

ROUTES TO AFGHANISTAN: ON 2+2 TALKS

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A year after U.S. President Donald Trump announced his “[South Asia policy](#)” for Afghanistan, senior American officials will be in the region for talks this week. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defence Secretary James Mattis visit Delhi for the [first 2+2 talks](#) on Thursday with their Indian counterparts, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Mr. Mattis is expected to come via Kabul, while Mr. Pompeo and U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, will swing by Islamabad.

Afghanistan today is by no means how Mr. Trump had envisioned it last August: in terms of the security situation, regional solutions for the peace process as well as economic development. The past few weeks have seen a spike in violence, with the Taliban carrying out a set of coordinated assaults around Afghanistan, rejecting an offer of a three-month ceasefire by President Ashraf Ghani and laying siege to Ghazni city. Before U.S. Special Forces and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces were able to clear them out, the Taliban had shown up the fragile hold Kabul has on this provincial capital less than 150 km away. The fight against the Taliban took massive U.S. air fire power as well to finally secure Ghazni, with the once bustling city now war-torn. While the Taliban suffered heavy casualties, so did the Afghan Army.

The impact of the [Taliban assault in Ghazni and other cities in August](#), including the deadly bombing of a Kabul school, was three-fold. It cast serious doubt on any U.S. plans to draw down troops as Mr. Trump may have envisaged; it blew to bits the hope that the June 1d ceasefire and the meeting between U.S. special envoy Alice Wells and Taliban officials in Doha in July meant that the Taliban was committed to the peace process; and it also showed that despite six months of concerted American punitive actions on Islamabad, the Pakistan establishment is not shutting down support for Taliban fighters. In an emotional public statement, Mr. Ghani accused Pakistan of treating the terrorists in hospitals close to the Afghan-Pakistan border, while his Ministry of Defence said Pakistani fighters, including from the Lashkar-e-Toiba were among the insurgents. Pakistan denied the charges, suggesting that the dead Pakistanis were actually “labourers” working in Ghazni. The violence this year has also put 2018 on course to be the deadliest year for Afghan civilians, with an average of nine people killed every day, according to UN data.

Kabul's security structure has seen a dramatic series of sackings and resignations in the aftermath. National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar has been replaced by Afghanistan's Ambassador to the U.S., Hamdullah Mohib. The Defence Minister, Interior Minister, head of the National Directorate of Security and deputy chief of the National Security Council all tendered their resignations, reportedly over differences with Mr. Ghani's working; he hasn't accepted them. The developments, along with the faltering peace process, will make the task of holding parliamentary elections due in October, as well as presidential elections in April 2019, much more challenging.

Siege of Ghazni: On the Taliban offensive

If the U.S.'s efforts inside Afghanistan have fared badly this past year, its strategy in the region, particularly with reference to Russia, China and Iran, has been even more perplexing. Last week, Russia put off multi-nation talks in Moscow scheduled for September 4, which would have also brought a Taliban delegation to the table, after Mr. Ghani, ostensibly under U.S. pressure, pulled out. However, the U.S. has itself entered into direct engagement with the same delegation led by “political chief” Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, a UN-sanctioned former Minister in the Taliban government, when Ms. Wells went to Qatar, making U.S. disavowal of the Moscow process seem more churlish than principled.

The Trump administration's collision course with Iran is another hurdle to realising its South Asia policy. Iran is a neighbour to both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and any action against Tehran will have consequences on the region. Second, the new American push to sanction and isolate Iran by November will undoubtedly shift the focus from the task of resolving the situation in Afghanistan. This mirrors earlier U.S. offensive actions — in Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, Syria in 2014 — each of which took its eye off the ball in Afghanistan. Finally, Iran is also an alternative route for landlocked Afghanistan's trade routes to the sea, which ties in with India's desire to circumvent Pakistan by [developing the Chabahar port](#). In fact, if Washington wasn't at odds with Tehran, it may have benefited from access to the alternative supply lines to U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. Insisting instead on India cutting off ties with Iran, as successive U.S. delegations have done in the past few months, will only jeopardise this route, and affect Iran's desire to assist with the access.

U.S., India may not sign security pact at 2+2 meet

As a result, India, which Mr. Trump named as a "critical part" of his South Asia strategy last year, has to balance its many bilateral and regional commitments to Afghanistan, while discussing the next steps at the 2+2 talks. To begin with, it is necessary that the Narendra Modi government spells out clearly its policy towards talks with the Taliban. Before Afghanistan pulled out of the Moscow talks, for example, the government had given Russia the impression that it would be willing to participate in the talks. If that is the case, India would also have to become party, hypothetically, to any future agreement that brings the Taliban into a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul, and the government must carefully study the implications of that departure from past policy.

Next, India must focus on assisting Afghanistan in every manner possible to ensure that the country's elections are as peaceful and participative as possible. India's development assistance has been the source of its considerable influence and goodwill among Afghan citizens, and this is not the time to make cuts. The outlay for 2017-18 at 365.96 crore was far lower than its commitment in 2015-2016 at 880.44 crore, according to figures tabled in Parliament. Officials say this is because major projects, such as the Salma Dam and Parliament building in Kabul, that began in 2008-09, have now been completed. But this begs the question, why are more ambitious projects not being planned? While the current crop of Small Development Projects launched in 2016, encompassing drinking water plans for several cities including Kabul, supply of buses, construction of low-cost housing, and assistance in health and education are important, India's regional status demands more.

On the military front as well, India must move quickly to provide helicopters as well as engineering/tech support for Afghan hardware. India's plans at Chabahar are equally important to its efforts at keeping its lines to Afghanistan independent of other considerations, and Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale's visit to Kabul next week for a trilateral India-Afghanistan-Iran meeting will be important to take them forward.

Lastly, the government must realise that its consistent undermining of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) because of problems with Pakistan is also weakening Afghanistan's engagement with the subcontinent, which India had worked hard to foster. The conversations at the 2+2 meet on Thursday must take into account not just India's role in Mr. Trump's South Asia policy but its own role in its neighbourhood.

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