

## TWO THEATRES OF PEACEMAKING

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

As the threat of conflict on India's China frontier looms large and tensions with Pakistan simmer on our western borders, hopes for peace and reconciliation have risen in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The first direct talks between Kabul and the Taliban insurgents began last week at Doha, in Qatar. Today, the leaders of UAE will sign a formal peace agreement with Israel at the White House. Bahrain, the second Gulf country to announce the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in the last few weeks, will join the ceremony.

Sceptics caution against raising hopes too high. The chances of failure in Afghanistan are real. And the momentum behind the normalisation of ties between Israel and the Gulf kingdoms, may not necessarily lead to broader peace in the Middle East. Cynics say the US initiatives in Afghanistan and Arabia are driven by President Donald Trump's quest for diplomatic victories weeks before the election. To be fair though, President Trump has been eager, through the last four years, to redeem his pledge in the 2016 presidential elections to put an end to America's "endless wars" in the greater Middle East.

Talks between Kabul and the Taliban to generate an early ceasefire and a new framework for political reconciliation are part of the agreement between the US and the Taliban signed earlier this year, under which the US has pledged to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban has promised not to attack the US and its allies.

The Middle East has always been far more intimately tied to US domestic politics. Supporters hail Trump as the first US president in decades not to drag America into a new war in the Middle East. Joe Biden, his Democratic rival, is unlikely to oppose Trump's deal-making in Afghanistan and the Middle East. But he will certainly find ways to diminish the president's success.

It does not really matter if the motivations of Trump's policy are wise or not. His actions create new facts on the ground and have political consequences for other states. The developments in Afghanistan and the Middle East will have implications for a large number of actors, including India. Five broad trends emerge from the current peace efforts in Afghanistan and the Middle East. All of them demand a significant rethink of Indian positions.

First is the strategic nature of the two sets of developments. Given the difficulty of reconciling the competing interests in Afghanistan and the Middle East, both the peace processes remain quite vulnerable. But the unfolding dynamic will alter the geopolitical landscape in both places. Whether peace breaks out in Afghanistan or not, the Taliban is here to stay.

The Afghan peace process is rooted in the recognition that the Taliban could not be defeated on the battlefield and must be accepted as a legitimate political force. As UAE and Bahrain join Egypt and Jordan in having formal relationships with Israel, there is no escaping the fact that the contradiction between Arabs and Israelis is no longer the dominant one in the region.

Second is Arabia's enduring importance for the Subcontinent's geopolitics. India's strategic community tends to take too narrow a view of the Arabian salience; the focus is mostly on ensuring oil supplies, promoting manpower exports, and limiting the region's impact on India's Pakistan problem. But there is more to the Gulf.

Consider, for example, the fact that the Afghan peace talks are taking place in Qatar, a tiny Gulf

Kingdom. It might be worth recalling that the Gulf Arabs played a key role in the 1980s defeating the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The UAE and Saudi Arabia were the only countries to recognise the Taliban government in the late 1990s. This time around, they appear to have taken a backseat. But they will not forever cede the lead in Afghanistan to their Gulf rival, Qatar.

Delhi will need to pay more attention to the unfolding realignments in the Middle East, especially between the Arabs and non-Arab states like Iran, Turkey and Israel. The current peace deals mark a historic change in the structure of those relations. They are about a reconciliation between a critical section of the Arabs with Israel and their growing confrontation with Turkey and Iran.

Third is the paradox of American power. Trump's moves in Afghanistan and the Middle East are widely seen as part of the inevitable decline of US power. But the reality remains that the US is the one forcing change in both the theatres. There were a whole lot of attempts over the last decade from Russia, China, Europe and the region for a peace settlement in Afghanistan. In the end, it was the US political and diplomatic weight that facilitated the formal dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban. In the Middle East, it is the US that has led the efforts for a reconciliation between Israel and Gulf Arabs.

Fourth, as the US steps back from the region, at least for now, the resulting strategic vacuum is likely to be filled by other powers. Russia and China are quite active in both the Middle East and Afghanistan. China has traditionally avoided being drawn into the region's political conflicts. But in recent years, it has stepped forward, if tentatively. China's future role in Afghanistan, in partnership with Pakistan, could be quite significant and will be of some concern for India.

But the Greater Middle East is no longer the exclusive preserve of great powers. Regional powers have already acquired much say in the new geopolitics of the Middle East. If Qatar and UAE punch way above their weight, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are locked in a major contest for regional influence. All of them are involved in the proxy wars in other countries. Meanwhile, Egypt and Iraq are trying to regain their once privileged places in the regional hierarchy.

Finally, domestic turbulence in most countries is intensifying. Religious radicalism, sectarian and ethnic divisions, and the clamour for more representative governments are sharpening conflicts within and between countries. The collapse of the oil market is undermining the region's economic fortunes and making it harder for political elites to address the emerging political challenges.

India's engagement with the Middle East has traditionally been focused on maintaining good relations with all the major powers in the region and avoiding involvement in their internal and intra-regional conflicts. Even in Afghanistan, where India's security stakes have been visibly high, Delhi has resisted being drawn too deep.

India's framework of non-involvement, however, is unlikely to survive the present wave of structural change in Afghanistan and Arabia. As the old order begins to crumble in the greater Middle East, the question is no longer whether India should join the geopolitical jousting there; but when, how and in partnership with whom.

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