



Next stage in the Great Game

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Defeatism will hurt India's interests more than the Taliban's return to Kabul could

- As international talks with the Taliban leadership gain momentum, India's foreign policy establishment has gone through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.
- After the initial denial that several countries, including the U.S., Russia, U.A.E., Qatar and Saudi Arabia, were engaging with Pakistan in order to bring senior Taliban leaders to the table in late 2017, India protested against being cut out of the talks.
- It then negotiated to join them, followed by expressions of deep misgiving over where the talks would lead.
- And finally this has given way to acceptance today that the talks have not only progressed, but are being given priority over every other process in Afghanistan.

Valid concerns

- The misgivings are well placed, and confirmed by the results of the last round of talks between U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban leaders in Doha (February 25-March 12).
- The talks appeared to be held on the Taliban's terms, and at a venue of its choice.
- Therefore, while clear agreements have been forged on the withdrawal of foreign forces and on not allowing Afghan soil for use by foreign terror groups, agreements on a comprehensive ceasefire and an intra-Afghan dialogue, once considered the minimum "redlines" or starting point of engaging with the Taliban, have now been made the last priority.
- Another reason for New Delhi's disquiet is that these talks continue

without acknowledging a role for India, despite this being an expressly stated goal of Mr. Trump's South Asia policy.

- Finally, there is the uncertainty for Afghanistan's future that these talks have wrought that worries India.
- When talks with the Taliban began, the objective was to try to mainstream the insurgents into the political process, and at least have a working ceasefire by the time presidential elections, scheduled for April 2019, were held.
- Yet the Taliban continues to carry out terror attacks in Afghanistan even as its leadership talks with the U.S. Despite the Ministry of External Affairs issuing a statement on the importance of holding the presidential elections, the Afghan vote has been further postponed to September 28.
- This makes Mr. Ghani's continuance more tenuous under the constitution, which could mean an interim government will be installed, something India has been opposed to as well.
- New Delhi is worried about the prospect of chaos and civil war, akin to the scene after the previous U.S. pullout in the early 1990s that cut India out and brought the Taliban to power in Kabul with Pakistan's support.
- Despite the restricted room for manoeuvre, however, there are several steps New Delhi can and must take in the present scenario to ensure both its own relevance in Afghanistan and stability in the region.

Talks with Taliban

- However, direct, open talks between India and the Taliban at this point would serve little purpose for either side.
- For India, it would mean casting aside a consistently held moral principle and speaking to a non-state actor that espouses terrorism.
- India's policy for the past two decades is to deal with the government in Kabul, and this will hold it in good stead if the Taliban were to eventually be a part of the government there.
- The truth is, 2019 is not 1989, and much has changed inside Afghanistan as it has in the world outside.
- While Afghan security forces have suffered many losses in the past year, it is unlikely that the Taliban would today be able to overrun and hold Kabul or any other big Afghan city as it did before.

- Every one of the 17 presidential tickets announced also has an “India-friendly” face on it, and India must leverage its influence across the spectrum.
- India is also host to a sizeable population of Afghans who live, work and study in the country, and an outreach is important.
- The world must see Afghans as they see themselves, and not according to the often-skewed ideas generated at conferences on Afghanistan’s future that sometimes don’t even include an Afghan representation.
- Finally, both India and Pakistan have a shared responsibility in building a dialogue over Afghanistan post-reconciliation.

Take the long view

- Despite all the many reasons for despondency, it is necessary that Indian strategists don’t lose sight of the bigger picture — India’s longstanding relationship with the people of Afghanistan.

The Hindu

