

# SEARCH FOR PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN WILL NOT SUCCEED UNLESS ALL PARTIES RELINQUISH ENTRENCHED THINKING

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Afghanistan

The enormity of the challenges confronting intra-Afghan talks that commenced in Doha on August 12 can only be appreciated if they are placed in the context of the turmoil that has continued in Afghanistan for over four and a half decades. For the first time, far-reaching changes involving the polity are being attempted through dialogue without the gun being the sole arbiter.

The country has witnessed the overthrow of the monarchy, a nationalist dictatorship, communist rule, the mujahideen era, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate and the current Islamic Republic. It has also experienced almost three decades of the presence of foreign forces and outside interference, especially from Pakistan. The balance of Afghan society and polity, shaken in 1973 with the monarchy's departure, has never been restored. Instead, sharpening ethnic divides, extremist ideologies and theologies, large migration to foreign lands, internal displacement, spread of narcotics and violence have become endemic. At the same time, over the past 15 years, a section of Afghan urban youth linked to the world through the social media wants more open systems within an Islamic framework.

Negotiators representing the Taliban and the rest of the Afghan political establishment and their masters bear in large or small measure the psychological and, in some cases, physical scars of this painful history. Hence, the search for durable peace and stability will not succeed unless all parties and, in some cases their foreign patrons, especially Pakistan, are willing to substantially relinquish entrenched thinking. If they fail to do so, the talks will fail too. This may result in a collapse of existing political structures, splintering of the Afghan armed forces and higher levels of violence and criminality.

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As the talks begin, the Taliban is in a position of strength. If the Kabul-based Afghan political class had succeeded in consolidating the republic and had kept the Taliban confined to a small area, it would have had the upper hand. That has not been so. Indeed, the Taliban with Pakistani support has shown remarkable resilience and has gained great confidence. It has inflicted a strategic defeat on the world's pre-eminent power. To effectively tackle them, American troops would have had to enter Pakistan territory and carry out a sustained operation. That, none of the three presidents who had to deal with the Taliban after 9/11 were willing to do.

While the Taliban is largely cohesive, the Kabul political class is not. The 2019 presidential election was deeply flawed. The declaration of the incumbent president, Ashraf Ghani, as victor was dubious. Ghani was forced to accept his rival Dr Abdullah as the head of the Peace and Reconciliation Council, implying that he would have to share authority in decision-making in the peace negotiations. Also, other members of the Kabul team represent civil society and other political forces including the Hizb-e-Islami. This will give opportunities to the Taliban and others to create disunity in their ranks.

The most significant issue in these negotiations will relate to the nature of Islam in Afghanistan. The constitution of the Islamic Republic, adopted in 2004, begins with the Islamic shahada and

commits the state to the “Holy religion of Islam”. It also seeks to uphold the universal declaration of human rights. The Taliban accept Hanafi jurisprudence like the majority of Afghans but believe that the Islamic sharia in its extreme Deobandi interpretation along with distorted Pashtun social codes must be uncompromisingly followed. That manifests itself in the approach to other faiths, other Islamic mazhabs, gender issues, social conduct and apparel and even facial hair.

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It is almost impossible to predict how common ground can be found to accommodate fiercely held beliefs on all sides on the issues of religious interpretation and social codes. Goodwill among the negotiators and leaders buttressed with creative Islamic jurisprudence and scholarship would be needed. At the same time the Taliban leadership and Pakistan would be aware that despite its strategic defeat and desperation to withdraw, the US retains the capacity to deny them the fruits of “victory”. Also, the third decade of this century is not the last decade of the last millennium; the world has been transformed. To what extent will all this make the Taliban flexible is an imponderable. The Kabul elite would also have to make concessions on political issues and social codes.

However laudable it may be, it would be unrealistic to expect the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire though they may calibrate violence as the talks progress. The Taliban would fear that if cadres are not used, they may just fritter away. Also, Kabul would not take them seriously if it lost the ability to inflict damage. For the movement, power sharing, especially at the Centre, while significant, may not be as important as gaining charge of some provinces, a prospect Kabul will be chary about, irrespective of the facts on the ground.

At its core the Taliban is Pushtun. Its treatment of non-Pushtun Afghan ethnicities during its rule generated hatred and fear among them. Since then it has tried to put forward a pan-Afghan image and has succeeded in making some headway in a few non-Pushtun areas. However, old fears remain strong among many non-Pushtun especially in the cities. It will have to address these concerns.

### **Opinion | [US-Taliban deal puts the onus of ending the Afghanistan war on Asian forces](#)**

How is India placed in Afghanistan as this dialogue begins? Clearly, Indian policy-makers refused to modify their Afghan approaches even as it became increasingly evident that the Taliban had gained ground in the country and was getting international legitimacy. Even while the Kabul authorities were trying to persuade the Taliban to the negotiating table, India continued to shun it. It saw the situation in black and white terms because of the Taliban connection and dependence on Pakistan. This resulted in India putting itself into a corner. It could have continued to strengthen its ties with Kabul and at the same time opened links with the Taliban. Diplomatic contradictions have to be managed. All other major powers were doing so. In India’s case, this was especially needed because the Taliban was signalling that it was not a Pakistani proxy. That assertion should have been tested.

External Affairs Minister Jaishankar correctly emphasised that the talks should be Afghan owned and led. In addition, India should also stress that in the interests of Afghanistan and the region the talks must succeed, that their failure would be catastrophic for the Afghan people and the region. Finally, that India would continue with its traditional policy of fostering close ties with any legitimate Afghan government.

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*opening in Doha'. The writer is former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan*

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