able to tell his base that he's bringing troops home.

The U.S.'s policy in Afghanistan is to resume talks with the Taliban and reach a troop withdrawal deal before Mr. Trump decides to initiate a unilateral withdrawal — that is, a removal of troops with no deal or ceasefire.

This won't be easy. The Taliban, unlike the U.S., has the luxury of being in no rush to reach a deal. It has little incentive to accede to Washington's likely demand of agreeing to a ceasefire before a troop withdrawal accord is signed, especially because doing so would deprive the Taliban of violence which serves as a powerful tool of leverage.

For India, the implications of the U.S.'s current policy in Afghanistan are stark: It puts India in a tough spot and Pakistan in a good place. If U.S. talks with the Taliban resume, this puts Afghanistan back on a reconciliation path that, if successively seen through, would produce a political settlement that features a power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban. That's not a preferred endgame for India. If talks fail, an intensifying war means that Afghanistan would suffer rapid destabilisation, thereby constraining India's ability to operate in Afghanistan, a key strategic partner. Meanwhile, for Pakistan, a resumption of talks that produces a settlement, resulting in its Taliban ally occupying a political role, would work just fine. If Afghanistan falls into chaos, this would serve Islamabad's interests as well because the Taliban would grow even stronger — and possibly seize power by force.

Even before Mr. Trump called off talks, Islamabad had an upper hand over New Delhi in Afghanistan. Pakistan was an instrumental facilitator of a U.S.-Taliban negotiation meant to lead to an eventual outcome — a Taliban power-sharing deal — that would have served Islamabad's interests. India, meanwhile, was left on the outside looking in, while Kabul, its key partner, was excluded from the talks. In fact, New Delhi's dilution of Article 370 may have been, at least in part, an effort to push back against Islamabad's upper hand in Afghanistan.

In the coming months, New Delhi could have some difficult decisions to make. If the situation continues to deteriorate, with no end to the war in sight, India will need to figure out how to

secure its interests in a country where it has a significant footprint. If talks resume, it will need to decide how or if it should try to play a role in them. Finally, if there is a reconciliation process and the trend lines point towards a settlement resulting in a Taliban power-sharing role, New Delhi will need to weigh whether it's worth trying to engage with its bitter rival's powerful asset. These are tough questions. But then again, when it comes to policy in Afghanistan, nothing is easy.

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