

## GETTING INDIA BACK TO THE AFGHAN HIGH TABLE

### **New Delhi's Afghan Policy Needs Changes And Must Include Openly Talking To The Taliban And All Other Political Groups**

If India's foreign and security policy planners had anticipated developments in Afghanistan they would have pursued nimble approaches, seeking to establish open connections with all its political groups, including with those perceived to be in Pakistan's pocket. Instead, they continued to rigidly cling to Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani even as his equities diminished with each passing month. This, despite his becoming the winner of the presidential elections held in September last year but whose contested results were declared five months later.

#### ➤ **Cut to the quick**

Inexplicably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Mr. Ghani for winning the elections, in December 2019. At that stage, the Afghanistan election commission had only announced the preliminary results and most countries maintained a discreet silence. It took the commission two months more to declare Mr. Ghani as President-elect, a result that was rejected by Mr. Ghani's main rival, Abdullah Abdullah. It led to two simultaneous swearing-ins; both Mr. Ghani and Mr. Abdullah took oath as President. It is true that the international community ultimately supported Mr. Ghani but qualified it with an insistence that he enters into a real power-sharing agreement with Mr. Abdullah. That agreement has just been reached. It will inevitably further weaken Mr. Ghani.

How has Mr. Ghani reciprocated India's such unqualified backing? His clear and public response came last month in a manner. It could only have been disappointing to Indian decision makers. The United Nations Secretariat organised a meeting on Afghanistan where it invited the six current physical neighbours of Afghanistan—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In addition, invitations were extended to the United States, Russia and the Ghani government. Obviously, Mr. Ghani did not condition his participation on India's inclusion. He should have done so if only for the constructive role New Delhi has played in Afghanistan's reconstruction since the Taliban were ousted from the country in 2001-2002 after 9/11. Also, for consistently supporting him.

If Indian policymakers had adequately pondered on Mr. Ghani's stance they would have recalled his position on India in the immediate aftermath of assuming the leadership of the National Unity Government brokered by the Americans in September 2014. He had then relegated India to the fourth concentric circle of five in importance to Afghan interests. Hence, it is not surprising that he did not bat adequately for India to become part of the meeting called by the UN. Indeed, if all his fine words of India's importance to Afghanistan were actually true, he would have lobbied and ensured India's participation.

#### ➤ **Point man's blunt talk**

So much for Mr. Ghani. What truly cut India more to the quick was the U.S. going along with India's absence. So much for the personal chemistry of the leaders of the two countries. The day after the meeting, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. point man on Afghanistan and the architect of the Taliban deal, spoke to India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar to assuage hurt sentiments. But the balm of good words cannot obscure the basic fact that the U.S. acts to promote its interests in Afghanistan. It obviously expects that if in doing so Indian interests are exposed, India will protect them as best as it can.

The fine diplomatese of the Ministry of External Affairs statement of the conversation between Mr. Khalilzad and Mr. Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval in Delhi on May 7 cannot override the blunt message conveyed by the U.S. official in his interview to this newspaper,

“India should talk directly to Taliban, discuss terror concerns directly,” (The Hindu, Inside pages, ‘Interview, Zalmay Khalilzad’, May 9, 2020). He noted that despite India’s contributions to Afghanistan’s economic development — and these are undeniably significant covering large parts of the country, and are popular — as well as its long history of contacts with that country, it does not have a place in international diplomacy on Afghanistan. As Mr. Khalilzad put it: “But when it comes to international efforts, India yet does not have a role that it could.” He patronisingly added that the U.S. wants India to have a more active role in the peace process.

Clearly, as the most significant power in the region, India should have ensured that it had a place on the table and should have devised ways to achieve that end. This is especially so because Afghanistan impacts on India’s interests, especially its security concerns. The question that India’s security and foreign policy decision makers should therefore ask themselves is this: why did the powers not consider India’s participation vital to the present peace-making efforts, especially when the U.S.-Taliban deal was concluded leading to a possible new stage in Afghanistan’s evolution?

### ➤ **The Taliban and Pakistan**

Mr. Khalilzad offered first a clue. He followed it up with what is the obvious reason. He said, “I do think engagement between India and all the key players in Afghanistan, not only in terms of the government but also in terms of the political forces, society and the Afghan body politic is appropriate...” Responding to a question of groups in Afghanistan targeting India he said, “I believe that dialogue between India and the Taliban are important, and it would be important that issues of concerns like this [terrorism] are raised directly.” Taking Mr. Khalilzad’s views in their entirety, it is clear that he feels that by avoiding open contacts with the Taliban, India has reduced its role in international diplomatic efforts.

That the U.S. is currently crucially dependent on Pakistan for the successful implementation of its Taliban deal aimed at securing as orderly a withdrawal as possible from what is a major strategic reverse for the world’s pre-eminent power is not in doubt. Mr. Khalilzad’s positive words for Pakistan make it clear. More significant is his comment, “Our strong position is that there shouldn’t be [terror] sanctuaries on either side of the Afghan-Pakistan border...” This is in sharp contrast to U.S. President Donald Trump’s earlier focus only on Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan.

In such a situation, it was essential for India to have maintained its strong links with the Afghan government, built and supported its traditional Afghan allies — perhaps this was discreetly resumed — but also establish open lines of communication with the Taliban. This was especially because they were informally conveying that India should not consider them as Pakistan’s puppets and also because they had gained international recognition. Contacts and discussions do not mean acceptance of their ways or that their professions of not being Pakistan’s stooges should not have been tested.

### ➤ **Echo from the past**

It is sad that despite all that India has done in Afghanistan over the past 18 years since the Taliban were ousted from Kabul in 2001, it finds itself on the margins of international diplomacy on Afghanistan. It is reminiscent of the time in the 1990s when, at Pakistan’s insistence, India was considered a problem and kept out of crucial global forums on Afghanistan. It did not matter then because along with Iran and Russia, it kept the resistance to the Taliban going through Ahmed Shah Masood. Mr. Ghani is no Masood and there are no countries on the horizon which are really opposed to the Taliban acquiring a major place in the Afghanistan’s formal power structures.

India needs to take corrective diplomatic action even at this late stage, and even in the time of COVID-19. It must begin openly talking to the Taliban and with all political groups in the country. It must realise that its Afghan policy needs changes.

**Meanings of Difficult Words:**

1. **high table** (noun) – groups with most important people. It exactly means (particularly in a dining hall of a college) a table put on a raised platform for most important people.
2. **anticipate** (verb) – expect, foresee, predict.
3. **pursue** (verb) – engage in, conduct, follow, carry on.
4. **nimble** (adjective) – skilful, active/lively, astute/clever, quick-thinking.
5. **seek** (verb) – try, attempt, aim, strive, work towards.
6. **perceived** (adjective) – recognized, identified, viewed, regarded, considered.
7. **in someone's pocket** (phrase) – under someone's control/influence.
8. **cling to** (verb) – be excessively dependent on (someone); stick to, stand by, remain attached to.
9. **with each passing day/month** (phrase) – gradually; as each day/month passed; as time continues to pass, day by day (or month by month).
10. **equity** (noun) – value, worth, valuation; importance, power/influence, authority.
11. **cut to the quick** (phrase) – damage, disturb, upset, hurt.
12. **inexplicably** (adverb) – in a way something can not be accountable/explainable/ understandable.
13. **discreet** (adjective) – careful, circumspect, cautious, close-lipped; delicate, diplomatic, sensible.
14. **swearing-in** (noun) – an official ceremony in which a person is taking oath and admitted into a new official job.
15. **oath** (noun) – vow, sworn statement, promise/pledge.
16. **qualify** (verb) – to make the meaning of a statement less strong; make conditional, restrict.
17. **insistence** (noun) – demand, instruction, requirement.
18. **inevitably** (adverb) – automatically, unavoidably, certainly, definitely.
19. **reciprocate** (verb) – return the favour, give back; respond.
20. **unqualified** (adjective) – unconditional, unrestricted, unlimited, unmitigated.
21. **backing** (noun) – support, approval, endorsement.
22. **in addition** (phrase) – as well as, additionally, moreover.
23. **condition** (verb) – influence, affect, have an effect on; determine, decide.
24. **constructive** (adjective) – positive, useful, helpful.
25. **oust** (verb) – remove, dislodge, displace, drive out, overthrow.
26. **ponder** (verb) – think about, consider, review, reflect on.
27. **stance** (noun) – point of view, opinion, standpoint.
28. **recall** (verb) – bring to mind, call to mind, remember.
29. **in the aftermath of** (phrase) – as a consequence of, as a result of.
30. **broker** (verb) – settle, negotiate, arrange (an agreement).
31. **relegate** (verb) – downgrade, lower; degrade/reduce to.
32. **concentric** (adjective) – relating to the things which are having a center in common.
33. **interest** (noun) – concern; advantage/benefit.
34. **it is not surprising** (phrase) – as expected, as anticipated, as predicted.
35. **bat** (verb) – defend the interests of; support.
36. **call** (verb) – convene, summon, assemble.
37. **indeed** (adverb) – in fact, actually, undeniably.
38. **lobby** (verb) – seek to influence, try to persuade, urge.
39. **point man** (noun) – a person who is at the centre of an activity (particularly in political affairs).
40. **so much for** (phrase) – that is the last/end of saying/taking/writing about someone.
41. **blunt** (adjective) – straightforward, forthright, undiplomatic, indelicate.
42. **go along with** (phrasal verb) – agree with, comply with, concur with.

43. **architect** (noun) – originator, creator, founder.
44. **assuage** (verb) – relieve, alleviate, moderate.
45. **balm** (noun) – relief, comfort, consolation, cheer.
46. **obscure** (verb) – overshadow, conceal, hide.
47. **expose** (verb) – make vulnerable, be/put at risk.
48. **as best (as) one can** (phrase) – in a best possible way under the circumstances.
49. **diplomatese** (noun) – it is a type of language or jargon used by diplomats. (Jargon is a specialized, unreadable, confused language which is very complicated to understand).
50. **override** (verb) – disregard/ignore, pay no heed to, overrule/reject (a view, idea, suggestion etc).
51. **undeniably** (adverb) – unquestionably.
52. **diplomacy** (noun) – international politics, foreign affairs, foreign policy.
53. **patronisingly** (adverb) – in a way that treats other person as inferior (or) child; in a manner that shows superiority; condescendingly, disdainfully.
54. **on the table** (phrase) – to be considered/taken for discussion.
55. **devise** (verb) – formulate, come up with, create, develop.
56. **evolution** (noun) – progress, advancement, development.
57. **clue** (noun) – hint, indication, signal, pointer.
58. **in its entirety** (phrase) – as a whole; completely, entirely.
59. **dependent on** (adjective) – reliant on, relying on; supported by.
60. **orderly** (adjective) – systematic, methodical, organized/planned.
61. **reverse** (noun) – a complete change of direction; a total change of action.
62. **pre-eminent** (adjective) – important, distinguished, prominent.
63. **make clear** (phrase) – explain, clarify, elucidate.
64. **sanctuary** (noun) – safety, protection, shelter, security.
65. **perhaps** (adverb) – maybe, possibly.
66. **ally** (noun) – associate, confederate, partner, supporter.
67. **discreetly** (adverb) – in a careful and far-sighted manner.
68. **resume** (verb) – restart, recommence, begin again.
69. **line of communication** (noun) – a means by which information may be transferred from one person to another.
70. **puppet** (noun) – pawn; a person under someone's control.
71. **recognition** (noun) – identification, acknowledgement, acceptance, admission.
72. **stooge** (noun) – subordinate, assistant; henchman; pawn/puppet.
73. **echo** (noun) – trace/sign, indication, hint.
74. **reminiscent** (adjective) – similar to, comparable with, bearing comparison with.
75. **keep out** (phrasal verb) – exclude, deny access to, prohibit.
76. **forum** (noun) – meeting, assembly, gathering, conference.
77. **resistance** (noun) – opposition to, refusal to accept, unwillingness/ disinclination/ reluctance to accept.
78. **on the horizon** (phrase) – imminent, impending, approaching, near/close, just around the corner.
79. **corrective** (adjective) – restorative, remedial, reparative.