



CENJOWS

AFGHAN PEACE TALKS AND INDIA

By

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The recent visit to India by Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Special Envoy for Afghanistan, his interaction with Foreign Minister Jaishankar and NSA Ajit Doval conveyed that the US, when facing failure, turns to India. The visit displayed US desperation for pushing forward stalled peace talks leading to pull out of their forces, while staving off a civil war which could devastate the country. The visit followed a telephonic conversation which Khalilzad held with Jaishankar on the 'urgency of resolving the internal political crises within the country (Afghanistan) and forming an inclusive government.'

Mike Pompeo had visited Kabul in end March and attempted to end the political deadlock but failed. In frustration, he stated that the US would reduce aid to the country, till a political solution was found. With no resolution still in sight, the US has approached India, aware that it possesses desired influence.

The urgency was evident when Khalilzad flew in for a few hours during the current pandemic, rather than have a virtual meeting, as is the global norm. The US is aware of India's goodwill in Afghanistan. India has currently begun exporting 75000 tons of wheat to the country besides providing medicines and medical equipment to battle the pandemic. It is also deeply

involved in reconstruction in Afghanistan and is a major donor. Thus, its voice carries weight.

The peace process has stalled and unless stumbling blocks are removed, it could go into a tailspin. Present roadblocks include a fraying peace deal, a political impasse within the current Afghan government, where the two main contenders have sworn themselves as President leading to disagreements in forming an inclusive team for talks, increased violence by the Taliban and a rapidly spreading pandemic. The prisoner swap which was to be the first indicator of confidence building has run into problems. The US now needs allies with the ability to influence both sides to restore confidence and move forward.

The Indian press release stated that the US requested India to get involved in the internal political process in Afghanistan including looking at 'proposals for different formulations that could include separate strands in Afghanistan,' even the Taliban. From the Indian side, accepting the meeting indicated that for the first time it is reconsidering participating in the peace process and possibly engaging with the Taliban.

The US had kept India at an arms-length throughout the negotiations to satisfy demands of Pakistan. India too had stayed away, not seeking to crowd the negotiation table and be one of a group. Ultimately the US has realised that claims of Pak on its grip over the Taliban leadership and its desire for peace in Afghanistan are flawed so also are its claims on the enmity between the Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

The attack on the Sikh Gurdwara in Kabul in end March, which claimed over 25 lives, was orchestrated by a combined LeT-Haqqani network team working in coordination with the ISKP. This blew apart Pak's claims of the ISKP and Taliban being at loggerheads. If anything, the reverse was true, and both were being backed by the ISI. It added to the distrust which the US already had on Pakistan.

The Taliban too appears to be signalling a change in stance. In a recent online conference organized by an Indian thinktank, a Taliban spokesperson Mohammad Shaheen stated, 'We will never want any foreign organisation using Afghan soil to target another country. We will bring a law to stop any such activity.' He added that the Taliban would be more than willing to engage with neighbouring countries 'on the basis of mutual respect and mutual interests.'

In another interview with an Indian channel, Suhail Shaheen, another Taliban's Doha Spokesperson stated, 'Based on our national interest and mutual respect, we would like to have positive relations with neighbouring

countries including India and welcome their contribution and cooperation in the reconstruction of future Afghanistan.' Evidently, the Taliban visualizes a role for India in the futuristic Afghanistan, while reducing ties and dependency on Pakistan.

There are reports of Pakistan-Taliban ties being strained at leadership levels, while they continue to collaborate at the working level, since Taliban draws many of its cadre from Pak as also possesses bases there. The upper crust of the Taliban leadership has realised that being associated to the ISI could be detrimental to their regional reputation, hence are seeking a broader alignment. They are also aware of Indian goodwill in Afghanistan and that in the current pandemic it is India which continues to provide succour to the country, while Pak seeks its devastation for personal gains. It has openly hinted that it seeks engagement with India.

India has stayed away from talks, aware that there would be multiple stumbling blocks and Pakistan as a major backer could never be depended on to deliver. This, despite Ashraf Ghani repeatedly stating that India should directly engage with the Taliban, as it would benefit both sides. The US now approaching India displays acceptance of reality. Further, with the Taliban also seeking greater collaboration with India, there could be a change in the Indian perception.

Indian concerns include that if it engages directly with the Taliban, ignoring the Afghan government, it may lose its goodwill. India had always desired that resolution of the Afghan problem is only possible by internal discussions. One side refusing to recognize the other would never lead to a realistic solution. It was in this context that India emphasized to Khalilzad that a precondition for Indian participation is a commitment by the Taliban to recognize the Afghan government which could result in talks being 'Afghan owned Afghan led.'

In addition, India has two other concerns, which it currently raised to the US, and would subsequently discuss with the Taliban. These include protection of minorities and 'putting an end to terrorist safe havens and sanctuaries.' This implies Taliban breaking free of Pakistan's ISI shackles.

Both the Taliban and the Afghan government acknowledge that India has and will continue to play a major role in the country, even after peace is restored. India has so far contributed over USD 3 Billion in its development and reconstruction and would contribute more, provided its security concerns are catered for and Pakistan kept at arms-length. Hence, Indian demands to the Taliban may be accepted.

For India, this is a strategic opening, which it cannot ignore. While it should move cautiously, however, it can neither let its reputation as a nation which has sought to work for the benefit of the Afghan people, earned goodwill and hence is now in demand be ignored. Its role in bringing both sides to talk would alone ensure its permanent place in Afghanistan.

Many had criticized the Indian government for misjudging and ignoring participating in talks with the Taliban, even when invited, as in Moscow. In hindsight, it is possibly the correct strategy which was adopted. When all other major players have failed, the US has turned to India, aware that if India steps in, it could convert the current tense environment into one of collaboration.

India should now take advantage and move in, slowly elbowing Pak out. This will ensure that Indian foothold and presence in Afghanistan remains strong.

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