

# Needed, a more unified Asian voice for Afghanistan

Afghanistan's future will impact Central Asia and South Asia more than the distant global powers involved with it now



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As the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) end their presence in Afghanistan and set off a churn in the neighbourhood, Central Asia is emerging as a key player that the global Troika of the United States, Russia and China are turning to. Three meetings this month, of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) contact group on Afghanistan and SCO Defence Ministers in Tajikistan, and the Central and South Asia conference on regional connectivity in Uzbekistan, are turning the spotlight on the region's role in dealing with the situation in Afghanistan, and how India could build on that.

## Factoring in the Taliban

Put plainly, events of the past few years, and the decisions of the Troika have kept India out of a leading role in Afghanistan. Since 2019, the Troika has met with Pakistan (Troika plus) in order to discuss Afghanistan's future, one in which the Taliban – with which New Delhi has had no ties – gains an important if not controlling role in Kabul. The same powers that invaded Afghanistan post 9/11, and declared the Taliban leadership as United Nations Security Council-designated terrorists, are now not only advocating talks with the Taliban, entreating their Pakistani hosts of the past two decades to help, but actively paving the way for the Taliban's return to power.

India's efforts to build on trade with Afghanistan, shore up development projects and increase educational and training opportunities for Afghan youth have been appreciated, but these can-

not grow bigger due to a number of factors. New Delhi's original hesitation in opening talks with the Taliban, which even Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani had suggested, has cut India out of the current reconciliation process. The end of any formal dialogue between India and Pakistan since 2016 and trade since 2019, have resulted in Pakistan blocking India's over-land access to Afghanistan. India's alternative route through Chabahar, though operational, cannot be viable or cost-effective also long as U.S. sanctions on Iran are in place. India's boycott of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017, and now tensions at the Line of Actual Control after the Chinese aggression in 2020, make another route to Afghanistan off-limits.

Meanwhile, the U.S. has announced a new, surprise formation of a "Quad" on regional connectivity – U.S.-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan that does not include India, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is conducting trial runs of truck convoys from Tashkent to Karachi and back. With so many doors slamming shut, the hope is that the Central Asian window, with the "Stans" (as the five Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are sometimes referred to) will open new possibilities, but here too, there are some caveats.

## Uzbekistan's view

To begin with, it is clear that Tashkent (Uzbekistan) sees the rise of the Taliban in a different light from New Delhi. After a whirlwind round of negotiations in his own region since coming to power in 2016, where he mended relations and ended border disputes with each of the other Central Asian States, and outreaches to the U.S. and China to shift the traditional tilt towards Moscow, Uzbekistan



President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has made purposeful moves on Afghanistan. In 2018, his government became one of the first countries to publicly invite a Taliban delegation from Doha, Qatar to visit, while at the same time he has promoted a number of ambitious trade and connectivity initiatives with the Ashraf Ghani government.

## A push for connectivity

Speaking at the Central and South Asia conference in July, Mr. Mirziyoyev spelt out his plans for a modern version of the "the ancient northern trade route known as the Uttara Patha, connecting the Indo-Ganges Plain with the southern territories of the Eurasian continent through the historical cities of Takshila, Gandhara and Termez." He spoke of the old Silk Routes that once bound Central and South Asia together, and called Afghanistan the key link in "practical connectivity" for them. Significantly, while he mentioned the salience of the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railroad, the Trans-Afghan railroad to connect to China's BRI, and the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) via the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas as key elements of the "architecture of connectivity", he did not mention the Chabahar route that India has espoused. The Uzbekistan-Pakistan memorandum of understanding on Transit Trade – or the Agreement between Uzbekistan and Pakistan on Transit Trade (AUPPT) –

was also signed the same day, which would give Uzbekistan access to the Pakistani seaports of Gwadar and Karachi, rather than Iranian ports.

Uzbekistan's calculations, and by extension, those of its other Central Asian neighbours, are three-fold: the first is that prosperity for these land-locked countries can only flow from access through Afghanistan to the closest ocean, i.e. the Indian Ocean. Second, that all transit through Afghanistan depends on guarantees of safe passage from the Taliban, backed by the group's mentors in Pakistan. Third, each of the "Stans" are now a part of China's BRI, and tying their connectivity initiatives with Beijing's will bring the double promise of investment and some modicum of control over Pakistan.

## Shared concerns

Given the odds, New Delhi's room for manoeuvre with these five countries on Afghanistan appears limited but not without hope. To begin with, India and the Central Asian States share common concerns about an Afghanistan overrun by the Taliban and under Pakistan's thumb: the worries of battles at their borders, safe havens for jihadist terror groups inside Afghanistan and the spill-over of radicalism into their own countries.

It is necessary for India to work with them, and other neighbours to shore up finances for the government in Kabul, particularly to ensure that the government structure does not collapse. It is only a matter of time before the COVID-19-weary international economies tire of funding Afghanistan, as the last donors conference in Geneva (November 2020) showed.

As part of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), India must also step up its engagement with the Central Asian countries on fighting terror. While the Narendra Modi government has made it clear it will not send In-

dian boots to the ground in Afghanistan, it can support the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) where it needs it most: in terms of air power. India's previous gift of a few helicopters is far from adequate, given commitments made as Afghanistan's first Strategic Partner 10 years ago, and there must be more that New Delhi can support, especially in conjunction with other countries that depend on Soviet-made arms, including helicopters and planes, weaponry, ammunition and spare parts.

## Dealing with Pakistan

Finally, South Asia must learn from Central Asia's recent example in knitting together this region more tightly, a task that can only be completed with better ties between India and Pakistan. New Delhi's furtive discussions with the Taliban leadership in Doha make little sense unless a less tactical and more strategic engagement with Pakistan is also envisaged.

Most importantly, countries of Central Asia and South Asia need to find a more unified voice, as they have in recent weeks. Afghanistan's future will affect both regions much more than it will the distant global powers that currently dominate the debate.

Travelling to Kazakhstan in 2015, Prime Minister Modi spoke of why the Silk Road that connected the two regions faded away. "The end of the Silk Road did not just come about from the rise of sea-based trade of the new European powers," he said, "It also happened because Central Asia was no longer a bridge between regions, but the new fault line between great empires to the east, west and south." Ensuring a similar rupture is not wrought in Afghanistan is essential, which today has the potential to become that bridge or the biggest boulder between Central and South Asia.