

The Delhi Dialogue on Afghanistan

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Summary

By successfully hosting the Third Regional Security Dialogue, New Delhi has sent a clear message that the Taliban regime is a regional security challenge. Notwithstanding the absence of Pakistan and China, the meeting should be seen as India's way to not only highlight its importance in rebuilding Afghanistan but also its leadership in coordinating a regional effort in the fight against terrorism, radicalism and drug-trafficking.

On 10 and 11 November 2021, India hosted a regional security dialogue on Afghanistan. It sent the invitation to all the countries neighbouring Afghanistan, but China and Pakistan refused to attend. While Islamabad accused New Delhi of being a '[spoiler](#)', Beijing claimed to have '[scheduling issues](#)'. Neither the representatives of the Afghan Taliban nor the extra-regional powers such as the United States (US) and Turkey were invited for the meeting.

The internecine Afghan war may have ended when Ashraf Ghani fled Kabul without a fight, but it should be clear that terrorism is not done yet. Following the US withdrawal, the vast area of Afghanistan raises new dangers of conflict and chaos borne out of long-simmering religious passions and exacerbated by heightened external interventions. Moreover, the Taliban remain incapable of performing the minimal functions of management and mobilising the country's resources for constructive purposes. Therefore, stabilising Afghanistan requires proactive involvement, rather than a posture of indifference.

Some of the strategic challenges that India will face in the coming months will arise from the Afghan soil, which has been used to shelter, train and finance terrorism and radicalism across the region. Ever since the Taliban took over in August 2021, India has been extremely concerned about the security ramifications of a politically unstable Afghanistan. The Islamic State Khorasan province is already displaying a disturbing expansion in its reach and capability, as evident in recent terror strikes in Afghanistan.

India organised the Afghan meet at a critical juncture when most of Afghanistan's neighbours are recalibrating their positions on the Taliban regime. Their participation can be viewed as their collective recognition of India's legitimate interests and role as a crucial stakeholder in peace and security in Afghanistan. The [joint declaration](#) by national security functionaries from India, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan talked about a more inclusive government that represents all sections of the Afghan society while also emphasising the shared concerns on terrorism, terror-financing and radicalisation emanating out of Afghanistan.

Given Pakistan's refusal to deny India any role in determining the future of Afghanistan, Pakistan's National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf's outburst against India was not unusual. Although China has its own security concerns originating from Afghanistan, given its deep

solidarity with its “iron brother” Pakistan, Beijing’s non-participation in the meeting was understandable, and aimed at sending out a signal that it is not willing to be associated in any Afghan initiative led by India.

Immediately after the Delhi dialogue, Pakistan held the troika-plus meeting, which included the US, Russia and China as well as the Taliban-led Afghan government. The primary agenda was [recognition of the Taliban government](#) by the international community. Having established a Taliban-led regime in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s security establishment believes that all-important external stakeholders – the US, Russia, China and Iran – have no option but to accommodate the Taliban.

Such initiatives as the Delhi dialogue are important at this juncture because they increase pressure on the Taliban regime to adhere to the basic rights of minorities and women. It also sends the message that unless the Taliban fulfils the promises made in Doha, they will continue being considered a global pariah. Though the Taliban seem to have made some progress – they have allowed girls’ schools to reopen in some areas – much remains to be done on forming an inclusive and representative government.

Despite mounting economic challenges and rising religious radicalism, Pakistan remains too big, too near and too nuclear for India to isolate diplomatically. While it will continue to thwart India-led initiatives, the silver lining is that the Taliban regime seems receptive to the idea of India restarting assistance to Afghanistan. By not inviting its traditional Afghan allies, India has also signalled to the Taliban regime that it has no interest in interfering in Afghanistan’s internal politics. India is keen to resume the much-needed humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Not to be seen as against common Afghans, Pakistan has assured India that it will [consider the latter’s request](#) of sending 50,000 tonnes of wheat through its territory.

Since New Delhi was a direct beneficiary of two decades of Washington’s military presence in Afghanistan, the US’ withdrawal has been particularly troubling for India’s role and influence in the country. Though American and Indian interests in Afghanistan are often seen as complementary, they are not always compatible as both nations pursue their interests under constantly changing conditions. Generally well-intentioned but not well-informed, the US leadership is still in the dark on framing a coherent Pakistan policy post-Afghan exit.

The Delhi dialogue is the first step by India towards regaining its lost ground in Afghanistan. Given its relative success, it is possible for New Delhi to emerge as the location for future regional meetings on Afghanistan in which the US could also be invited. However, in the longer term, the practical solution to Afghan problem lies in weaning the Taliban away from radical Islamist ideology and pressurising Pakistan to respect the Afghan sovereignty.

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