

Afghan Peace Process and India: RSTV – India's World

Context:

- Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, recently paid a visit to the United States and President Trump's main agenda was to push for Pakistan's assistance in advancing the peace process in Afghanistan.
- Pakistan has been mediating the ongoing peace process between the Taliban and the US, while the insurgent outfit has continued to target US forces and the civilian government in neighbouring Afghanistan.
- The US and Taliban have made some progress off late to facilitate the withdrawal of Americans troops, in what has been the longest military intervention of the United States.
- Donald Trump has appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as a special envoy to lead the negotiations, with the representatives of Taliban, which has been facilitated by Qatar.
- The proposed peace deal includes a complete withdrawal of American troops and in return the Taliban needs to ensure that Afghan soil is not used by terror groups to target western countries.
- As the peace process inches forward, it is essential to analyse its impact on Indian interests in the region and this is the focus of this discussion.

Has India been left behind?

- The biggest concern for India has to be the fact that other major powers such as United States, Russia, China, Pakistan and others stakeholders in the Afghan conflict seemed to have gone ahead to work out a deal with the Taliban while India feels left behind and has a stated policy of not directly negotiating with the Taliban.
- Countries such as Russia and Iran also had a similar policy earlier but slowly they have adapted to the present conditions and have started opening up to the Taliban.
- In fact, when the US invaded Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, one of its primary objectives was to overthrow the Taliban government which had sheltered the Al Qaeda. Initially, the US managed to throw the Taliban out of power but today it has regrouped and emerged with greater potency to target western forces and the Afghan civilian government and it nearly controls 50-60% of Afghan territory.
- It is with these changing ground realities and stark realisation that the US started negotiating with the Taliban.
- While the US is keen to withdraw from the region as soon as possible, the countries are interested in containing the spread of radical jihad to their peripheries, especially in the light of the spreading influence of the Islamic State.
- So the Taliban is the only available collaborator for US, China and Russia to prevent the further spread of terrorism in the region.
- In return, Taliban is looking to snatch power from the civilian government and bring back the Sharia law, whereas, Pakistan gets to retain its strategic depth in Afghanistan vis-à-vis India by using the Taliban as its proxy to create a stronger base for anti-India terror outfits such as the JeM and LeT.
- But it is ironic that the US and Russia are failing to realise the previous damage that the Taliban has caused to them. It was the Taliban which sheltered the Al Qaeda that carried out a series of terror attacks against western targets and it was the core members of Taliban who played a key role in defeating the Soviet Union with the covert support of Pakistan.
- It is also ironic that Pakistan is being given the lead role to mediate by these countries, because it is the deep state of Pakistan i.e. its Army and ISI, which is the root cause of all the trouble in the region.
- So since Pakistan and Taliban cannot be trusted with the task of stabilizing Afghanistan, India's stand has been that the peace process has to 'Afghan-led, Afghan-controlled and Afghan-owned'.
- Hence the inclusion of the Afghan government in the talks process should be non-negotiable and at

most care has to be taken to ensure that the constitutional and democratic rights of the Afghan people must be protected, especially the rights of women and minorities.

- The final arrangement should ensure that there are no ungoverned spaces which could be taken over by radical elements and terror outfits.

What is Pakistan's relevance in the region?

- In the initial phase of Trump's administration, the US came down heavily on Pakistan for its duplicitous role in fomenting terror in the region. But now Trump seems to have gone back on this approach and appears to be warming up to Pakistan in the light of few compulsions.
- For Donald Trump, withdrawal of American troops and an early exit is not just a fulfilment of his 2016 electoral promise but also an essential outcome that could be projected as a major achievement while seeking re-election in 2020.
- If such a hurried deal is put through for the sake of American interests then it will definitely create an opportunity for the Taliban to return to power. Because it is impossible for pro-democracy leaders and Islamic fundamentalists to co-exist and such a unity government cannot function for long.
- So if the Taliban makes it back to the helm of affairs in Afghanistan, then Pakistan will capitalise on this opportunity and use the Taliban to extend support for anti-India terror activities by using Afghanistan as a staging base.
- The return of the Taliban could also push the country back in to a civil war and this would be bad news not just for India but for the western countries as well.
- In such a scenario, the Af-Pak region will become an even bigger hub for global terrorism.

What happens to India's goodwill and investments in Afghanistan?

- India enjoys tremendous goodwill amongst the people of Afghanistan and it has made large scale investments in order to help stabilize the war-torn country and rebuild its institutions.
- India has funded construction of highways, hospitals, hydropower projects, construction of the Parliament building in Kabul, etc.
- Earlier, the Taliban used to resist any Indian presence in Afghanistan and the proxies of Pakistan's ISI such as the Haqqani network have carried out major attacks on Indian interests in the country.
- India on its part has always rejected the approach of the other countries in distinguishing between the good Taliban and the bad Taliban. It has been consistently opposed to having any direct negotiations with a radical outfit that it considers to be involved in terrorist activities.
- So if the Taliban were to return to power, India would feel that its interests and goodwill might be under threat.
- But despite these ideological differences and the bitter past between the two, there appears to be some sort of improvement in their perception of each other.
- Recently, at the Moscow meet, the Taliban has said that it sees India as a partner who could genuinely contribute to the good of Afghanistan.
- Even India has tested the waters by opening initial talks with few warlords and Taliban leaders.
- So for both, the way forward would be to not see this as a zero-sum game and be open to accept the ground reality. For India this would mean an acceptance of Taliban as a stakeholder in Afghanistan and for Taliban it would mean an acceptance of India's role in aiding the development of the country.

Is the Taliban of 2019 different from the Taliban of the 1990's?

- There hasn't been much of a difference in Taliban's ideology and activities over the last 20 years. The outfit continues to carry out brutal acts of terror and if it comes back to power, then its stated objective is to implement a rigid version of the sharia law.
- So there is little reason for India to believe that the Taliban has changed. But still India has shown some willingness to engage with the Taliban by participating in the London conference and more

recently it sent two retired diplomats to represent India at the Moscow Format.

- As of now, regional powers such as Russia and China are engaging with the Taliban by using Pakistan as a mediator in order to contain the spillover of radicalism closer to their territories.
- But any regional approach cannot be complete without the involvement of Central Asian countries, Iran and India. The concerns and interests of these countries will have to be taken into account.

What are India's options?

- India's options are quite restricted because it doesn't have much of a leverage to influence the developments in Afghanistan to its favour. The goodwill and soft power that India has earned through its developmental assistance could be easily lost if the Taliban were to return to power.
- India's main concern would be over the stand of the US if terror attacks emerge from this region post its withdrawal of troops. As things appear now, the US would be content if its homeland and Europe are not attacked by terror groups based out of the Af-Pak region.
- This is the guarantee that the US appears to be expecting from the Taliban, even though it has not been made explicit and it continues to maintain that it will withdraw troops only if Taliban ensures that any form of terror does not emerge from Afghanistan.
- India will have to continue exerting pressure on US, European countries, Russia and China so that its core interests are heard and taken care of.
- In the current circumstances, Russia and China need to stop looking at short-term gains and push the US to adopt an Afghan-led initiative that has the interests of the Afghan people at its core and this could be the only way to ensure peace.

Way Forward:

- India needs to significantly enhance its engagement with all the stakeholders in the Afghan conflict.
- India needs to find a place at the high table and stay on top of the situation by closely watching the developments.
- India would also do well if it prepares for the worst-case scenario by keeping a few contingency options ready.
- The global community should also be mindful of the new dimension that has been added with the rise of ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K).

