

Finding India's voice on Afghanistan

In a world of hard geopolitical realities, New Delhi must leverage its unique strengths in remaining engaged with Kabul



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In the chaos that has followed the Taliban takeover of Kabul on August 15, noisy recriminations in the international community and the desperate appeals of Afghans who want to leave the country, India has been relatively silent. On the ground, the Narendra Modi government chose to speak with its feet, ordering the full evacuation of the Indian embassy and all Indian personnel within hours of Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's departure from the 'Arg' Presidential Palace. At the UN Security Council (UNSC) in New York and UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, India has expressed its worries about terrorism, human rights and refugees, but has not mentioned the Taliban itself even once by name. And in India, the Government appears to be equally mute, as thousands of Afghans clamour for visas, and get no reply, focusing instead on the task of bringing a few hundred Indian nationals back home.

When India led

The silence is in sharp contrast to the past, particularly the last 20 years, where India had been at the forefront of discussions in Afghanistan and on Afghanistan. India's role strengthened over the tenure of three different governments in Delhi in three areas: in terms of infrastructure building and development assistance, encompassing all 34 provinces of the country; in terms of building democracy, helping script the Constitution and hold elections; and in terms of educational investment, allowing thousands of young Afghans to study, be trained as professionals and soldiers, and become skilled in India.

India was the first country that

Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership with, the only country that undertook perilous but ambitious projects such Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Chabahar port project in Iran for transit trade, and by far the one country that polled consistently highly among countries that Afghan people trusted. It seems inconceivable that the Government can choose to simply walk away from such capital, regardless of the developments in Afghanistan, domestic political considerations in India and geopolitical sensitivities. The Government must consider all its options in remaining engaged with Afghanistan for its future.

A marginalisation

To begin with, it is necessary to acknowledge the hard truth that no other power from the west to the east has considered India's interests while charting its course on Afghanistan. India has found itself cut out of several quadrilateral arrangements: the main negotiations held by the "Troika plus" of the United States-Russia-China-Pakistan that pushed for a more "inclusive government" including the Taliban; the alternative grouping of Russia-Iran-China-Pakistan that formed a "regional arc" that has today seen them retain their embassies in Kabul; and the connectivity quadrilaterals formed by the U.S. and China, respectively, with Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan, that depend heavily on Taliban protection and Pakistani port access.

Neither India's traditional strategic and defence partner, Russia, nor its fastest growing global strategic partner, the United States, thought it important to include India or insist that their envoys Zamir Kabulov (Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan) and Zalmay Khalilzad (U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation) briefed their counterparts in New Delhi about the details of their negotiations with the Taliban leader-



ship. If New Delhi was unable to feel its staff would be secure from Taliban militia and their Pakistani benefactors in order to keep diplomats in Kabul, nor to negotiate a diplomatic outpost at Kabul airport that would allow it to place a core team with the U.S., the United Kingdom and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, it is time to accept that India is in need of a new diplomatic strategy. While the Narendra Modi government found it inconvenient to vocally protest the talks with the Taliban and the extended line to Pakistan to facilitate the talks with these "friendly" global leaders thus far, it is necessary for it to publicly decry an outcome that has clearly worked against India's interests now.

Action under the UN umbrella

In order to do so, India needs to begin by rallying the United Nations, to exert its considerable influence in its own interest, and that of the Afghan "republic", which is an idea that cannot be just abandoned. At the UNSC, India must be more vocal about its abhorrence of a Taliban-run Afghanistan that seeks to reverse the gains of the past two decades. A considerably diluted statement that India drafted as UNSC president on August 16, that did not even mention opposition to an "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" was a disappointment in this regard.

Next, India must take a leading role in the debate over who will be nominated to the Afghan seat at the UN, and whether the Republic's appointed current Ambassador will remain, or the seat declared "vacant" or even

"suspended" depending on the new regime in Afghanistan committing to international norms on human rights, women's rights, minority rights and others. As Chairwoman of the Taliban Sanctions Committee (or the 1988 Sanctions Committee), India must use its muscle to ensure terrorists such as Sirajuddin Haqqani and other members of the Haqqani group responsible for brutal suicide bombings on Indian embassies and consulates must not be given any exemptions: on travel, recourse to funds or arms.

Mr. Modi's speech at the UN General Assembly scheduled for September 25 will be an apposite occasion to express India's position on the future of Afghanistan and challenge the rest of the international community to refuse to legitimise the Taliban regime unless it is willing to negotiate on all these issues. As the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has said, the Taliban's desire for international recognition this time around "is the Security Council's only leverage to press for inclusive government and respect for rights, particularly for women, in Afghanistan".

Dealing with the regime

Next, the Narendra Modi government must determine the nature of its engagement with the new regime in Afghanistan. While a tactical engagement, dealing with the safety of Indians and Indian interests, overflight rights and other coordination seems inevitable, the question of whether India should convert its furtive back-channel talks with the Taliban and with Pakistan in the past few months into something more substantive remains to be debated. This becomes more important as India now faces a "threat umbrella" to its north, including Pakistan's cross-border terrorism, Afghanistan's new regime and China's aggression at the Line of Actual Control. The Government's *modus operandi* over the last few years, of running foreign policy by stealth

and surprise, would be counter-productive here. A more broad-based and consultative process of engaging all political parties would be required instead. While not directly dealing with the Taliban, India must ensure stronger communication with those who are dealing directly, including leaders such as former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai and former High Council for National Reconciliation chief Abdullah Abdullah, who have lived in India and retain close links, to ensure its interests. As a part of its engagement, New Delhi must consider whether to revive its assistance to the resistance, which at present includes Ahmad Shah Massoud Jr., Amrullah Saleh, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor, all well known to India and aligned to a great extent with India's objectives in Afghanistan.

People outreach

Finally, the Government must embrace its greatest strength in Afghanistan – its relations with the Afghan people – and open its doors to those who wish to come here, just as previous Indian governments have done in the past. The Government's efforts, thus far, have been woefully inadequate, with only a few hundred Afghans evacuated or allowed to enter; the Ministry of Home Affairs decision to cancel all pre-issued visas, due to security concerns, is a step in the wrong direction. In particular, India must continue to facilitate medical visas for Afghan patients and extend the education visas for students who are already admitted to Indian colleges.

In a world of hard geopolitical realities, it is India's soft power, strategic autonomy or non-alignment principles and selfless assistance to those in need, particularly in its neighbourhood, that has been the strongest chords to its unique voice in the world. The moment to make that voice heard on Afghanistan is now.

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