

TALKING PEACE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

Abdullah Abdullah is no stranger to Delhi, and his visit last week as the Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation in Afghanistan was part of building a “regional consensus” for the Afghan talks in Doha between the Taliban and representatives of the Afghan government, civil society and others. India, with its age-old ties to Afghanistan, as well as its strategic interests in the region, is an important link in this process. The ball, now, is in Delhi’s court.

As the US and the Taliban engaged in talks to fix a timeline for the exit of American and other international troops from Afghanistan, it was Pakistan that played the facilitator in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. The memory of the Kandahar airstrip in 1999, where India had to give in to the demands of the hijackers in a deal negotiated by the Taliban, who were acting at the behest of Pakistan, has been the ghost at this table for Delhi. And the fears have only grown as, facilitated by the US’s urgent desire to quit Afghanistan, the Taliban looks set to make a comeback in Kabul, with Pakistan playing a supportive role. In the best case scenario, the Taliban will return in a power-sharing arrangement with the elected government. In the worst case scenario, it could be a return to chaos, or a violent take-over as in 1996, should the talks collapse. Along with the struggle by the two sides in the Afghan talks to find common ground — one of the sticking points is which school of Islam should be the basis for talks, another if the talks should mention the US-Taliban agreement — the violence in Afghanistan has continued, underlining the need for a ceasefire.

Delhi appears to have accepted that it has to play a role in the emerging Afghanistan. From Abdullah’s visit, it is apparent that Kabul also wants more Indian engagement in the process. But India seems as yet unsure as to what that role should be. Certainly, opening channels of communication with the Taliban now seems inevitable even though concerns about the Taliban’s links with the Pakistan-nurtured Haqqani network and the ISIL are only growing. India must also resolve a contradiction inherent in any outreach to the Taliban. Can Delhi continue to maintain that it will have nothing to do with Pakistan? At the very least, it would mean an acknowledgement that Pakistan has an equally important role in any regional consensus. Considering the differences in what each country and the two sides in the Afghan talks want as outcomes of the process in Doha, this is Delhi’s difficult dilemma to solve.

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